‘One ever feels their twoness’: Transnational Illegibility and the Siamese Twin in Lawrence Chua’s *Gold by the Inch*

Chang and Eng Bunker, the first so-called Siamese twins ever discovered, only appear once in Lawrence Chua’s *Gold by the Inch* as the narrator briefly tells the story of the brothers’ purchase from their parents and sale to P.T. Barnum, who exhibited their fused body in sideshows throughout Europe and America. The narrator remarks on the “twoness” of Chang and Eng: a multivalent construction that produces the body of the Siamese twin as that which inhabits a liminal space between singularity and multiplicity, being of nation and without nation, and personhood and commodification. These instances of twoness make Chang and Eng difficult – and sometimes impossible – to read.

Chua’s nameless narrator is equally difficult to read. As a Thai-born New Yorker, he is both of nation and without nation; his narrative slips between present and past, as well as between first and second person, creating a kind of narrative illegibility reminiscent of the Siamese twin. Because of the illegibility of the narrator’s transnational body and the narrative he creates, Chang and Eng offer a critical purchase on *Gold by the Inch*. Despite their singular appearance in Chua’s text, the “twoness” of the Siamese twin is a key organizing metaphor through which we can begin to explicate the complex ideological structures that come to bear on the transnational narrator in *Gold by the Inch*.

Drawing on Marx’s *Capital*, Du Bois’s *Souls of Black Folks*, Lisa Lowe’s *Immigrant Acts*, and Balibar’s *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* with supplement from Rachel Adams’ *Sideshow U.S.A*, M. Jacqui Alexander’s *Pedagogies of Crossing*, and Elizabeth Grosz’s
“Intolerable Ambiguity,” this paper seeks to enumerate the ways in which the commodification of transnational bodies creates a bifurcated identity (herein referred to as “twoness”) that denies the bodies in question the ability to claim belonging on either an ethnic or national level, rendering them illegible. I intend to put these theoretical texts in conversation with Chua’s work to produce an innovative reading of the book that illuminates the illegibility of the text’s Thai bodies in a transnational context. In particular, I will establish a connection between the book’s sex shows/sexual performances and the American sideshows at which Chang and Eng exhibited their own illegible body and through this delineate the machinations of commodification and racial spectacularization as makers of transnational “twoness.” I will then produce a reading of the narrator’s own twoness. My reading will focus on the text’s employment of shifts in narrative voice (which I will call the “split you”), scenes in which the narrator’s bodily borders have become fungible and the narrator’s attempts to achieve a spectacular racial identity though the purchase of commodities – all of which position the narrator as dislocated from national and ethnic belonging and produce the transnational as illegible.

In *Capital*, Karl Marx argues that the value of any commodity is defined through a logic of equivalence in which the amount of “labour-time socially necessary for its production” is equal to its exchange value, meaning that any two commodities produced using the same amount of human labor should hold the same value (re: exchange value) in the market (46). Chua’s novel is framed by similar logics of equivalence, which is evident from the first chapter titled “U.S. $1 = 25 baht” (5). In particular, this equation establishes the necessary equivalence between American currency and Thai currency; it highlights the material differences between one form of currency and another, while masking them through their ostensible equivalence in the global marketplace. The reader is immediately made aware, therefore, that the text will be imbricated
with the language of commerce and the value forms of commodities. However, throughout the
text, Chua complicates the value form through his employment of Chang and Eng.

Under capitalism, human labor is commodified because it is abstracted from the worker’s
body and confronts the worker as a thing alien to himself. The material differences among
commodities and the uses they satisfy mask their equivalence, which is predicated on the
abstraction of human labor. But the relationship between labour-power and the commodity it
produces becomes more complex when the commodity on the market is the embodied labor of
the sex worker and other performers. The embodied labor of sex workers and other performers
establishes them as both “owner[s] of a commodity” (i.e. their own labor power) and
commodities themselves as performers of embodied labor (186). Though all workers’ labor is
commodified through the logic of equivalence, what distinguishes their labor from the labor of
other workers is the affective demands of the work. The sex worker must love his or her
consumer, as the performer must amuse, entertain, or produce an otherwise emotional response
for his or her consumer(s). The affect associated with such embodied labor complicates the value
form by challenging the logic of equivalence because of its inability to be quantified. Affect
therefore creates a space of illegibility around the embodied labor of sex work and performance.
This paper strives to make comparisons between sex work and bodily exhibition on the sideshow
stage and examines the interplay of these two spectacular structures on the construction of the
transnational narrator in Chua’s novel as an illegible body.

