

Re/shaping the other: Puppetry as phenomenology and the ethics of representation

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Abstract

Scholars such as Steve Tillis, Wanda Strukus and Paul Piris have already highlighted the need for a phenomenological approach to puppet theatre but have generally conducted their analysis from the subjective viewpoint of the audience. This paper considers my short puppetry piece Chang and Eng and Me (and Me), in which the practice of puppetry becomes an active site of phenomenological investigation, considering this from the subject position of the puppeteer. Drawing on Emmanuel Lévinas' Ethics of the other and my own practice as a puppeteer and theatre-maker, I argue that a practice of puppetry-as-phenomenology offers unique tools through which we might apprehend the other, and in doing so grapple with pressing contemporary issues of violence and representation. This paper is supported by an extract from the work itself, which is available online:

<https://vimeo.com/wattleanddaub/cemmextract>

Bio

Tobi Poster-Su is a UK-based scholar, theatremaker and puppeteer. He Lectures at Bath Spa University and is undertaking an AHRC-funded PhD (*Towards a Critical Puppetry: Racialisation and Material Performance in the Twenty-First Century*) at Queen Mary University of London. He has published in *Critical Stages*, *Theatre Journal* and *Applied Theatre Research*, delivered presentations at ATHE, IFTR and TaPRA conferences, and is co-convener of the TaPRA Bodies and Performance working group. As co-artistic director of Wattle and Daub, Tobi has co-created and performed in *Chang and Eng and Me (and Me)* and *The Depraved Appetite of Tarrare the Freak*. He has worked as a puppetry director and performer on shows including Tom Morris's *A Christmas Carol* and RSC/Improbable's *My Neighbour Totoro*.

From a phenomenology of puppetry to puppetry-as-phenomenology

I am sitting at a table in a small, makeshift studio I have set up in my office using black drapes and LED lights. Across the table from me is a camera on a tripod, its controls crusted with dried clay. On the table, its surface protected by a large sheet of cardboard, is a lump of clay which 10 minutes previously had taken the form of two carefully sculpted, conjoined figures, but has been rendered formless by the force of my hands. It is the UK's second COVID-19 lockdown of 2020 and I am alone in the room, although in dramatic terms I have just filmed a scene with three characters.

What I am describing is in one sense a creative workspace — a site for the research and creation of a theatrical performance. However, as I will argue, it is also a site of active phenomenological enquiry in which the puppet functions not only as a site for representation but also as a unique tool with which to explore the nature and ethics of representation itself.

First it is useful to contextualise the performance in question, which is available to view online as a core component of this paper. The performance is a 15-minute filmed work entitled *Chang and Eng and Me (and Me)*, which uses puppetry to explore the stories and identities of Chang and Eng Bunker, Siamese conjoined twins of Chinese descent who were among the earliest East Asian performers to grace the American or British stage. Alongside this story the work presents an autoethnographic exploration of my own identity as a British performer of Chinese descent, working in an industry in which, almost 200 years later, bodies like mine remain a rarity on the British stage. The work was initially conceived as a more straightforward biography of Chang and Eng, but as I detail, discoveries made through the embodied practice of puppetry suggested and demanded a more visible authorial hand. The work was also initially conceived as a live theatrical piece, and while the change to an edited video work was largely due to the impact of the pandemic on live performance, the physically isolated nature of the process undoubtedly impacted the performance as a site for research.

Secondly, it is important to summarise the existing scholarship on phenomenology and puppetry, noting that this has generally concerned itself with the audience's subjective experience of the phenomena of puppets. Steve Tillis suggests that any study of the process by which an audience perceives the signs produced by the puppet as signifying life can be

understood to be phenomenological enquiry (1992, 7), though this is explored briefly as part of a larger project to formalise a vocabulary for the aesthetics of the puppet. The phenomenology of puppetry is explored in more detail by Wanda Strukus (2004, 257) who argues that puppets present a unique problem to a Husserlian phenomenological tradition which believes that we encounter objects and subjects in differing manners. Exploring the implications this may have on the intersubjective relationship between audience and character, Strukus suggests that the audience must undergo a perceptual shift in how they encounter the world in order to identify the puppet (an object) as a character (a subject), a process she aligns with the phenomenological act of bracketing. In doing so, Strukus seems in agreement with the interpretation expressed by Tillis (1996, 110) that a puppet can be understood as a site on which signs, produced by the puppeteer, are inscribed and then read by an audience.

