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# Propagating Monsters: Conjoined Twins in Popular Culture

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PROPAGATING MONSTERS: CONJOINED TWINS IN POPULAR CULTURE

By

Susan Santha Kerns

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Partial Fulfillment of the  
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ABSTRACT  
PROPAGATING MONSTERS: CONJOINED TWINS IN POPULAR CULTURE

by

Susan Santha Kerns

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2013  
Under the Supervision of Professor Tasha Oren

This study analyzes representations of conjoined twins in the United States to illustrate how historical images are in conversation with biographies, medical documents, sideshows, and contemporary film and television shows about conjoined twins, both fictional and nonfictional. The recycling of established tropes and the privileging of science over humanity results in limited understandings of the fluidity of conjoined twin identity. Separation and individuality are favored, relegating conjoined twins to “disabled” people that need fixing. Studying biographical artifacts of Millie-Christine McKoy’s and Daisy and Violet Hilton’s careers illuminates the interrelationship between biographies, images, and rights. Although born into slavery, Millie-Christine overcame social challenges and were afforded rights beyond what most people of African descent had during the 1800s. Daisy and Violet, however, were born decades later yet were owned for over twenty years and never fully wrested themselves from their tabloid images. The motion pictures they made, Tod Browning’s *Freaks* and *Chained for Life*, however, started creating narrative space for conjoined twins in film, and both allow for female conjoined twin sexuality, something no film has done since. *Freaks* visually and narratively accommodates those with unusual bodies, while *Chained for Life* lays the groundwork for later films that privilege separation. Building on this history, this study analyzes conjoined twins in fiction and nonfiction film and television, specifically

fictional two-headed “monsters”—one body with two heads—and full-bodied conjoined twins who remain connected. These narratives insist upon separation if conjoined twins desire romance, or play out a good twin/bad twin pattern, and they favor easily assimilated bodies. Conjoined twins in nonfictional television shows generally become spectacle or specimen via the highlighting of scientific discovery, separation, and independence, while medical knowledge is favored at the expense of conjoined twins. However, several programs about Lori and George Schappell or Abigail and Brittany Hensel endeavor to disrupt medical narratives, overturn stereotypes, and widen perspectives. These offer a first step toward broadening the identity spectrum to account for fluctuating identities and notions of individuality, which could help redefine conjoined twins outside of singleton terms.

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### **Introduction: The Legacy of the Biddenden Maids**

Mary and Eliza (or Elisa) Chulkhurst, also known as the Biddenden Maids, are an early example of conjoined twins whose bodies continue to be used for publicity with mythology still circulating about them nearly 1,000 years after their reported birth. They are of the first conjoined twins with “documented” histories. Purportedly born in 1100 in Kent, England, and nicknamed for their birth village, the Biddenden Maids left several acres of land and a large sum of money to the Chulkhurst charity to be used to feed the poor after they died in 1134. In their honor, the charity distributed flour and water “cakes” decorated with wooden-stamp impressions of the twins. Some say the cakes provided a cure for stomachaches; others say they were mere souvenirs, too hard and unpalatable to eat. During the 1700s, the cakes became a consolation prize of sorts: those who did not receive full food baskets “had to be content with the hard Biddenden cakes with the Maids' effigy, which were thrown out among the populace from the church roof” (Bondeson “The Biddenden Maids” 217). Additional souvenirs eventually became available to commemorate the twins, including biographical broadsheets and small clay plaques resembling the cakes, and the distribution of souvenir cakes, now called biscuits, continues today, and this story endures. Their story provides the village with a legacy and a way to promote tourism, and it also turned the twins into a timeless legend. Their nicknames are now interchangeable with a continued village celebration for which they have become mascots, and a sign depicting them still stands.

The actual lives of the Chulkhurst sisters, however, remain open for debate. Indeed, they barely matter. As with many conjoined twins who have a life in representations, biographical information about them becomes debatable since their



biographies must be constructed via publicity materials, souvenirs, and press pieces—the truth distilled from the ballyhoo. They also seem to be created based on singletons’ (single-bodied humans) needs or contemporary interests. While it is likely that the Chulkhurst sisters lived in the village of Biddenden, some argue that the Chulkhurst charity simply invented the tale of the two sisters during a period when it was losing visibility. If they did exist, it is likely they were born near 1100, but a birth that year would have coincided with the accidental death and possible assassination of King William Rufus (William II), whose death became suspect. He was killed when an arrow punctured his lung while hunting, and though accounts suggest that his death was accidental, speculations of murder lingered. As a result, other unusual occurrences around 1100 were turned into omens foretelling the King’s death, so some speculate that the birth date of the Chulkhursts was changed accordingly from a later date to an earlier one. Other reports claim the twins were born as late as the 1500s, although Jan Bondeson argues that if they had lived between 1500 and 1700, a key period in the development of teratological studies,<sup>1</sup> more mention would have been made of them in news and popular literature (220). Even simple facts about the Chulkhursts’ lives, like their birthdate, became questionable over the years as stories about them were employed in ways that suited others’ needs.

It is common for singletons to alter the personal histories of conjoined twins, or images of their bodies, to make claims outside of and unrelated to conjoined twins. Doing so, unfortunately, can permanently color the biographies of twins or affect their real-life choices and rights. Although artifacts from the 1100s are certainly more difficult

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<sup>1</sup> Teratology is the study of monsters.

to utilize than documents from the last thirty years, people continue confusing media representations of conjoined twins with personal biographies or misusing things like television appearances to make claims about conjoined lives. Furthermore, existing documents of most performing conjoined twins—particularly those living during the 1800s and early 1900s—are publicity materials constructed to create a certain image. Illustrations, photos, and pamphlets helped market twins in a specific way to promote their “brand.” Promoters often controlled these documents and usually stretched or totally fabricated the truth to reinforce the performance audiences would see or had just seen. The situation is so confounded that even contemporary biographers and scholars at times treat “autobiographical pamphlets” written by publicists as truth. Conjoined twins whose families kept them out of the public eye leave little accessible information about their lives, making it nearly impossible to study conjoined twins raised outside of entertainment venues for the sake of comparison. All of these things make it difficult to understand conjoined twins’ lived realities and their relationship to representations of them, which makes it necessary to be aware of the layers of image construction when trying to consider how all invested people and perspectives—conjoined twins, doctors and scientists, spectators, representations, biographies, legal rights, race, gender, and mass culture—intersect.