Chua introduces this illegibility when he presents the idea of “twoness” in his description
of Siamese twins Chang and Eng:
Late one afternoon in 1824, as the Scottish trader Robert Hunter was returning to his house on the west bank of the Chao Phraya, he was struck by an extraordinary sight before him in the water. It was a creature that appeared to have two heads, four arms, and four legs, all of which were moving in perfect harmony. As Hunter watched, the object climbed into a nearby boat, and to his amazement he realized that he had been looking at two small boys who were joined together at the waist. Chang and Eng, as the boys were named, were then thirteen years old, the sons of a Nyonya mother and a Teochew father, and they were bought by Hunter, who shipped them off to America to work the sideshows of P.T. Barnum’s circus. The twins wound up becoming naturalized American citizens, changed their name to Bunker, married plantation belles, and lived in the American South during antebellum slavery. One of their children even fought on the side of the Confederacy. One ever feels their twoness. Like twin circuits in a machine. In the mess but not of it. Acquired and interred in a story we never wrote. (Chua 193-4)

Chua both evokes and transforms W.E.B. Du Bois’s construction of twoness in his introduction to the Siamese twins, Chang and Eng. In Souls of Black Folks, Du Bois writes that the American Negro is only allowed to “see himself” through “the eyes of others,” forcing him to occupy a liminal subject position between self and the otherness projected upon him. In that space, “one ever feels his twoness, -- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (Chapter 1, “Our Spiritual Strivings”). For Du Bois, the position of “twoness” of twentieth century African American is the subject’s inability to reconcile the positions of being both a subject and the object of the other’s gaze. Chua diverges from Du Bois construction of
twoness by recasting the twoness of the Siamese twin as a site of multiple illegibilities. Chua creates the possibility of two readings even within his invocation of Du Bois’s text. In one construction, the “one” that ever feels the twoness of Chang and Eng is the reader, in which “one” occupies the grammatical position of a general or universal pronoun. Yet, the line might also suggest that “one” refers to either Chang or Eng, indicating that the twins themselves are always aware of their dual subjectivities. In other words, neither twin experiences the unified self that Du Bois’s construction of twoness indicates is the norm.

Chua’s construction of the “twoness” of Chang and Eng encapsulates both the physical reality of the twins’ fused body, as well as the peculiar illegibility of their personhood. In his literary history *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self*, Leslie Fiedler theorizes that the twins regarded themselves as “a single person” because they chose to sign “legal documents and personal correspondence not as Chang and Eng, but simply Chang Eng” (213). Likewise, Elizabeth Grosz notes in her essay “Intolerable Ambiguity” that Chang and Eng also wrote their letters using entirely the first person pronoun “I,” which she provides as evidence that the twins thought of themselves as a single person (56). But to read the body of Chang and Eng through the concept of twoness produces a more complex conclusion. The lack of an “and” in the twins’ signature does not indicate that they viewed themselves as one entity, but rather manifests the illegibility of twoness. If an “and” indicates the distinct presence of two persons with individual subject positions, then the removal of that “and” creates a space in which the identity of the subjects is obscured. Floating together on the page without any indication of coordination or subordination, the names appear only in conjunction. But without a distinct grammatical conjunction to define the relationship between the names, it is unclear whether they belong to one writer or two. The lack of a proper conjunction, then, signifies a confusion of identities in an
unintelligible space where one voice blends into that of another, rather than the steadfast and singular identity Fiedler implies. Additionally, the use of the first person singular creates a textual space in which the identity of the author is ambiguous. Because the twins composed their letters together, the use of the first person singular makes it impossible to distinguish which idea originated from which writer. It does not, as Grosz implies, necessitate that Chang and Eng thought of themselves as one entity, but rather points back to the twins as a manifestation of illegible personhood through the grammatical confusion it creates on the page.