Given the current preference in contemporary theatrical puppetry for visible puppeteers,¹ this analysis is complicated by this onstage presence of the puppeteer, with whom the audience may also experience an intersubjective encounter. Paul Piris (2014, 40), writing on co-presence in puppetry, explores this triangular relationship using phenomenological aspects of thought that draw on both Sartre and Lévinas. Piris defines co-presence as occurring when a puppeteer is present as both a puppeteer and a character who interacts with the puppets, though I would suggest the phenomena he describes occur to some degree even when the puppeteer is not explicitly a character within the drama. Piris suggests that co-presence confronts an audience with a puppet object-as-subject while simultaneously confronting them with a human subject-as-subject, establishing an intersubjective relationship between these ontologically different presences.

All these texts, particularly Tillis' (1992, 1996), draw on some of the terminology of semiotics, but all depart from a purely structuralist analysis. Indeed, a purely semiotic reading of puppetry would miss a key phenomenon of puppet performance: by reducing the puppet to a site for the signification of life, one fails to capture the fact that audiences and puppeteers both (at times) *experience* the puppet as alive. This is true not only in the sense that the same willing suspension of disbelief that allows an audience to experience an actor as a living character also allows an audience to experience a puppet as one, as in Piris's theorisation of

¹ High-profile examples include *Avenue Q* (2003), *War Horse* (2007), and *Life of Pi* (2019).

the puppet's apparent subjectivity in performance (2014, 30), but also, in that puppetry might productively trouble ontological categories of aliveness. I will return to this question later. If these phenomenological analyses of puppetry primarily focus on the subjective experience of the audience, then as a practitioner-researcher, I am suitably positioned to contribute to phenomenological understandings of the intersubjective relationship between the puppeteer and the puppet by conducting an active phenomenological investigation of this encounter from the perspective of the puppeteer.

A phenomenological approach to the act of puppetry should attune us to three strata of experience simultaneously: first, the life of the puppet—the fact of puppet-as-character. Second, we must be attuned to the mechanics by which this occurs, the bodily acts on the part of the puppeteer that imbue the puppet with life and character. Finally, we must be attuned to the relationship between the puppeteer and puppet, a relationship that functions as both an intersubjective encounter with a living character and a bodily encounter with a material object in which a mechanical representation of life and character are made. Drawing on Strukus (2004), I would suggest that these multiple realities necessarily entail a form of bracketing on the part of the puppeteer. For me to encounter the puppet as a living character I must take for granted the fact of its life — otherwise I am unable to play out the necessary drama. For me to produce the signs an audience require to apprehend the puppet as alive I must take for granted the reverse — what Piris refers to as the “objectness” (2014, 40) of the puppet — otherwise I am unable to attend to the mechanical needs of the puppet.

I suggest puppetry as a phenomenological mode of investigation that attends to these three strata of experience may function not only to develop our understanding of how an audience perceive puppetry, but also to usefully attune us to the mechanics of representation in a way that can produce particular insights into specific representational issues. In my own recent practice, I suggest that puppetry as a mode of investigation has allowed for an interrogation and exploration of the various violences inherent to the act of representation and offered tools to resist an appropriative speaking for the other. In doing so I consider the specific qualities of the puppet as a representational tool and how these might prompt and allow for particular engagements with the absent other.

In demonstrating this I will analyse a key moment of puppet performance from the development of *Chang and Eng and Me (and Me)*. I will then reflect on how these concerns

manifested themselves in the finished work, focusing on a short sequence entitled ‘Violence’. As part of the research and rehearsal process, I captured rich descriptions of the phenomena of my encounters with the various puppets I used, some of which are reproduced in part below. However, it would be wrong to locate the site of investigation either solely in the act of performance or in the act of writing; indeed, discoveries were made in a manner that does not entirely lend itself to neat methodological summary. My hope is that in detailing and reflecting my creative and research processes I can provide justification for the act of puppetry as a phenomenological mode of investigation, and evidence for the particular insights this process of investigation led me to.