The Biddenden Maids, then, historically inaugurate a representational lineage for conjoined twins despite the fact that they may not have existed, or may not have been conjoined twins if they did exist. The surviving images of the Maids, which include early cookie presses dated pre-1500s to the 1800s, show them connected at the shoulders and hips. This kind of bodily formation is nearly impossible, so if the women were conjoined

(and not just standing side by side), they probably were joined at the pelvis or at the base of their spine, since pygopagus twins (as they are called) often learn to approximate standing side by side, or appear to be doing so. Exaggerated drawings of later sets of pygopagus conjoined twins, like Millie-Christine McKoy (who were joined at the base of their spine) and Chang and Eng Bunker (who were connected by a band of tissue on their abdomens), often placed them side by side as well. The commonness of these types of illustrations makes it easier to argue that the Biddenden Maids truly were conjoined, just crudely portrayed. They also denote a very early example of conjoined twins displayed in what Robert Bogdan calls the “aggrandized mode,” one of two common modes of sideshow presentation.<sup>2</sup> The aggrandized mode “endowed the freak with status-enhancing characteristics” like special abilities or fabricated backgrounds (97). Standard traits might be exaggerated—for example conjoined twins’ singing ability could be enhanced with a narrative about where they studied, the famous people they met, and those they impressed, and audiences were meant to look up to the accomplishments of people exhibited in this mode and see them as exemplary humans overcoming their physical limitations. The Biddenden Maids’ humanitarian actions would have proven that they made peace with their conjoined bodies and overcame a potential life of pity by reaching out to help others in need. What could have been a breadline became a centuries-old celebration of giving and living in harmony with others, and their generous character elevated them above mere singletons. The purported money and lands they left to feed the poor made them commendable citizens, and later versions of the molds even enhanced their beauty and fashion. The twins became a metaphor for community and

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<sup>2</sup> The other is the “exotic” mode.

helping those in need as doubly giving women eager to provide for others—a true symbol of bounty.

The Chulkhurst’s tale additionally indicates how singletons use conjoined bodies for their own purposes to make sense of their world through meaning inscribed on doubled bodies. This can be seen in their representational mode, and the debate surrounding their story also invokes the sense of “wonder” Rosemarie Garland Thomson describes when she explains that accounts of non-normative bodies primarily occur in one of two categories: wonder or error. “Wonder” suggests explanations for anomalous bodies that have to do with the body’s significance in the world. Explanations might be religious or anecdotal—for example, the birth might portend a bad event or embody God’s wrath against a family—and often they are tied to a sense of circumstantial logic outside the realm of science. “Error,” on the other hand, indicates an investigation into what happened prior to the birth that caused the anomalous body. These explanations became the norm as scientific advancements were made, especially as countries industrialized and bodies’ degree of deviance became linked to their departure from industrial use value, and they continue to be the most common way of explaining conjoined twins and others with unusual bodies. “Wonder” still surfaces, however, when, for example, a politician like Bob Marshall suggests that birth defects are “God’s punishment” for women who abort what would have been their first-born child. Narratives about unusual bodies that utilize wonder or error—scientific, religious, or otherwise—continue to create answers to singletons’ questions or make sense of unusual bodies on normative-bodied peoples’ terms. They explain bodies’ uniquenesses in relationship to the “normal” world, as occurred with the Biddenden Maids and their

linkage to the death of a king. Representations of conjoined twins bodies continue being used to provide meaning about historical events, cultural differences, or even romantic relationships for singleton people, and nearly every medium imaginable including oral traditions, printed stories, illustrations, photographs, and moving images on television and film has been used to portray these corporeal narratives.

Historically, representations of “freaks,” including conjoined twins, have been studied as if sideshow performers are one large, autonomous group of people who share the same feelings and experiences. When lumping multiple types of bodies together, patterns or characteristics often are applied to the entire group with little regard for differences like, say, how a bearded lady might differ from conjoined twins. Although doctors also once expected sets of conjoined twins to respond to stimuli just like other sets of conjoined twins—if one set experienced pain similarly between bodies, doctors thought all conjoined twins would share pain analogously—as medical research advanced, it became clear that things like shared physical sensation depended on where and how conjoined twins were connected. It now seems obvious that craniopagus<sup>3</sup> conjoined twins will share sensations differently than, say, those connected at the base of their spines. Doctors now compare where overlaps exist in how conjoined twins physically experience the world—and where there are interesting and useful divergences in behavior. People who study representations of “freaks” have been slower to segregate people with certain body types from one another with the exception of studies like Robert Bogdan’s, which breaks down representations into two main modes. Even within twin studies, many authors lump conjoined twins into one broad category of sameness.

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<sup>3</sup> Joined at the head.

Authors write biographies describing the details of individual twins' lives, yet simplistic comparisons are made between twins living in totally unrelated situations—perhaps twins from different countries or historical eras—to forge similarities or make projections about the twins' feelings. Arguing that conjoined people live basically the same lives despite their historical period, economic circumstances, geographic location, race, or gender ignores nuances and erases the ability to see where useful divergences and overlaps occur, and what those might mean. Race and gender studies scholars understand that essentialism deprives people of their autonomy and simplifies the multifaceted lives of humans with rich, individual experiences. Although essentialism is at times useful if invoked strategically, often it is the result of oversight. Specialized groups of people become the “same” because it is easier for people outside of that group to make sense of said people. This dissertation is an attempt to look at conjoined twins, and representations of them, individually or in meaningful groups to decipher overlaps that reveal something not only about how singletons make meaning of conjoined twins, but also how conjoined twins' lives interact with representations of them.

The first two chapters of this dissertation focus on popular sets of conjoined twins in the United States who performed during the 1800s or early 1900s—the height of sideshows and theatrical or vaudeville performances by conjoined twins: Millie-Christine McKoy and Daisy and Violet Hilton. Representations of Millie-Christine and Daisy and Violet outwardly illustrate similar career trajectories, yet the twins' “disability” seems to have freed one set and restrained the other. Despite being born into slavery, Millie-Christine lead a lifestyle beyond what would have been considered “normal” for them had they not been conjoined, and biographical evidence suggests that they eventually

separated their performative “freak” persona from their private lives, thus to some extent also freeing themselves from the projected desires of (white) singletons as well. In an interview in the documentary *Face to Face: The Schappell Twins*, scholar Alice Domurat Dreger explains that within a “place of restriction” like being conjoined in a singleton society, there also can be a place of privilege, and that if one can figure out how to take advantage of that place of privilege, unforeseen possibilities open up. Through a series of smart decisions and mere luck, Millie-Christine learned how to operate in that place of privilege and use being conjoined to their advantage. This allowed them to become educated, and make a good living for themselves, their managers, and their families while maintaining at least some control over their representations—certainly more so than most performers of African descent had during the period of their success. It also allowed them to work against racial stereotypes of Black women. Millie-Christine became quiet activists who never called themselves such, demonstrating a commitment to education through their conversations with patrons all over the world while funding educational opportunities for freed slaves in the southern United States.

Daisy and Violet Hilton, however, never were able to take advantage of their place of privilege, as they seemed unable to wrest themselves from the publicity images that defined them. As babies, Daisy and Violet were sold to a promoter, Mary Hilton, whose daughter and son-in-law inherited them when she died. Daisy and Violet were under strict control of their managers, Edith Hilton and Myer Myers, until their early twenties, when they sued the couple for emancipation. They essentially were slaves for the first two decades of their lives, which was unheard of for white women during the early 1900s in the United States, and the twins never completely recovered. They

achieved some continued fame after their trial, but their public personas became that of good girls gone party girls; they grew into tabloid sensations unable to leave their “freak” personas onstage. Additionally, they made a couple of film missteps including the Tod Browning film *Freaks* and the exploitation film they produced, *Chained for Life*. All of these things, along with very public love affairs and a publicity marriage gone awry, complicated the everywoman person the twins tried to present and eventually propelled the twins into obscurity as they aged. Theirs is a somewhat tragic story, and comparing it with Millie-Christine both illustrates the freedoms Daisy and Violet had that Millie-Christine were not afforded and highlights how Millie-Christine eventually were able to maximize their careers, while Daisy and Violet could not. Daisy and Violet remained tied to their publicity—unable to separate the public from the private and unwilling to detach the truth from the ballyhoo—until they walked away from show business altogether.