The twins’ peculiar bodily construction and historical situation enables Chang and Eng to articulate yet another valence of twoness: the position of the transnational body in the increasingly borderless global market. According to Chua’s history of the twins, the boys were first “bought by Hunter” before they came to work in the United States in sideshows where they earned money through the exhibition of their spectacular body. According to historian Sarah Mitchell in her article “Exhibiting Monstrosity: Chang and Eng, the ‘Original’ Siamese Twins,” other accounts of the twins’ interactions with Hunter suggest that the money given to their mother when they left for America was compensation for “the family’s anticipated lost income caused by their absence” as Chang and Eng’s father had passed away and the twins were “supporting the family by fishing and selling duck eggs” (150). Mitchell also acknowledges that Chua’s version of the twins’ acquisition is reflected in historical documents. Like their body, the history of their “purchase” and arrival in the United States is illegible. But whether they were bought outright or their mother was given compensation for “anticipated lost income,” the twins did earn their own money through the exhibition of their fused body on the sideshow stage. In the first year of their careers as performers, the twins were paid $10 a month, which was raised to $50 by the second year of their career. By the time they began working with Barnum in the
1860s, they earned $100 a week for their engagements, eventually amassing nearly $35,000 in real property by 1863.¹ Although the twins were paid together by their producers and exhibitors, they filed taxes separately. In the eyes of the United States government, the twins as individuals held different values and different identities, but for their viewing public, Chang and Eng’s abstraction as freaks complicated their position as individual, taxable entities. As performers, the twins appeared not as distinct individuals, but as an illegible fusion of bodies, personhoods, and national identities. In crossing borders to display their bodies, the twins exhibited the twoness of the transnational, a position somewhere between Thai and American, mediated by the sideshow stage. Although they did eventually become taxpaying “naturalized American citizens” and participated in American culture in a way that Lisa Lowe would categorize as speaking themselves “American,” the twins’ body was perpetually marked by its place of origin as a Siamese twin.² Their fused body constantly recapitulates their foreignness and marks them as a site in which identities are constantly in flux between Chang and Eng and between Thai and American.

The figure of the Siamese twin recasts Du Bois’s concept of twoness in the context of transnationalism. As Chang and Eng exhibit their body in Barnum’s sideshows, they are constantly forced to see themselves through the eyes of the spectators who gaze back at them. In her work on sexual tourism and prostitution in the Caribbean, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, M. Jacqui Alexander writes that sex tourism “draws together powerful processes of sexual commodification and sexual citizenship” in which the “state institutionalization of economic

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¹ These figures of Chang and Eng’s weekly earnings and tax records are reported in Irving Wallace and Amy Wallace’s 1978 biography *The Two*.

² In *Immigrant Acts*, Lisa Lowe defines the political formation of immigrant subjects as “American” through their participation in culture, the medium of the present.
viability through heterosexual sex for pleasure links important economic and psychic elements for both the imperial tourist (the invisible subject of colonial law) and for a presumably ‘servile’ population (which the state is bent on renativizing)” (27). In such constructions, the imperial tourist can play the role of the colonizer by sexually possessing an exotic other, purchasing alongside the commodified body of the sex worker/performer the commodity of spectacularized race.

In *Sideshow U.S.A.*, Rachel Adams discusses the “important cultural work” of the freakshow as that which allowed “ordinary people to confront, and master, the most extreme and terrifying forms of Otherness they could imagine, from exotic dark-skinned people, to victims of war and disease, to ambiguously sexed bodies.” Adam’s use of the term “master” implies that the sideshow spectator was empowered to negotiate the fear of the other through the process of commodity, exerting ownership (albeit temporary) over the bodies exhibited inside the ten-in-one. “With its heterogeneous assemblage of bodies,” Adams writes, “the sideshow platform is both a source of entertainment and a stage for playing out many of the century’s most charged social and political controversies, such as debates about race and empire, immigration, relations among the sexes, taste, and community standards for decency” (2). Sideshows enabled the 19th century American spectator to view racialized bodies as spectacle, as well as momentarily possess the commodified bodies of the sideshow performers through the spectatorial gaze.

Both the sideshow performer and the sex worker, therefore, are coded in this context as particularly racialized commodities in which spectators held a particular erotic investment. In her work on Chang and Eng, Allison Pingree explores the erotic component of the Siamese twins’ attachment in the American cultural fascination. Pingree posits that the idea of Siamese twins
complicated American notions of domesticity, privacy, and sexuality because the Bunker twins marriage to sisters carried a host of contradicting connotations. The idea of conjoined male bodies spoke to an obvious fear of homosexuality (and incest), while their marriage to (non-conjoined) twin sisters opened up the possibility for bigamy. As such, the body of the conjoined twin, like that of the sex worker, becomes a spectacle in which the viewer holds an erotic investment. In the majority of pitch cards, lithographs, and cartoons of Chang and Eng produced during their lifespan (1811-1874), the band of flesh that connected the twins was exposed. Whether the brothers wore Asian-style clothing (as they did in their early career) or formal Western suits (as they did later in their career), there was always a gap in the fabric through which their physical connection was highlighted and made visible to their viewing public. In addition to being able to participate in a colonizing moment, the spectator viewing Chang and Eng’s body was also able to participate in the erotic spectacle of the racialized freak as they stared at the exposed flesh of the entwined performers.