Research and performance context

The impulse to create a work about the lives of Chang and Eng Bunker arose from the fact that I have been unable to stop thinking about Chang and Eng for the past 30 years. The reasons for this are complex and not fully transparent to me, but I am certain that one factor was that as multiracial British-East Asian child, I rarely encountered notable figures of East and Southeast Asian descent. Revisiting the story of the twins as an adult, I was struck by their prototypical role in the formation of Asian-American identity and, as I have noted elsewhere, the extent to which “as performers and cultural producers, Chang and Eng were [...] themselves put to work — with varying degrees of agency — on the project of constructing their own emergent racial identity” (Poster-Su 2021b). I was also struck by the uneasy intersections of privilege and exclusion that they occupied arriving in America before the mechanics of the racialisation of Asians had fully solidified. As such, while Chang and Eng arrived in the US as indentured servants and were subject to racialised violence and exclusion, they were also ultimately permitted to become US citizens and themselves benefitted materially from the ownership of enslaved African Americans whose racialisation was already firmly established. The fact that their participation in the slave trade was concurrent with their absorption into white American society — they were ‘gifted’ an enslaved person as a wedding gift on the occasion of their weddings to white American sisters Adelaide and Sarah Yates (Huang, 2018) — raises questions about the relationships between assimilation and complicity with white supremacy that continue to resonate today. As someone grappling with the unknowable history of my own and my family’s assimilation, and as a diasporic East Asian cultural producer, I was struck by the familiarity of my various anxieties about the twins’ identities, and the resonances these held with my own experience.

When I first conceived of the performance, my initial intention had been to use a combination of my own body, augmented by a life-sized puppet, to represent the characters of both Chang and Eng. My initial determination to insert myself so visibly within the story (2014, 30) — to play Chang or Eng — related both to an excitement about the idea of telling the story of character whose ethnic background was similar to my own for the first time in my career, and also to an affinity I felt with various aspects of their existence as performers of Chinese descent in the West.

In the face of this imagined affinity and possible self-insertion it seems useful to declare some specifics of the respective identities of Chang and Eng Bunker (the puppets) and me (the puppeteer). Chang and Eng were born over 200 years ago in Siam to a Chinese father and a mother of Chinese and Siamese descent. They were conjoined by a band of flesh on their abdomen and with the exception of this band and a conjoined liver, had two entirely separate bodies. Within contemporary social and medical models of disability the twins would be understood to be disabled, although were Chang and Eng born today with access to hospital medicine it is likely that they would be physically separated at birth. I was born in the UK around 37 years ago to a Chinese mother and a father of British and Polish-Jewish descent. I am not a twin of any sort. Consequently, the development of the performance occurred against a backdrop of anxieties around the ethics of representing Chang and Eng onstage (or on screen, as ultimately transpired). These anxieties both manifested in and were revealed by the act of performance. Before analysing my core case study of puppet performance, it is useful to briefly consider one of the early explorations that led to my final choice of puppet forms, scale, and materials.

From self-insertion to clay sculpture

The first puppet form I used was a roughly life-sized torso-only puppet from a previous show, onto whose distinctive face I had placed a Satori-style Neutral Mask and who I had dressed in one of my shirts (see Fig. 1.) As this R&D occurred during lockdown, I was at all times physically alone in the space, with Tanuja Amarasuriya, the director, and Lizzie Wiggs, the movement director, watching me via Zoom. Often, this meant that I was also able to see myself (albeit as a very small image) on the screen of the laptop.

Fig. 1.

Lizzie, the movement director, instructs me to lie on the floor and suggests that the two of us explore the simple actions of getting up and exploring our environment. Lizzie suggests I do not concern myself with the manipulation of the puppet but rather what it means to exist in such close proximity to another body while performing the simplest tasks, such as sitting up, turning away, etc. I lie down, conscious of both the physical presence of the puppet and, through my laptop, the gaze of Lizzie and Tanuja. When I look at the screen I also see myself, which adds a further layer of self-consciousness. The puppet is on my right side, and my right hand sits inside the head of the puppet, travelling through a hole in the shoulder blades and the fabric tube of the puppet's 'neck' — when I move my right hand, the puppet's head moves. Beyond this we are not physically connected, though I have wrapped the puppet's arm around my shoulder and our torsos are touching.