Through their film work, monetarily and critically unsuccessful though it was, Daisy and Violet nevertheless started opening up space for conjoined twins in film. Though it is often dismissed as exploitative to the sideshow performers who acted in the film, *Freaks* continues to be one of the narratives most receptive to non-normative bodied people living normative domestic lifestyles. Daisy and Violet are not a part of the mutilation scenes at the end of the film, and therefore, the majority of their screen time develops into a domestic melodrama about two young women managing marriages. It is meant to titillate, to be sure, but it does not question the possibility of conjoined relationships or moralize about their behavior. It also does not privilege the notion that conjoined twins must become singletons before achieving success, as most conjoined



twin narratives that follow *Freaks* do. Furthermore, it allows for female conjoined twin sexuality, something that no film since has done outside of *Chained for Life*. The film world in *Freaks* is constructed, both visually and narratively, to accommodate those with unusual bodies. With *Chained for Life*, the twins attempted to co-author a story that reflected their lives, at least as told through the tabloids, while also answering questions in stimulating and extreme ways: for example, can an innocent twin receive the death penalty if her sister commits murder? Despite its failures, it nevertheless lays the groundwork for myriad conjoined twin films to come—films that privilege separation as a means to a fulfilling life.

Chapter Three builds on ideas presented in *Freaks* and *Chained for Life* to analyze representations of conjoined twins in fictional film and television narratives. This chapter outlines not just the types of conjoined twins found in these narratives but also the ways in which they are utilized. Five broad categories of conjoined twins are identified including already-separated, formerly conjoined twins, parasitic twins, two-headed “monsters,” full-bodied conjoined twins, and conjoined twins merely used as minor characters. The subsections highlighted in this study include two-headed “monsters,” which are one body with two heads for some duration of the film, and films featuring full-bodied conjoined twins who remain connected. Within this narrower group, two additional patterns emerge. The first is the good twin/bad twin trope, which also is popular in literature and mythology. In these narratives, one twin embodies good and the other evil, though sometimes “good” and “evil” are translated into sides of an issue, for example, racist and not racist with the conjoined twins embodying qualities of these stereotypes. The other main theme involves separation and romantic coupling.

While many of the films and television shows discussed do not come across as advocating for separation, they all privilege it to some degree. Sexuality for the most part is thwarted until the twins are separated and placed in more traditional, heterosexual couples. Additionally, outside of *Chained for Life* and *Freaks*, the only films that deal with twin sexuality involve male conjoined twins. Studying these films brings to light the places in which fictional narratives about conjoined twins are failing to represent them as “normal,” if not human, and instead privileges normative (male) bodies. Often conjoined twins in both major and minor roles are made to emphasize points about singleton characters or, theoretically, audience members with seemingly little regard for conjoined twins themselves, and these films overall suggest that being conjoined is a situation in need of resolution via separation. Identifying these patterns can help widen representational patterns that are more inclusive for conjoined twins and additionally lead to a greater understanding of humanity as multifaceted no matter what differences people bring to the table.

The final chapter analyzes nonfictional television representations of conjoined twins including those found in reality television programs, made-for-television documentaries, talk shows, and segments on prime time magazine shows. Nonfictional television programs are the most akin to traditional sideshows because they feign objectivity or truthfulness and offer viewers a safe vantage point from which to stare without judgment. Conjoined twins in these narratives generally become either spectacle or specimen via shows that privilege scientific discovery, separation, and independence, and the majority of these shows favor medical knowledge and scientific advancements at the expense of the humanity of conjoined twins. These shows reinforce Rosemarie

Garland Thomson's notion that "error" replaced "wonder" as modern science and medicine developed, and they imply that in an era of "error," the work of narrative is to explain or correct the problem of anomalous bodies and return them to an "architecture of certainty," as Alice Domurat Dreger calls it (*One of Us* 4), even if at the expense of conjoined twins whose bodies are to some extent disregarded after surgery. In shows about separation surgeries—either before, after, during, or some combination thereof—conjoined twins are featured as bodies ripe for operation, while science, surgical advancements, and medical professionals eclipse the twins themselves. Individuality is privileged above all else, and discussions of normalized bodies replace human stories.

Nonfictional narratives' messages are often complicated due to a tension that arises between the show's voiceover and image. While most voiceover provides a narrative of "error," active images of conjoined twins frequently illustrate their capabilities. This unusual formal opposition not only calls into question the reliability of the narrator, but it also indicates that what one person might define as "error," another may simply utilize as her body. Images, then, may humanize conjoined twins in these shows despite their overarching theme, which is one way in which conjoined twins talk back to representations about them. However, people who have chosen to stay conjoined also are making attempts to widen the spectrum of representations and conversations about them. This chapter additionally focuses on programs that feature two sets of twins—Lori and George (formerly Reba) Schappell and Abigail and Brittany Hensel—in ways that endeavor to disrupt medical narratives. Though the Schappells and Hensels do not profess to be aware of the history of conjoined twin representations, they understand the gaze and how people respond to their bodies. As such, they express a desire to use

film and television appearances to overturn stereotypes and widen their own opportunities. While not all of these attempts are successful, they nevertheless offer a first step toward breaking out of representational patterns established in sideshow performances, and further identifying these traditions may help future filmmakers create increasingly human portrayals of conjoined twins while bolstering acceptance for conjoined twins in their day to day lives. Conjoined twin narratives also may begin opening up a spectrum of notions about identity and individuality, which could serve to defy not only the idea that conjoined twins can be defined in singleton terms, but also that identity may fluctuate rather than remain fixed. As scientific discussions turn into cultural ones, conjoined bodies may be less likely to be used to play out singleton fears, fantasies, or scientific developments. These attempts to afford conjoined twins a place of privilege in a singleton world bring this study full circle and back to something analogous to Millie-Christine's legacy of representations: their remaining artifacts include dehumanizing medical records as well as reports of opportunities outside of what they would have had during the time period in which they lived were they not conjoined.