Chua’s text presses on the connections between the sideshow performer and the sex worker/sex show in the chapter titled “Nonstop Live Show.” The chapter itself is only a single paragraph long, comprised of fragments and fused words:

3 Pingree’s essay “America’s ‘United Siamese Brothers’: Chang and Eng and Nineteenth-Century Ideologies of Democracy and Domesticity” also considers the Civil War-era fascination with the twins as an advertising method to sell a united Democracy.

4 Pingree’s other work on Vaudeville’s conjoined twins Daisy and Violet Hilton (“The ‘Exceptions that Prove the Rule’: Daisy and Violet Hilton, the ‘New Woman,’ and the Bonds of Marriage”) also supports the claim that the Siamese twin held an erotic fascination for the viewer, particularly when the Hilton sisters appeared in Tod Browning’s *Freaks*, where the camera notably lingers over the image of the women unzipping their dress, promising the viewer a glimpse at the unseen bit of backside that connected them.
Non Stop Live Show. No Entrance Fee. No Cover Charge. Pay only for drink.


The stylistic representation of the series of sex acts inside the club is clearly reminiscent of the sideshow barker and the historical tradition of exploitation associated with Barnum’s employment practices. The long list of sex acts evokes the spiels that sideshow barkers employed in attracting spectators to witness the freaks exhibited within the tents. Furthermore, Chua’s stylistic choices in this passage enhance the “freakish” qualities of the prostitute. The clipped sentences reduce the sex workers into an assemblage of genitals. No performer’s names are mentioned, only pussies and cunts. Likewise, the acts are constructed as being performed by the genitals alone with no outside intervention from the person to whom they belong. In “Intolerable Ambiguity,” Grosz reads the figure of the Siamese twin as a body which asked its audience to question the relationship between body and identity. She posits that Siamese twins as subjects were not “given an identity independent of his or her bodily morphology – either sexual or more broadly corporeal – but acquire[d] an identity in relation to the body” (63-4). In Chua’s passage, the sex worker is constructed as a kind of freak whose commodified body can perform spectacular feats without any guiding intention from the performer herself. She has no identity
outside of her sexual corporeality, linking her to body to the sideshow freak and, specifically, to the illegibility of the Siamese twin.

The conflation of performing body and act that renders the sex worker freakishly illegible is further enhanced stylistically through Chua’s occasional blending of words such as “Insideher” and “Pingpongball,” and the breaking of words such as “Can dle.” The fracturing and reforming of words in this passage creates a kind of linguistic unintelligibility that distances the reader from the acts occurring inside the nightclub while also inviting the reader in. The reliance on fragments with muddled prepositional phrases, the general lack of articles, and adjectival constructions creates the appearance of being crafted by someone with little facility in English while simultaneously establishing English as the language of global capitalism. Indeed, the passage begins with discussion of monies to be exchanged before it begins to rattle off sex acts. Here there is “No Entrance Fee. No Cover Charge” and you “Pay only for drink. Beer 50 baht. Whisky 55 baht. Kloster 55 baht.” While the speaker is coded as Thai and fluent in the language of commerce, the reader is established as unmarked and is invited to partake in the temporary ownership of commodified racial and sexual bodies. This subsequently engages the reader in an uncomfortable re-enactment of the forces of colony (enabled by capitalism) that are recapitulated through Chua’s sideshow-sex show.

The text’s sideshow-sex show connections articulate a particular kind of twoness that surrounds the commodified bodies of these kinds of laborers; it is through these spheres that the narrator’s own twoness is articulated in Chua’s text. The narrator, nameless like the sex workers in the “Nonstop Live Show,” compares his relationship with his ex-boyfriend Jim as a kind of prostitution. Although he was “never really a prostitute,” the narrator is keenly aware of the
construction of the value of his body in his relationship with Jim (58). “In those days,” he says, “I was almost obsessed with my value,” a value that he notes he was frequently unable to determine until he became Jim’s “worthy companion.” Rather than counting the “money left on top of [his] clothes,” he “knew the prices and categories had already been fixed” (57). The narrator clearly acknowledges the conflation of his body, its product, and its value as something determined by forces outside of himself, articulating his relationship with Jim as a space through which the twoness of the commodified body is produced.