Even before I attempt to manipulate my 'second' body, I am conscious of feeling uncomfortable. Part of this is physical, but this is a puppet I have manipulated onstage for over an hour without much discomfort. Lizzie remarks on how difficult it is for me to move, and she is right, but I am struck by the thought that Chang and Eng, who lived as conjoined twins, would have had an entirely different experience of movement. The self-insertion feels narcissistic and distasteful, and I wonder what I or an audience could possibly learn from such a performance. Nevertheless, I persevere. We perform a series of simple tasks: rising, looking about the room, and sitting down. I am struck by the essential unknowableness of Chang and Eng, who feel deadlier to me as a result of this clumsy attempt at representation than at any prior point in the show's development. I feel that everyone can tell that it is not working; I feel the appraising gaze of my collaborators but also that of the puppet, whose head I occasionally turn to meet my gaze.

Later, watching the video back, I am surprised by how 'good' some of the puppetry looks, unformed and improvised as it is. In terms of craft, I would be capable of effectively realising this performance. However, I remain fairly sure that my instincts to present Chang and Eng in this manner have been thrown into question by the attempt to do so. If I feel some affinity towards Chang and Eng, if I have spent the last 30 years carrying around a particular myth about them, perhaps this says very little about the lives and histories of Chang and Eng, and a

great deal about my experiences, perspectives, and preoccupations. There is something in how I am able to understand the essential unknowableness, the deadness of the historical other in a way that I can feel deeply in the pit of my stomach, that feels partly born out of the embodied experience of attempting that particular mode of representation.

My discomfort with being witnessed by the puppet in this act of clumsy self-insertion brings to mind Piris' application of Sartre's theory of the Other to the puppet's gaze (2014, 37). Piris suggests that the puppet, while lacking subjectivity, nevertheless can function as an 'other', noting that according to Sartre, the gaze of the other can allow the subject to understand something about themselves that was previously inaccessible. I have discussed elsewhere the problematics of naturalising the Western modernist ontological designation of objects as inanimate (Poster-Su 2021b). However, I would suggest that even though the Western theatrical practice of puppetry occurs in a cultural and philosophical context which generally assumes that puppets are lifeless objects, in taking for granted the puppet's subjective potential to gaze,² it simultaneously acknowledges the puppet as alive. John Bell suggests that puppets are always inherently destabilising in that they remind us that rather than being fundamentally distinct from the material world, humans all eventually become inanimate objects, which might encourage us to consider the various forces that animate us (2014, 50). Drawing on Jane Bennett's (2010) concept of 'material agency', which highlights the capacity of material objects to act on and with human beings, I suggest that just as a puppet's animacy might be considered contingent on the presence of a puppeteer, our own animacy might be considered contingent on, among other things, the shelters, objects, and microbiome which ensure our continued life. In reminding humans that our animacy is also dependent on outside forces, puppetry might work to destabilise the ontological assumptions that underpin the binaries of subject/object, living/nonliving and animate/inanimate.

My awareness of the limitations of my ability to meaningfully embody the twins is rooted in an attention to the phenomena of being. Writing on the phenomenology of whiteness, Sara Ahmed suggests that the corporeal schema of embodied reality — that which a body can do — is structured and delineated by the fact of racialisation (2007, 153). It follows that colonialism has rendered the world inhabitable to white bodies, placing objects within the

² Much British puppetry training uses the concept of the gaze as a core principle. Practitioners who refer to 'the gaze' in their teaching or directing include Sue Buckmaster, Chris Pirie, Mei Mac and many more.

reach of these bodies. Racialised bodies therefore inhabit spaces in which certain objects are, invisibly, not within reach. I wish to extend this thinking to physical difference, by way of Vivian Sobchak's (2005) richly detailed phenomenological account of her experiences of acquired disability, in which she details the mechanical aids, accumulated expertise, and conscious choreographies that are required for her to access and engage with a range of domestic and public spaces: the quotidian practices that might bring spaces and objects within reach. What can be reached from my singular body when conjoined to a puppet is not analogous to what might be reached from Chang and Eng's conjoined bodies.