Two quick notes on terminology are important before beginning the rest of this discussion. The word "disability" is often used in quotes, because being conjoined makes one differently abled but not always "dis" abled in the way most people think of it. In their book *Cultural Locations of Disability*, Sharon L. Mitchell and David T. Snyder note that judgments about bodies often are based on at least one of three criteria: social function, aesthetics, and biological capabilities (5). Conjoined twins sometimes only psychologically challenge any of these criteria. The twins in this dissertation all are socially functional and, with rare exceptions, biologically capable as far as they know (or

unless they have been separated). This means that most conjoined twins are not “disabled” in the traditional sense except on the basis of whether or not one finds them aesthetically pleasing at best, or at least essentially aesthetically normal outside of their conjoinment.<sup>4</sup> A singleton bias, then, accompanies the term “disability” for conjoined twins and primarily stems from an unease about imagining living joined to another person; it might even be redefined as not being single-bodied for twins like Daisy and Violet Hilton, Millie-Christine McKoy, or even Chang and Eng Bunker, all of whom had fully functional bodies. Twins with more difficult connections, like craniopagus twins, might have additional disabilities, because the formation of their bodies might cause spinal curvature, for example. The term “disabled” will be used sparingly, because it seems debatable that some conjoined twins were “disabled” at all. The word “freak” additionally is put in quote marks to indicate that it is a word associated with sideshow performers, but it is not a word to be used haphazardly. Sideshow performers have reclaimed the term, and many self-identify as “freaks.” There is a tendency among authors of sideshow studies to reveal how they personally identify as some type of “freak” (through claims to associational legitimacy, disability, or even womanhood as freakishness). Although I am a peripheral part of carnival and sideshow culture as a fan and enthusiast, I do not feel I have earned the right to remove the quotations marks, because I am not a performer or even necessarily “with it” other than in spirit. I certainly do not personally understand what it is like to have a body deemed so outside of acceptable social constructs that it limits personal, professional, or legal options.

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<sup>4</sup> This changes for some conjoined twins after separation, because their bodies may be altered in ways that make them increasingly disabled via myriad physical and medical challenges.

Therefore, like textual curtains behind which authentic performers reside, the quote marks will remain around “freaks” for the duration of this show.

## Chapter One: Millie-Christine's "Little Deformities" Made Opportunity

Called "Sister" by their family, Millie and Christine McKoy were born into a slave family in 1851. Throughout their lives, they went by Millie and Chrissie, Christine, or Christina but contemporary scholars use the hyphenated dual name Millie-Christine.<sup>5</sup> Joined at the base of their spine, Millie-Christine were immediately bought out of slavery and put into the entertainment business as babies. As such, they toured extensively throughout their lives under a series of "managers," the first of whom owned them by legal means or by way of kidnappings, though after the end of the United States Civil War, they signed contracts with managers and help co-manage their careers. They were able at this time to take some ownership of their bodies and representations back from promoters to create positive images of African American women who exhibited intelligence and grace, and who interacted freely with white people, even those of royalty. They amassed a small fortune during their lives, and eventually they not only supported themselves and their managers, they also provided for their family and made enough money that their parents purchased the plantation they once worked. More than

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<sup>5</sup> In their purported autobiography, "The History of the Carolina Twins" (1869), the twins are called Millie and Christina. However, no current biographical piece refers to Christine as Christina, and the name Christina seldom appears in information about the twins. A revised promotional pamphlet, the "Biographical Sketch of Millie Christine, The Carolina Twin" (1871), uses the name Millie Christine, Christine Millie, or Millie and Christine throughout. Their promotional materials infrequently refer to them as Millie-Christine, and the women often signed photos "Millie Chrissie." This changing of names from Christina or Chrissie to Christine potentially displaces the twins from their own history for no particular reason, and the hyphenation is never reversed as Christine-Millie, for some reason, although the twins seemed comfortable with having changing and interchangeable names. This problem with naming is confounded by the fact that, at best, they may have co-authored the "autobiographical" pamphlet with a manager or promoter. Most often, managers constructed sideshow biographies to present the performers, and their lives, in the way that best complemented the performance. Since "The History of the Carolina Twins," autobiographical or not, was a product made for their show, it is difficult to know if Christina was a preferred name, if she started to prefer Christine, or if later authors called her Christine for the sake of consistency with other circulating promotional materials. I use Millie-Christine, rather than Millie Christine, both because it is commonly used by contemporary scholars and because of the textual bond it creates between the two women's names. However, I understand its limitations in that it sets a standard order for twins who spoke of themselves as one and as two and used their name(s) to reinforce their complicated understanding of selfhood.

just performers, Millie-Christine were gifted women who, through their education, demeanor, and manners, advocated for people of color. They did not overtly preach civil rights, but instead they used their bodies to obtain a platform and an audience, which they then used to illustrate their knowledge of world leaders, history, and languages. Millie-Christine were universally held in high regard, which allowed them to exhibit the intelligence of African Americans without directly proselytization about educational opportunities for people of color. At home, Millie-Christine became active proponents for educating African Americans, and they helped fund a local school for former slave children while also anonymously donating to major universities in their home state of North Carolina.

Millie-Christine briefly toured with the considerably older Chang and Eng Bunker, the “Original Siamese Twins,” who lived from 1811 to 1874. Both sets of twins enjoyed periods of extreme popularity and also met with severe hardship, yet each set’s “disability” allowed them to find freedom beyond what other people of their races had in the United States during the time periods in which they lived. Although Chang and Eng will not be discussed throughout the chapter, they prove useful companions in this area for Millie-Christine, since they were non-white in the United States during a similar time period. In the documentary *Face to Face: The Schappell Twins*, Dr. Alice Domurat Dreger explains that conjoined twins struggle with the tension between living in a culture that restricts them and their opportunities, and yet she says that “a place of restriction is also a place where privileged spots open up, and if you're lucky enough to actually be able to figure out how to take the restriction and turn it into a privilege, then you can do sort of wonderful things.” In speaking about contemporary conjoined twins Lori and



George Schappell, she notes that they are searching for this place of privilege, and that exhibiting themselves for profit might afford them that space. This is a questionable hypothesis because certainly not all conjoined twin performers found exhibition spaces to be one of privilege. Both Chang and Eng and Millie-Christine did, however, in part because they existed initially in a place of restriction due to their races. Instead of being confined to standards of what Asian or African people could do in the United States, their managers groomed them for performances. As such, both sets of twins were given educational opportunities outside of considerations of race, and this allowed them to change the conversation. By presenting themselves as conjoined twins first, they were able to exhibit traits like intelligence and business savvy; if presumptions about what they could and could not accomplish existed, each was exceeded as part of their performances. This led to offstage opportunities as they gained not just fame and fortune but also trust, business acumen, and respect. Their ability to do this stemmed directly from their “disability”<sup>6</sup> and the opportunities that being conjoined offered them, or required of them.