The narrator’s relationship with Jim also produces a kind of secondary twoness via the decorative value associated with the narrator’s raced body. Jim’s possession of the narrator replays the narratives of colonialism that M. Jacqui Alexander establishes as a feature of sexual tourism and Rachel Adams foregrounds as a part of the spectacle of the American sideshow stage. Curiously, Jim’s possession of the narrator as a lover serves the “purpose” of giving the narrator “the appearance of belonging: to a place, to a time, to [J]im” (Chua 57). Jim provides the narrator with a sense of belonging in both time and place via neoliberal multiculturalism. In Immigrant Acts, Lisa Lowe theorizes American culture as a “key site for the resolution of inequalities and stratifications that cannot be resolved on the political terrain of representative democracy.” American culture “performs” this resolution of inequalities by “naturalizing a universality that exempts the ‘non-American’ from its history of development or admits the ‘non-American’ only through ‘multiculturalism’ that aestheticizes ethnic differences as if they could be separated from history.” Lowe further argues that the kinds of cultural productions that emerge out of the false universality of multiculturalism actually serve to disrupt the myth of national identity “by revealing its gaps and fissures” (9). For Lowe, neoliberal multiculturalism is the dominant idea of the American in the late 20th and 21st century.
By being linked to Jim (and Jim’s “Americanness” and “whiteness”), the narrator attempts to negotiate a kind of belonging in the myth of multicultural America. His belonging, however, is contingent upon his status as a “hot commodity.” He can participate in neoliberal multiculturalism through his interracial relationship with Jim, but only as long as he remains valuable to Jim. While with Jim, the narrator is photographed sitting among Jim’s other expensive and “prized possessions: Giacometti coffee tables, Beidermeyer chairs” (Chua 88). The photograph serves to equate the narrator’s value to that of the other commodities Jim collects. (By collecting “prized possessions” such as Italian coffee tables, German chair, and Thai men, Jim, too, can participate in neoliberal multiculturalism.) In a sense, it also serves to freeze his value and keep it from depreciating by permanently documenting it as belonging to a time and place via the photograph. But by the time he and Jim have broken up, the narrator’s value is significantly depreciated, having only a “scrupulously catalogued . . . $24.52” to his name when he is released from jail (60). Without an American to dictate the narrator’s value under neoliberal multiculturalism, his value as a commodity depreciates, which significantly limits his ability to belong, leading him to search for belonging in the country of his birth.

The relationship clearly does more to construct neoliberal multiculturalism for Jim than it does for the narrator, as the narrator’s “intrinsic” value is the spectacle of his racialized body. He is, for Jim, a “hot commodity” that produces the affects of a neoliberal selfhood. Much of the narrator’s relationship with Jim revolves around the consumption of cocaine, during which the narrator’s body functions as a “mirror” (89). His use-value to Jim is clear in the sense that he enables Jim’s consumption of narcotics, but Chua’s particular employment of the trope of the mirror establishes a much more complex relationship between commodities and their owners. Because the mirror’s primary function is to reflect what it presented before it, the narrator’s body
in this construction reflects neoliberal multiculturalism back on Jim, who recognizes that “cocaine made him feel as if he were unencumbered by his body,” which “left him free to indulge” in the narrator’s body (89). The narrator’s body, then, becomes a mirror through which Jim can participate in neoliberal multiculturalism. For the narrator, the attempt at achieving neoliberal multiculturalism is denied by the very thing that enables Jim to achieve it: the mirror-like quality of his skin.

In Thailand, the narrator attempts to construct a sense of belonging through the purchase of commodities. As Jim is able to achieve a sense of neoliberal selfhood through his indulgence in the narrator’s commodified body, the narrator hopes to employ commodities that will reflect a Thai national identity by appealing to the racial aspects of fictive ethnicity. In chapter 5 of Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities, “The Nation Form,” Etienne Balibar argues that national identity is predicated on the creation of fictive ethnicities, which establish the ideological construction of the citizen and create national unification not by “suppressing all differences, but by relativizing them and subordinating them . . . in such a way that it is the symbolic difference between ‘ourselves’ and ‘foreigners’ which wins out and which is lived as irreducible” (94). Fictive ethnicities are chiefly created through language and race, which mediate national belonging by predicking membership on shared linguistic tradition and shared racial heritage. The two forces work in tandem, and do not function to mediate national belonging on their own accord.