Through the attempt at self-insertion, I became aware of a failure to properly apprehend the absolute inaccessibility of the individuals I was attempting to represent. Consider Lévinas's ethics of the Other (2014), which demand a recognition of the absolute alterity of the other—that is to say, that the other must remain essentially unknowable. Nicholas Ridout, writing on Lévinas's influence on theatre, suggests that while theatrical performance is capable of realising a face-to-face encounter with the other, it inevitably short-changes the unknowability and mystery of the other (2009, 53-5). If we assume that Ridout is referring to conventional human performance, then there is a distinct possibility that the nonhuman face of the puppet other might allow for a preservation of this unknowability, and might resist a reductive overidentification between spectator and performer. While othering, per Edward Said (2003), may be understood as a technology for the racialised dehumanisation of individuals, in a Lévinasian sense, to subscribe to a theatrical aesthetic which recognises the unknowability of the other may conversely be to recognise and honour their full humanity. Might the use of nonhuman/puppet representation in fact allow theatre to avoid the dehumanising foreclosure engendered by stable and authoritative representations of the other?

Material vulnerability and the performance of violence

Part 1

I sit at a table onto which I have placed a square of cardboard with three lumps of clay that I have cut from a larger block on top of one another. I have set up a camera directly above the table with the lens pointing straight down so that all that it captures are my hands and the clay. Next to the cardboard and clay but out of shot are some wooden clay sculpting tools, a

bowl half-filled with soapy water and a blue and white multipurpose cleaning cloth, and a hand-towel. Despite these precautions, parts of the camera and tripod are already encrusted with clay from absent-minded adjustments. There is clay under my nails.

I squash the clay lumps into a single blob then tear this into three: two equally sized blobs which will form the basis for each twin, and a smaller 'spare' lump for additions. I work in silence (or rather I perceive that I do; later I will watch back the video and hear myself whistling and humming). I shape both lumps into a skittle shape head and body, then begin to work the clay down into the shape of arms and legs. I tear away excess clay from underneath the head to create a neck. I cut into the body with a wooden scalpel to separate the lower arms from the body, and the legs from each other. This feels like an unearthing of form, rather than a violent act, though I am conscious of the potential the scalpel offers for this. The work is calming, I do not worry about making the forms perfect but rather focus on indicating the human body. I finish one body, give it a crude indication of a face, place it face up on the cardboard and move onto the next 'skittle'. When I finish the second body, I wrap the figures' arms around each other's shoulder and waist, shape a connecting band out of the excess clay lump, and join the figures at the waist. I lay them down next to each other. The relationship between the two bodies seems warm, comforting. There is something soothing about the whole process and the sight of these connected figures.

Even before I begin working, the material traces of the clay that will now represent Chang and Eng are present on my body, workplace, and tools. The clay insists that it is there in a manner that is viscerally undeniable; its presence cannot be ignored. In carefully forming the bodies of the puppets I am not simply creating the puppets as a site for representation but also forming a relationship with the puppets-as-subjects, in which I begin the process of apprehending them as others. In this we can see that the perceptual shift from object to subject that puppetry engenders in an audience (Strukus 2004) is also observable on the part of the puppeteer, even as the puppeteer is responsible for the mechanics that produce this perceptual shift. When I lay down the figures, the manner in which I perform this action is materially different to how I would treat an equally fragile clay vase or other non-anthropomorphic form.