Representations of both Chang and Eng and Millie-Christine moved from the exotic to aggrandized modes fairly quickly, which bolstered their successes onstage and off. The exotic and aggrandized modes are the two most common representational modes in the sideshow and related performance spaces, according to Robert Bodgan in his book *Freak Show*. People exhibited in the exotic mode were presented to be “culturally strange,” “primitive,” “bestial,” or generally “exotic” (105). Often exotics were said to be from non-Western countries, and stereotyped as such (105). The aggrandized mode highlighted how performers overcame physical hardships or the difficulties their

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<sup>6</sup> Millie-Christine are often called “disabled” because they upset the aesthetic qualities singletons associate with “able-bodied” people, but they did not have in any way dysfunctional bodies.

anomalous bodies presented them. Performers sometimes took on fabricated names or histories to lend credence to a false ancestry or background, and they often told tales of famous people they met, wonderful countries they traveled, and impressive accomplishments they achieved. Audiences were meant to admire their successes and the ways in which they triumphed in the face of adversity. Although both Chang and Eng and Millie-Christine started in the exotic mode as young people—their representations heightened their racial differences through facial features, costuming, and context—both were exhibited in the aggrandized mode by the time they were teenagers and then throughout the rest of their careers. It is unclear exactly why or how this change occurred, but it seems to have had to do both with changing notions about “exotic” people during the time period, since people from African and Asian were seeming less inherently exotic as more people like them came to the United States, and their performance abilities. Later “exotic” performers had to get more extreme to continue interesting audiences, and Millie-Christine and Chang and Eng did not fit that bill. Millie-Christine played musical instruments and sang, in addition to talking with audiences, while Chang and Eng grew out of their acrobatic abilities and into “performances” that also included talking with audiences or merely playing chess against one another onstage. As they grew older, Chang and Eng’s children appeared onstage with them, often as a means of illustrating that the twins did, indeed, have wives and reproductive capabilities; they both married white women and had twenty-one children between the two of them. The children, then, assisted Chang and Eng with other duties on the road. Millie-Christine had no children. In fact, they avoided discussing romance almost completely throughout their careers, presenting an intriguing divergence in rights

between the two sets of twins. Whereas Chang and Eng were legally allowed to marry two women, Millie-Christine were forbidden even to mention such a thing. They respected this boundary, but it clearly indicates that being conjoined, non-white, and male or female lead to different legal rights depending on circumstances. Another key difference between the two sets of twins is that Chang and Eng owned slaves and supported the Confederacy during the Civil War. They never advocated for the rights of Asians in the United States, and in distancing themselves from other non-white people, they attempted to strengthen their own associations with whiteness. Millie-Christine, on the other hand, set aside times for non-white people to visit them and set up educational programs for former slaves.

Although Millie-Christine were able to overcome many social limitations through their careers as performers, their existing representations indicate tension with the medical community over ownership of their bodies as specimens rather than humans. This friction can be seen most clearly in a medical report created in 1871 by Dr. William Pancoast that includes extensive descriptions of their genitals, a nude photo taken against their will (they agreed to it in order to receive medical treatment), an additional woodcut of their vaginal opening, and still another drawn illustration of it in close-up. Notably, after the Civil War ended and their original owner/manager died, part of their new agreement with his wife and son was that they would no longer undergo medical examinations during their tours, as was often requested by local doctors. This exception occurred seemingly because they were ill and needed the doctor to treat them. This report and its visual accompaniments indicate a history of tension between the medical community and conjoined twins, whereby their bodies are treated as specimen for public

study at the expense of their ability to be seen as people. This trend continues today predominantly in televisual representations of conjoined twins on nonfictional medical shows. Pancoast's report not only adds context for that discussion,<sup>7</sup> but it also indicates how difficult it is to come to terms with images like these, which are in conversation not only with the twins and their other representations but also with erotic and medical photographs and images of Blackness. Millie-Christine function within and on the edge of so many categories that putting their possible representational categories in discussion with one another illustrates the complexity of defining them as any one thing, or by any one idea solely, and how doing so can limit discussion if not project disreputable meanings onto the twins and their surviving images. These discussions are meant to create an understanding of how conjoined twins and their surviving histories interact with one another, both within one set of twins and between sets of twins from similar or different time periods. No two sets of conjoined twins experience exactly the same thing, but it is important to see when patterns occurring in twentieth-century television shows carry over traditions from nineteenth-century medical records, for example. Noting where trends in conjoined twins' lives and representations overlap with those of other conjoined twins or sideshow performers, or with various genres of photographs, films, or television shows, allows for an expanded understanding of the complicated relationship between conjoined twins and the representations that define them. This is especially important when these representations are used to make judgments about what conjoined twins can and cannot do in real life, and what they must do in order to maintain autonomy over their own bodies and lives.

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<sup>7</sup> These ideas and contemporary televisual representations of conjoined twins are examined in Chapter Four.

### **Millie-Christine: A Quick Biography**

When Millie and Christine were born in 1851, their parents, Jacob and Menemia<sup>8</sup> McKoy, already had seven children. Jabez McKay,<sup>9</sup> the family's owner, immediately moved Millie-Christine into the North Carolina plantation home from their field house. By the time the girls were ten months old, McKay sold the twins to John C. Pervis, purportedly because McKay grew annoyed with disruptive visitors who wanted to see the twins. Pervis wanted to tour the twins, and Menemia was meant to travel with them, though McKay still owned her. Thus began the twins' long, intercontinental career. By the age of two, the girls had a new backer, Joseph Pearson Smith, and a new owner, Mr. Brower, who decided it would be best if the girls traveled without their mother. Shortly thereafter, William Thompson and William Millar, known as "Professor" W. J. L. Millar, kidnapped the twins for nearly two years and passed them off as slaves brought into free states in the north, where their previous publicity materials had not reached. Their kidnappers hired a nurse who told stories onstage about the twins, but since lawmakers were enforcing the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, whereby runaway slaves were to be returned to their masters, the troupe packed up and went north to Canada.

Millar and Thompson decided upon reaching Canada that it was time for a new story. They claimed the twins were born in Africa and, at one year old, were captured along with their parents and five siblings and sold into slavery in Cuba. In this story, an

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<sup>8</sup> Many contemporary authors use the spelling "Monemia." I use "Menemia" because that is how their mother's name is spelled in their 1869 publicity pamphlet and in an 1866 letter written on behalf of the twins' parents when they were trying to locate their daughters (reprinted in Samuels pages 63 – 65).

<sup>9</sup> It is presumed that Jacob and Menemia altered their owner's last name, McKay, to create one for their own family, McKoy. This causes some confusion in biographical information about the twins, and both names are occasionally used for each family, as is "McCoy."

American doctor visiting Cuba purchased the girls, returned to the United States with them, and died shortly thereafter. The girls then became part of a fictional Dr. Maginley's estate sale, and a second fictional purchaser took them to Philadelphia, where they were declared free; Millar and Thompson were appointed their guardians. Millar and Thompson also claimed they were incrementally purchasing freedom for the rest of Millie-Christine's family with monies from their shows. This story touched on everything. It simultaneously answered questions, neutralized Millie-Christine's background, and addressed their separation from their parents while adding noble purpose to the show. This tale also illustrated how, throughout their early careers, Millie-Christine's personhood depended on their narrative's relationship to slavery, which provided an undeniable subtext to their performances. They were conjoined twins, but they also were symbols of slavery, freedom, and benevolence depending on where their show took place and which narrative was being told. The showmen could present as much (true or false) information as they wanted, give it the angle they thought audiences would respond to best, and never have to take an actual stance on slavery, thus leaving discussions of the topic in audiences' hands.