The narrator tries to look more Thai by spectacularizing his race through local fashion trends. He intentionally purchases a black wool suit to make him appear more Thai, which “never seemed important . . . before but it is now” because in Thailand people “wear suits in this
weather all the time” (6). However, the suit he purchases is merely “a skillful copy anyone can buy for 2500 baht,” an acknowledgement of the commodity’s inability to successfully help him negotiate Thai belonging due to its own inauthentic origins. The narrator hopes that the suit will magnify the racial component of fictive ethnicity by making him blend in. However, despite this hope, his race fails to produce belonging via fictive ethnicity. Though his racialized skin gave him value in the United States through neoliberal multiculturalism, the “uniform” of flesh fails to “hold . . . together” his identity in Thailand. To the Thai people he encounters in his return to the country of his birth, his skin is “not dark enough to hide [his] insides,” which “betray” him as something different, foreign, and “a contagion” (121). The narrator attempts to achieve a more appropriate level of race by sun tanning, “hoping it will bake the answer” to the question about his origins into his skin. However, even in his attempts to “bake” his “belonging” under the hot Thai sun, the narrator knows no matter how dark he can make his skin, he will also be betrayed as a bearer of transnational twoness by his tongue. Even though he speaks the language, he knows that the native Thai street vendors “will look surprised when you pick over certain words in their speech that you can’t remember” (12). Both language and race fail to help the narrator produce a fictive Thai ethnicity as his skin will never appear dark enough nor will his language be fluent enough to appease the native Thai. This twoness, then, is recapitulated by the narrator as the twoness of the transnational: forever existing between nations, while not belonging to either. Like Chang and Eng, the narrator may be in the “mess” of each country, but is not “of” either (193).

The only sense in which the narrator can achieve any kind of belonging in Thailand is through participating in the economy of sexual tourism that constructed his own twoness. Where suits, language, and race fail to mark him as Thai, his relationship with the young hustler Thong
somehow succeeds – but only temporarily. The narrator remarks that he is enjoying his relationship with Thong so much because “it feels like I’m living off him” (36). The narrator’s relationship with Thong enables him to claim a kind of fictive ethnicity through the commodification of Thong’s body. The narrator’s ownership of Thong recapitulates the narrator’s own relationship with Jim in that the ostensible owner of the commodity is afforded some kind of belonging – to a nation, to an ideology – through possession of a racialized body. The temporary belonging transferred onto the owner of the commodified body is part of its affective milieu. Without the narrator, Jim ostensibly loses his ability to belong to neoliberal multiculturalism (until he can find another racialized lover to replace the narrator) and without Thong the narrator must turn toward yet another means through which to negotiate his belonging.

The Siamese twin trope returns in the narrator’s attempts to negotiate fictive ethnicity in both American and Thai contexts. Chua metaphorically constructs this search for ethnic and national belonging through his construction of the narrator’s lovers as potential twins. The narrator’s longing for a twin indicates a desire to be conjoined with his lover through the mechanism of fictive ethnicity – a conjunction that is ultimately denied. As his relationship with Jim begins to deteriorate, the narrator notices “how different we looked one morning, standing together in front of the bathroom mirror, his arms draped around me” (55). Though the proximity of their bodies indicates a kind of near-Siamese conjunction in which it is difficult to tell exactly how entwined the narrator’s body is with Jim’s, neoliberal multiculturalism has failed to sublimate the differences between the narrator and Jim, highlighting the fissures in the narrator’s ability to claim national belonging through Jim, as well as his ability to be twinned with his lover. The language of the twin resurfaces in the narrator’s relationship with Thong. He thinks of
Thong as his “twin,” but later fears that his perceived twinning with Thong will not last because they are actually nothing alike, that the differences between them seem “so wide at that moment, something that would never be bridged” (37). But despite that fear, the narrator still feels the pull to incorporate himself with Thong, even when he leaves Thong to visit his family: “The separation will be good, you tell him. *I’m getting too attached to you*” (44). The idea of the narrator’s attachment to Thong is reminiscent of the conjoined body of the Siamese twin. Thus, when the narrator says that he is enjoying his relationship with Thong so much “because it feels like I’m living off him,” there is also a sense that he is living off of Thong’s body because they are physically attached to one another, creating a kind of Siamese twin in which one cannot tell where one lover’s body begins and the other ends (36).