My interaction with the figures is also different to my interaction with similar wooden or cloth puppets. As a material, clay is at once vulnerable and tenacious. Figures made from wet

or dry clay are vulnerable in terms of formal integrity, whereas the clay itself is highly resilient and clings to fingers, work-surfaces and itself. Eleanor Margolies (2014, 328) characterises wet clay as a performance material of both infinite potential and inherent impermanence, and I suggest that the vulnerability and ephemeral nature of the figures, combined with my sensory understanding of this fact, may play a role in my intersubjective relationship to the puppets. Like me, the figures have the potential to develop and be destroyed. If I have the power to destroy these small figures, I am also reliant on their continued integrity to communicate with an audience. In fact, I am unable to inhabit the space of a puppet performance without their mediation. As such, the care with which I handle them is a care that I experience both as the care of a vulnerable other, and an act of self-preservation.

Part 2

I have moved the camera to the opposite side of the table from where I had been sitting, so that it is slightly higher than the tabletop and pointing at the cardboard base and the clay figures. I stand to one side of the table out of shot but in easy reach of the puppets. Using the flip screen, I can check framing but again I am able to focus on my actual view of the puppets. With my right hand, I hold the puppets upright, then use my left arm to swing the left arm of the left puppet towards the face of the right puppet. The arm does not reach, and in attempting to get it to do so I cause it to partially detach at the shoulder. I manage to land a punch on the chest and tilt the bodies to the ground as if they are falling over. The bodies are stiff and yet there is still not a significant sense of weight. I move the left puppet's left leg into a sort of kick and the puppets grapple, stiffly. The clay feels less malleable than when I was sculpting it, though this may be because I am trying to avoid altering the shape or further detachment of limbs. It feels like an approximation of the idea of violence, rather than violence itself, or even an effective representation of violence.

After some time, I decide to stop worrying about the integrity of the puppets, and something shifts. At this point the puppets are sitting up, and only half intentionally, the right puppet now has the left in a headlock. I grip the bodies with my right hand and use my left hand to lift the left arm of the right puppet, which I then smash with some force into the head of the left puppet. I do this around three times. By this point the neck of the left puppet is stretched out, its head distorted. The right puppet's left arm is distorted and partially detached. I raise

the right puppet's right arm and continue to hit the head of the left puppet. After a few blows it detaches, but I stick it back on and continue hitting. The clay now feels malleable, the violence real, but the puppets are losing their structural integrity. I begin folding over legs, heads, in order to continue striking other parts of the puppets, no longer paying attention to which puppet is striking which (the brothers fought despite being able to feel each other's pain). Eventually the puppets cease to resemble human forms entirely, so I dig my fingers into the clay and then flatten it with my palm until it resembles a ball of clay.

I am troubled by how much I enjoy the violence of the sequence.

In a literal staging of a fight, it is necessary to mimic the mechanics of violence in order to represent violence. In one sense this is what I am doing throughout, with varying degrees of success. At the same time, if we practise bracketing and take for granted that the puppets are the characters of Chang and Eng, I am also committing actual violence to Chang and Eng, culminating in the deaths of these perceived subjects. This may seem far-fetched at first glance, but consider my actual relationship to Chang and Eng as historical others. I have appropriated their forms, names, and experiences in order to create an artwork. I am representing them using forms that bear only the most superficial relationship to their bodies.

Armstrong and Tennenhouse (2014) survey theoretical concepts of representation-as-violence, noting that while some theorists believe that certain representational acts are acts of violence, others believe all representation to be a form of violence. Noys argues that this latter position risks occluding more specific forms of violence, while suggesting there is a particular violence in the theoretical abstraction of lived experience (2013, 17). I would suggest that since a degree of abstraction is inherent in the transposing of life to art, to represent the lived experience of two marginalised historical figures through the medium of theatre is an inherently violent act in its necessary reduction of the interior lives of these individuals to representations. Further, I would argue that any attempt to bring their life stories to the stage, for the gaze of an audience, inevitably recalls the actual trafficking and exhibition of Chang and Eng. As an artist concerned with the violence of representation, it is possible to feel immobilised by an awareness of the various violences of which we might be capable. While I do not think it is possible, or necessarily desirable to mitigate theatre's potential for violence, I would suggest that puppetry, in its radical doubling of subject and objecthood, offers the artist a unique tool with which to make visible and grapple with these

potential violences of representation.