Millar and Thompson eventually took the girls to Europe, where Millar kidnapped Millie-Christine for himself after several shows in Liverpool. Millar had crafted a deed "by" the State of Pennsylvania granting him guardianship of the twins, but the United States' laws did not apply, and human beings could not be considered the property of other people. Meanwhile, Thompson was tracking them in an attempt to "legally" reclaim Millie-Christine. Authorities decided Millie-Christine should be defined as children first rather than as former slaves—freed or not—or performers as chattel. As

such, the children should be reunited with their parents. It took over a year for the case to be settled (the girls continued performing in the interim), but eventually word reached Joseph Pearson Smith, who traveled overseas with Menemia. Smith had purchased the entire McKoy family before leaving the United States, which some see as a benevolent move, though it is more likely he wanted to use Menemia to reclaim the now five-year-old twins and bring them back to the United States as his property.

The account of this situation in “The History of the Carolina Twins” promotional biography explains that two women had been hired to play the part of Millie-Christine’s mother, but only one woman actually perjured herself on the stand. However, the Ministers of Law “listened to the plain and well-told narrative” of Millie-Christine’s mother “who evinced a mother’s tenderness for *us*, her little deformities, and imparted a pathos to those utterances when she, in a natural unassuming way, begged for the custody of her children” (43). The courts recognized Menemia as their birth mother, and since she became a free woman when she landed in England, the twins were returned to her.<sup>10</sup> Paradoxically, Menemia and Smith immediately entered into a contract with Millar to continue exhibiting the girls in Europe. Menemia resisted the idea “until some outside parties succeeded in inducing Mr. Smith to consent to some co-partnership arrangement, by which both he and [the McKoy family] would be the recipients of fine receipts. Mr. S. then consented to mother’s signing a three years’ agreement” though Millar soon attempted to “deprive us of our rights. He abused our mother, and applied the most

<sup>10</sup> While in Europe, Menemia gave birth to a daughter, Elvy, who traveled with the group until they returned to the United States. Since Elvy was born in Scotland, she should have been considered a free citizen in the United States but presented a difficult legal situation. Smith owned Menemia once back in North Carolina, but since the foreign slave trade was illegal by this time, Elvy’s return as a slave would have constituted a violation of that law. Elvy ended up being free before she became an adult, and little was made of her situation other than mention of it in the North Carolina newspapers, but it represents another situation where human rights occupy a liminal space based on ever changing notions of humanity, physical location, and the legal system in relationship to the McKoy family.

revolting epithets,” threatened Mr. Smith’s life, and treated the girls poorly (43-44).

Smith and Menemia purportedly plotted to leave at the night, because they were afraid of what Millar might do to them if they tried escaping (44).

Upon returning to North Carolina, and in spite of laws against such a practice, Millie-Christine’s “white mama,” Mary Smith (Joseph’s wife),<sup>11</sup> began teaching the girls to read and write, as Mary believed it would help them attract a higher quality and class of audience. The girls also honed their singing and dancing skills, took up feminine hobbies like needlework, and learned instruments such as the piano. Since the girls could not sit side-by-side to play one piano together, two pianos were set up in a V shape when they performed, and they played back to back. The girls toured the United States until the American Civil War broke out, at which time money was tight and it was thought best to wait out the situation at home. In 1862, while the Civil War was still occurring, Joseph Smith died. Although a number of the Smith family slaves were auctioned to repay bills, Mary kept the entire McKoy family. When the war ended, the twins were fourteen, and they became the key breadwinners for their family as well as the Smiths.

Most biographical reports state that Millie-Christine turned into a family business with the help of Mary and her son, Joseph Jr., whom they continued working with throughout their lives. Recent evidence reprinted in Ellen Samuels’ article “Examining Millie and Christine McKoy: Where Enslavement and Enfreakment Meet,” however, suggests that Jacob and Menemia may have been coerced into signing a contract with the Smiths. A letter written to the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands on behalf of the twins’ parents dated August 17, 1866, explains that, at the war’s end, Mary

<sup>11</sup> The twins purportedly called Mary Smith their “white mama” according to their sideshow pamphlets. The spelling of “mama” varies in different versions of their pamphlets and sometimes is written “mamma.” Martell changes this to “white ma” in her biography (73).



Smith refused the McKoy family their freedom (Samuels 63). Jacob and Menemia left, but Mary purportedly “concealed” the twins and told Jacob and Menemia their freedom would last but a year when the military would lose control of the country, at which time “it would go very hard with them when she came in possession of them again” (qtd. in Samuels 64-65). The letter further claims that Mary said Yankees would kill Jacob and Menemia to obtain the children. If they would sign a contract with her, however, she would be kind to the family and give them a fourth of the money made, so they signed (65). At the time the letter was written to the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Land, Jacob and Menemia had not received any money and were “very anxious to get possession of [the twins] again” (qtd. in Samuels 65). This letter forces a conversation about agency and race in the twins’ careers, as most writings about the relationship between Millie-Christine and the Smiths characterize them as full partners beginning immediately after the Civil War.

Samuels references David A. Gerber’s piece on consent in sideshows to address the situation.<sup>12</sup> Gerber argues that when dealing with a complex situation such as performances by people with anomalous bodies for the entertainment of normative-bodied people, which combine issues of disability and oppression, scholars must note that “consent” is based on the range and quality of choices performers would have had during their lifetimes, including their other viable employment opportunities or means of

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<sup>12</sup> Samuels’ main point, however, is that “contemporary attempts to recognize the McKoys’ agency by treating this first-person narrative [‘The History and Medical Description of the Two-Headed Girl’] as an autobiography that speaks in their actual voice(s), and thus as a reliable historical source, have actually functioned to present the twins as collaborators in their own oppression” (55). Samuels is responding directly to Linda Frost’s book *Conjoined Twins in Black and White* and Joanne Martell’s *Millie-Christine: Fearfully and Wonderfully Made*.

survival.<sup>13</sup> Following Gerber’s logic, one might argue that the twins were forced into “consent” by way of their limited options. The twins also may have needed the help of Mary and her son to lend ease and credibility to their business operations, as the Smiths would have had an easier time booking gigs and collecting money than Millie-Christine, thus making self-managing difficult. In “The History of the Carolina Twins,” the twins’ purportedly autobiographical pamphlet, the author(s) explain(s), perhaps written partially in response to the letter, “None can mistake our determination in remaining under the guardianship of Mrs. Smith. Our object is two-fold: *We can trust her*, and what is more, we feel grateful to her and regard her with true filial affection” (46). The lack of control and awareness by Millie-Christine’s parents of the twins’ whereabouts during this period (again, Millie-Christine were fourteen or fifteen years old) suggests that the business arrangement would have included complex negotiations about things like payment, travel, and degrees of access to the twins by their families. It very likely benefitted the Smiths more than the McKoy’s. However, the emphasis on “*We can trust her*” in the biography may speak to how important trust was for young African-American women trying not just to have careers, but to manage them, help their families, and retain control of their bodies. While it seems odd that they would put their trust in their former owners, especially if the Smiths were not forthcoming with the twins’ parents, it may have been their best option considering their limited range of choices. It would have been difficult for their parents to manage their careers, because they lacked experience and would have had myriad issues to overcome networking and negotiating with white people during this racially charged period. The twins needed someone who was predictable and protective