The unintelligible space created by the “twinning” of the narrator and his lovers is also inscribed on the narrator’s own body. If the skin is meant to act as a border between the body’s interior and the external world, the narrator’s body breaks down the borders of the skin as a “strategic fiction” by highlighting the body’s permeability (96). Not only does the narrator routinely incorporate other bodies into his own through the ingestion of seminal fluids, but his own fluids (particularly blood) force themselves outside of the body, creating a space of grotesque unintelligibility around the borders of the narrator’s body. In a memory from his childhood in Thailand, the narrator cuts his leg and the blood appears to be “so red it looks fake,” appearing more as colored “syrup” than actual blood (114). The illegibility of the narrator’s blood recurs later in the text when he pays to watch a sexual encounter between a pair of married Thai sex workers. The husband handcuffs the narrator to the wife, cutting her wrist. “There is blood on the pillow,” he says. “But you aren’t sure if it is yours or hers” (181). Though there is no indication that the narrator also cuts himself on the handcuffs, his presence at the event,
handcuffed to the woman, creates a space of unintelligibility around their bodies, extending to the blood on the pillow. The handcuff in this scene functions as another maker of sexual twinning, as the narrator has trouble distinguishing “where one body ends and another begins” (180). While the bodies of the narrator and the wife may not be as incorporated as the narrator desires of his lovers, the handcuffs link their bodies together in terms of their sheer proximity and the mixing of their blood. The miscegeneous space of the bloody pillow recapitulates the bodies of Chang and Eng, who, in addition to being fused through connective tissues at their waist, also shared a liver, which processed blood for both of them, mixing their individual blood sources and making them indistinguishable from one another.

There is never “an adequate description” of the narrator’s illegible body because of his twoness (124). But the commodification of the transnational body also produces a kind of narrative twoness which unsettles the cultivated divide between past and present, as well as the comfortable space between the reader and the narrator. As such, the text itself is shrouded in a kind of narrative illegibility, prone to “resisting the formal abstraction of aestheticization that is a legacy of European modernism and a continuing feature of European postmodernism” (Lisa Lowe 108). In Immigrant Acts, Lisa Lowe describes the textual practice of shifting divides between past and present as a particular feature of the decolonizing novel of the post-colonial era. Lowe’s work draws on Benjamin’s conception of history to recast the materiality of Asian American histories as that which “will not be ordered” and “what does not coagulate and cohere” (111).

The transnational body experiences a similar conception of history that operates counter to teleological notions of time. Chua’s text is a linear, resisting a narrative that progresses from
past to present. The novel is peppered with memories from the narrator’s past that recur in the present, and often invokes national or cultural histories alongside the “present” of the narrative. Under the conditions of twoness, history cannot be presented as a linear order of events for the historical and social makers of twoness are always coming to bear on the transnational body. As such, the narrator is also historically twinned with his Nyonya “grandmother” through the photograph he purchases. As he gazes at the photograph of this woman, he notes that “Her body falls away” to the point that “Long after the blood was mopped up, I would never know where her body ended and mine began” (141). The image of conjoined bodies that organizes the narrator’s connection to his lovers reappears as his projection of a “grandmother” in a photograph. The Nyonya themselves were an immigrant group of Straights-Chinese that the narrator constructs as “illegible” in the context of Thai national identity. Also a transnational, the Nyonya woman in the photograph perpetually experiences a similar twoness, described by the narrator as “A matrix” of ethnic identities that simultaneously holds “All those things inside you” and “You inside all those things” (113). The woman in the photograph also experiences a matrix of twoness which is expressed, despite the photographs attempts to freeze history and force the borders of the body to “fall . . . into place,” again in the presence as the illegible borders of her body push past the materiality of the photograph and participate in Siamese twinning with the narrator’s body (113). It is impossible to tell where the Nyonya body ends and the narrator’s body begins because the conditions of twoness reconstruct history as that which will not coagulate or cohere, continually recurring in the present.

The novel takes up this recurring history as storytelling trope, juxtaposing scenes in the narrator’s present with memories from the past in a way that recreates the past as indistinguishable from the present, just as the narrator’s body is indistinguishable from that of
the Nyonya woman in the picture. The result is a particularly circular narrative that forces the reader into a position where his or her expectations of reading a teleological, linear narrative are disrupted by the recurrence of history. The narrative also disrupts the comfortable divide between reader and narrator by shifting the narrative address from first to second person. I have previously termed this narrative shift the “split you,” which produces the conditions of twoness on the reader. By employing the second person address, the narrative forces the reader to actively participate in the novel in a position other than simply reading. Thus, the reader occupies a split position as the consumer of the text and a part of the text being consumed.