In performance

To detail some of the results and findings of this process, I now turn to a short extract from the filmed work. This does not take the form of a filmed theatrical performance but rather makes use of some of the technologies of film to create a piece of work that I hope retains a theatricality while also capturing, as much as possible, the perceptual thickness of my embodied explorations. As such it can be understood as an attempt to capture something of the site of my research, rather than remaining a site of active research.

<https://vimeo.com/wattleanddaub/cemmextract>

This is one of three Acts within the piece and is entitled 'Violence'. The extract opens with a sped-up, but otherwise unedited, sequence in which I build two clay figures. Only my arms are visible. This was one of many recordings of the act of sculpture, as the puppets always disintegrated quickly in use. It is possible to observe the progression of tenderness with which I relate to the clay as it takes human forms. I first apprehend each figure as a subject not when the figure is completed but when I raise the head of the completed figure from the table. The perceptual shift that Strukus (2004) identifies is not simply reliant on figurative representation of the body but also, as Piris (2014) observes, the manipulations necessary to animate it. Strukus suggests that an audience apprehends a puppet as alive not simply due to its form but rather due to an accumulation of perceptual acts, or noema (2004, 259). In the filmed work, the viewer might witness the accumulative effect of noema on me, the puppeteer, whilst also potentially experiencing similar perceptual shifts themselves.

The film then shows a series of more or less literal images of the beginning of a fight. I hold the clay figures and use them to knock over a dressing screen. I drop the figures into sawdust, which billows from beneath them and sticks to their bodies, accumulated as part of an evolving materiality; try as I might, those particular figures will never again be clean. I squeeze formless clay between my fingers, feeling it give way as it extrudes and separates. The figures fall into a heap of playbills advertising appearances by Chang and Eng. I strike one puppet with the hand of another. Puppetry typically requires a relationship of care with an object; rough, careless or destructive puppetry is generally considered to be technically

‘bad’ puppetry. Here I try to lean into the potential of my manipulation to cause harm.

Both in the doing and the watching, I am aware of giving free rein to a destructive impulse central to the creative act. Matthew Isaac Cohen suggests that violence against puppets and other object surrogates can safely manifest and aid in the processing of various violent impulses, including those with which individuals achieve social differentiation (2007, 124). This reading seems to rely, however, upon the assumption that violence against nonhuman or nonliving surrogates is ‘safe’. What if such acts are not only unsafe for the puppets and objects on which violence may be enacted, but also to the humans enacting the violence and for whom the idea of ‘safe’ targets for violence might be naturalised? In this sequence the physical violence parallels the violence of appropriation. I take these figures and use them for my own representational ends, even at cost to their integrity. Simultaneously, I am presenting in a partly literal manner the actual violence of history, that is, the violence that Chang and Eng inflicted on each other according to contemporary accounts. Towards the end of their lives the twins sometimes fought physically, and that is what I depict here. However, this depiction is also infused with my awareness of the violence visited on them by their traffickers, by their history, and by America, of the violence they did to others through their intentional involvement with the transatlantic slave trade.

The images become less literal. Blood spatters. Clay is packed on my face, obscuring it, sticking to my facial hair. A hardened clay sculpture of Chang’s face is struck repeatedly, shattering into dust. Writing on the potential for new forms of meaning making offered by puppetry’s interactions with disability, Petra Kupperts has theorised puppetry as a vehicle for non-realist embodiment (2020). Here the puppetry might be understood to allow for a non-realist embodiment of the various violences inherent in Chang and Eng’s experience of the world as minoritised individuals. The clay and my fingers are coated in a viscous substance, which coats and binds us. The boundaries between my body as the producer and site for violence become slippery, just as the stuff of the clay and the stuff of my body become impossible to separate cleanly.

The violence of assimilation is often invisible to the assimilated subject. I have arrived at the identity of a monolingual, ‘culturally British’ descendant of immigrants in a manner that feels both inevitable and largely devoid of struggle. As I shape the clay which, moments earlier, took the form of two figures locked in violent conflict and is now a smooth uniform surface

which bears little evidence of disturbance, I am forced to reflect on the hidden violences on which my own assimilation has been built. Some can be unearthed from discussions or family history; most remain as essentially unknowable as the interior worlds of Chang and Eng.

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