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<sup>13</sup> Gerber is vehemently anti-sideshow. In fact, he states, “I want to establish at the start that I do not approve of freak shows and thus find condemnation of them, past or present, a compelling purpose” (40).

at least, and trustworthy at best—especially in light of their history of kidnappings. Furthermore, Mary had broken laws in the past by teaching Millie-Christine to read and write, and all reports suggest that they valued education highly. During this period, the twins also started to assert more control over their bodies by refusing medical examinations, which indicates that their desires mattered in at least one crucial aspect of their working arrangement with the Smiths after the Civil War. The full details of the arrangement may never be known, and it is very likely the Smiths took economic advantage of the McKoy family and threatened them, but it is notable that Millie-Christine were able to stop succumbing to gynecological examinations after Joseph Smith died with just a couple of exceptions. This was no small feat for female conjoined twins, and it appears that Mary Smith at least understood the need for the twins to start refusing such invasive rituals. It is plausible that Millie-Christine preferred this “better the devil you know” arrangement to management by an unknown person who might treat them worse. The Smiths, in this regard, made sense.

Millie-Christine toured theaters in the northern United States and eventually, but briefly, joined a troupe of performers that included Chang and Eng Bunker, who had successfully avoided being drafted during the war but needed money on the other side of it.<sup>14</sup> When Millie-Christine felt they had saturated the United States, they traveled to Europe where they met royalty in several countries and purportedly learned to speak five

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<sup>14</sup> As the story goes, Eng’s name was drawn, but since Eng could not go to war without Chang, and since the duo was seen as a liability to the Confederate army, Eng was freed from his duties to serve in the military. Chang and Eng owned a successful farm and numerous slaves, so they were supporters of the Confederacy. In fact, at least one of their sons fought with the Confederate army. However, the Civil War took its toll on their business model and profits, so they returned to performing briefly.

languages fluently.<sup>15</sup> The women toured Europe and the United States until the early 1900s, with shows consisting of musical numbers—they sang and played instruments—and were coined the “Two-Headed Nightingale.” They also spent time speaking with crowds and answering questions. By the 1880s, they had amassed a considerable fortune that allowed most of their family members to own land. Their parents even purchased the land they had once worked—that of Jabez McKay.<sup>16</sup> In 1880, Millie-Christine helped found the Welches Creek African American School for children. Additionally, they built a church and purportedly contributed financially to a number of universities anonymously throughout North Carolina. The twins also built their own fourteen-room house, which was open to visitors, but they reserved Sundays for non-white visitors and people who worked all other days of the week (Martell 240). A fire claimed their mansion, so they built a more modest house to replace it, but the twins never fully recovered. Millie contracted tuberculosis, some say due to the fire, and their stint at an unknown sanatorium cost them a fair amount of money toward the end of their lives. Tuberculosis eventually took Millie’s life on October 8, 1912. When Christine first noticed that her sister was dead, she purportedly said, “She passed away as in a dream, a peaceful dream.” Their doctor, William Crowell, had consulted with other doctors during their illness to see if an emergency separation surgery should occur, and all advised that it should not. Dr. Crowell gave Christine opiates for several hours until he received word from Governor William Kitchin allowing him to increase the dosage and euthanize Christine. She died on October 9, seventeen hours after Millie.

<sup>15</sup> The twins’ publicity materials claim they spoke five languages fluently, but it is likely this is an exaggeration of number of languages, or proficiency in them. However, press reports confirm that Millie-Christine spoke two languages fluently and were at minimum novices in one additional language.

<sup>16</sup> After Jacob McKoy’s death, the McKay family attempted to reclaim the land, stating that they still owned it. They were unsuccessful.

### **Millie-Christine's Life in Representations**

The representations that remain of Millie-Christine include numerous advertisements, “freak” studio portraits, biographical pamphlets, and the aforementioned medical report with its images. Aside from the medical report, which is an anomaly and will be discussed as such, the other images and reports create a consistent narrative for Millie-Christine that shows them progressing from young, conjoined African babies into talented young women somewhat seamlessly. This trajectory aligns with Bogdan’s notions of the exotic and aggrandized modes of representations and creates somewhat of a bridge between the two as Millie-Christine surpassed one image and grew into another. This was achieved in part because Africans in general were becoming less exotic to westerners, but the switch in representations also had to do with Millie-Christine’s talent. They became accomplished musicians—singers and piano players—at a young age, so it was better for promoters to exhibit them as such. This immediately elevated the women, and after they learned to read and write, as well as study world history and its languages, their scholarly abilities enlarged their opportunities. People wanted to meet, not just see, the graceful, intelligent, and talented Millie-Christine. As the twins gained prominence, not only did their promotional illustrations and photos enhance this image, but they also were able to advocate for people of African descent quietly through their publicity materials.

Millie-Christine, like Chang and Eng, began being exhibited in the exotic mode but moved into aggrandizement fairly quickly. In their earliest years, illustrations of both sets of twins played on stereotypes about their respective races. They were Othered in

dress and environment to set them apart from white audiences, and their facial features and skin tone were exaggerated to increase their exoticness or stress their differences from normative-bodied Americans. As Chang and Eng became well known in the United States, their representations began to highlight their talents, like chopping wood and wooing women, rather than their ethnicity. Later in life, Chang and Eng used photographs for promotion, and most underscored their virility, often featuring their wives and children, sometimes all twenty-one of them. At least once, one of Chang and Eng's slaves, Aunt Grace, appeared in a family photo as well, holding one of their small children. This photo additionally emphasized their enculturation into North Carolina society, as they had adopted social norms of the South like slave owning. Later drawings of Millie-Christine essentially turned them into Caucasians in figure, skin tone, and facial structure, though their photos did not stray from standard "freak" studio portraits. Their advertisements' language changed, as did biographical details about the twins, and by the end of their careers, Millie-Christine were portrayed almost solely in the aggrandized mode unless they were being chided for comedic effect, which was rare. Both of these representational transitions disrupted the spectator-spectacle dynamics of their shows to some extent. Whereas Chang and Eng indirectly answered questions about their sexuality simply by exhibiting photos of their wives and kids, or actually having their children onstage with them, Millie-Christine used the stage to educate people about the intellectual capabilities of African-Americans while performing as conjoined twins first and foremost. Like Chang and Eng, as Millie-Christine's lives improved, they asked for and received top-notch salaries on tours. The twins were not merely exploited for the pleasure of the audience and profits of someone else, but rather they learned to use it to

benefit themselves. In Millie-Christine’s case, they also used it to benefit others, as audiences walked away knowing, for example, that two former slave girls could learn numerous languages and attain financial success on two continents. Their performances became a way of educating the masses, as spectators could not leave without acknowledging the twins’ intelligence and capabilities. As Millie-Christine exerted more control over their own representations, they upset the power of representations to dictate their lives. In other words, instead of allowing the representation to define them, they actively redefined their representations.