The narrator calls attention to the voyeuristic position of reading, explaining that the reason he likes a certain photograph of himself is “the feeling it gives you. You the voyeur” (11). By calling attention to the voyeuristic act of reading, Chua’s text extends the voyeuristic pursuits of paying to view “Nonstop Live Shows” or the commodified bodies of Chang and Eng to the domain of the novel. In constructing the reader-as-voyeur, the narrative makes the consumer of the novel complicit in the production of twoness. This also extends the novel’s critique of neoliberal commodity fetishism by highlighting the novel’s position as commodity for consumption, produced by a transnational writer. In reading Chua’s text, the presumably white reader can affect a neoliberal multicultural selfhood through its possession and consumption. However, the text does more than simply recognize reading as a voyeuristic act. The narrative forces the reader to participate. Immediately following the recognition of reading-as-voyeurism, the narrative employs the “split you” to position the reader-as-narrator: “Before you leave the apartment for the last time,” Chua writes, launching the reader into a memory of the narrator’s breakup with Jim before the journey to Thailand (11). The narrative both forces the reader to occupy the position of the narrator as well as experience the twoness of recurring history.
By the end of the novel, the text has forced the reader to actively participate in its narrative, which engages the reader in a textual manifestation of transnational twoness. “You thought this was something in which you wouldn’t have to participate,” the narrator says. “Thought this was a story you could just watch unravel. A consuming stain that stops short of where you’re standing. No” (208). The reader becomes an active participant in a sex act in the chapter “King Rubber,” in which the “split you” has sex with a Danish tourist. There is no shift of narrative voice between first person and second person to indicate that the reader is occupying the position of narrator. Instead, the entire chapter is told in the second person address, which forces the reader to participate in the sex act as a sex worker. The narrative prevents the reader from merely occupying the position of the voyeur, forcing the reader to occupy the position of the commodified body and experience its twoness. In so doing, the reader becomes twinned with the narrator, sliding in and out of the “split you,” which effectively splits the consciousness of the narrator into a double consciousness that asks the reader to experience the narrator through the reader’s eyes, as well as to experience what it is like to be “read” by the eyes of others.

As the reader experiences the twoness of double-consciousness with the narrator, so, too, does the reader begin to experience a bodily twinning with the narrator. At the novel’s end, the narrator addresses the reader as though the reader’s body has begun to merge with the narrator’s, further breaking down the alleged borders between fiction and reality constructed by the novel:

Something else is happening as you stretch around me. Hold me. Tight. You are looking me over. Searching me for some kind of closure. The end of a journey. I’m sorry I can’t oblige. My extended arms will always form the perimeter of an open sore. Even as you bring the wound to your thin, even mouth. Kiss it.
I love you.

I can barely hear your nasal voice.

I love you because your body is expensive.

I feel many things as you spread over me. Into me . . . Your blood sneaking back into the chamber of your heart.” (Chua 208)

The narrator’s body and reader’s body become entwined in this passage, creating the narrator and reader together as a Siamese twin whose borders have become completely illegible. The borders of the narrator’s body always form “the perimeter of an open sore,” cementing the narrator’s transnational twoness as that which cannot be closed or easily identified. The reader’s body stretches around the narrator’s and incorporates it into his or her own body, to the point where the two bodies are indistinguishable from one another. It is unclear in the end if inner structures of the body (the blood and the heart) belong to either the narrator or the reader, or if the two entities share a heart the way that Chang and Eng shared a liver. However, regardless of to whom the organ belongs, the incorporated body of the reader and narrator creates a space of Siamese illegibility. By drawing the reader into the multiple layers of twoness in the text, *Gold by the Inch* subsequently unsettles the reader’s own ability to negotiate belonging. By troping the reader and the narrator as a Siamese twin, the reader experiences the twoness of the commodified body, highlighted by the narrator’s construction of the reader’s body as “expensive” (208).

But the illegibility of twoness also enables the final image of the merged bodies of the reader and the narrator to also act as a reminder of the violence of consumption. As the reader’s body incorporates the narrator’s body, it consumes it like a commodity. The incorporation of the narrator’s body into the reader’s body marks the act of reading as an act of violence, and perhaps
an act of colony. This final image positions the novel as a commodity that is fetishistically consumed in the pursuit of neoliberal multiculturalism, which the novel critiques. Because the image of incorporated bodies evokes the consumptive acts of colonialism and the neoliberal commodity fetish which are inherently violent, Chua’s final image adds another valence of twoness to the reader’s experience by asking him or her not only to be twinned with the narrator, but to be his consumer, which contributes yet another permutations of the twoness of the Siamese twin.

Despite their brief appearance in the novel, the commodified history of Chang and Eng reaches through the past and incorporates into the body of the narrator in Chua’s *Gold by the Inch*. The Siamese twin is an invaluable organizing metaphor through which we can articulate all the complex valences of the transnational body’s twoness, as well as explicate the ways in which transnational histories are constantly recurring in the present. The text offers numerous other avenues through which to explore the relationship between bodies and capital, particularly Asian bodies and capital, in a transnational context. However, the scope of this project limits those relationships only to those which help articulate the narrator’s twoness through the twoness of the Siamese twin, which provide a channel through which those other structures can be navigated.
Bibliography