Purportedly the earliest publicity graphic of Millie-Christine, an 1854 newspaper ad for “The Celebrated African United Twins” at Barnum’s American Museum, shows the two girls sitting on a round pillow in white dresses (Martell 17). Though the surviving image quality is poor, one can tell the girls look clean, if not pristine. The image is similar to a circus poster, and the girls are but one in a list of exotic creatures to be displayed at Barnum’s museum; a rhinoceros and a boa constrictor captured in Mozambique round out the list. The twins are not contextualized as girls; they have no props and are not active. Instead, they look like civilized pets sitting on an expensive pillow. They are simply “The Latest Novelty,” as the poster states, to be seen “In Addition” to the rhinoceros and the snake. This listing of the girls atop the animals reinforced their place as the headlining “act” among a menagerie of African animals—exotic creatures to be looked at rather than humans to be engaged with or children to be cared for.

Images created about three years later of Millie-Christine began illustrating the exotic and aggrandized modes in a more straightforward manner. In an 1857 publicity

poster, “African Twins United by Nature,” created while on tour in Scotland with Millar, the twins look exaggeratedly “African.” Their eyes bulge and their smiles are inflated to the point of grotesqueness. This illustration is reminiscent of both the pop-eye exhibits performed by Black men in sideshows and the naïvely pleasant “pickaninny” stereotype of African Americans that persists in United States popular culture. This drawing may have been meant to look like the Topsy character in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, published in 1852—five years prior to this advertisement: under the image, the poster states that the twins will be “Accompanied by their mother who had recently been liberated from slavery” and “will hold their drawing-room levees.” Menemia is included in the drawing, and she looks like a typical “mammy.” She is very large—wider than both of the twins put together *and* an oversized urn of flowers—and her lips are exaggerated. One of the twins holds onto her dress. Behind Menemia are small palm trees and ferns that, together, create an outdoor scene; on the other side is an ornate, interior staircase. The image is split down the middle, as if the girls are bringing Menemia from the wilds into an upscale drawing room, juxtaposing the exotic and aggrandized modes of sideshow representations. The three stand together near a Victorian couch, and Christine’s slight tug at Menemia’s skirt pulls her mother into the civilized parlor space. The smiling girls look comfortable in the drawing room, and the note that Menemia was newly freed nods to the notion that she, too, may be leaving the fields to start a new life. This advertising would have signaled to upscale patrons that the twins were suitable for viewing among members of society in a domestic setting. Almost equally inside and outside, this image suggested that this family was comfortable in both situations, and yet living in neither. The image also would have appealed to people interested in acts of charity, as paying the



girls to perform could be seen as funding Menemia’s transition out of slavery—a story Millar likely would have been telling. Paradoxically, Menemia was only “free” during this period because she was still traveling abroad; as soon as she returned to the United States, she became Smith’s slave again. Finally, this advertisement signaled a change in the twins’ careers, as they were portrayed in the aggrandized mode almost solely after this illustration.<sup>17</sup>

Photographs of Millie-Christine taken between the late 1850s and 1870s typically show the twins standing side-by-side in ornate dresses, often in generic drawing rooms with props like guitars, books, baskets, flowers, and parasols, or among fashionable furniture. These studio portraits imply that the twins were comfortable visitors in upscale environments and used to such accouterments. The props accentuated the girls’ talents: they played music, sang, read, and discussed literature. Sideshow promoters believed this helped performers attract a wider range of spectators, because they could engage with people in a variety of spaces including theaters, parlors, and circuses utilizing their various stories and talents. As was the case with most sideshow performers, Millie-Christine rarely smiled for photos. When they did, they appear mildly amused or pleasant, but they never seem to exhibit real joy. Often the twins look serious, attentive, and respectful, though most of the time they seem stoic. In one photo, both look into the distance. Millie’s left arm rests over her stomach, and her right fist holds up her head. Christine’s legs are crossed, though she is standing—an unusual pose for her. It is a striking publicity photo, because it is not inviting. In most photos, at least one twin looks at the camera, creating a point of entry for the viewer. Since the twins necessarily stood

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<sup>17</sup> Later French representations of Millie-Christine returned to more exotic, Africanized images. The women’s faces and bodies were distorted, and their eyes and buttocks were enlarged.

back to back, in many photos their arms close off their bodies from the camera, which makes an inviting look especially important. In the aforementioned photo, however, no point of entry exists. A guitar sits next to Millie, and a cloth covers the stand on which Christine's arm rests. Even the ambiguity of the background and pedestals on which they lean decontextualizes the twins. While this photo still falls into the aggrandized mode, it is sloppy and accidentally foregrounds the mundane nature of repeated exhibition rather than reinforcing the twins' talents. The twins become merely things placed among other things, like a meaningless still life into which living people have been incorporated.

During this period, Millie-Christine's biographical pamphlets and the retelling of their kidnappings as children by Millar and Thompson also were altered in a couple of notable ways. The kidnappings, and their recovery by their mother, play a key role in the 1871 "Biographical Sketch of Millie Christine," which was written at least two years after "The History of the Carolina Twins." The "Biographical Sketch" was reprinted numerous times and never attributed to the twins as authors, though it did not start circulating until after the twins started refusing medical examinations—a concrete point in their careers when they started having more say in their representations. The **McKoy's managers**, or someone hired by their managers, would have written the "Biographical Sketch" to play up the excitement of their lives, which may account for the added melodrama. In a revised version of the kidnapping tale from an early 1900s revised edition,<sup>18</sup> Menemia and Smith pay to see the girls perform overseas, alongside police attending incognito, prior to the actual court case:

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<sup>18</sup> This version is reprinted in Frost's book, and she explains that it was published between 1902 and 1912 (50). She notes that at least five versions of this pamphlet existed and explains that "much of the text in these different versions remains largely consistent" barring titles and smaller details (16).

No sooner, however, had the keen eye of the mother caught a glimpse of her long-lost child than she uttered a scream of such heart-rending pathos that the audience simultaneously rose to their feet, wondering and astonished. The mother, overpowered, fell fainting to the floor. When resuscitated, she wildly threw her arms about, crying in most piteous tones. "My own child! O! give her to me! Do not take her away again; she needs my care! Where is she? Where is she?" While this scene of excitement was going on, the exhibitor attempted to secrete the girl in an adjoining room; but an honest Scotchman, divining his intentions, placed his back against the door, and bringing himself into a position that would have delighted a pugilist, cried out: "Ye'll nae tak' the bairn ayant the door, maun ye wallop me first, and I'm nae thinkin' ye'll soon do that."

Such a scene of excitement as the denouement created has seldom been witnessed. The women fainted, and the men, learning the true state of affairs from the Chief of Police, who mounted the stage for the purpose, threatened with immediate and summary punishment the sordid villain who had stolen, for the purpose of gain, a helpless child. He managed, however, to escape by jumping from the second story window, which hazardous feat alone, for the time, saved him from certain and well-merited punishment.

The mother, recovering, took the child, and they were conveyed to the hotel, where, for the first time in three years, she slept with it [Millie-Christine] in her arms, forgetting, in the possession of the fondly-loved

and long-lost one, the days and nights of anguish she had spent during its absence, and dreamed of naught save happiness and pleasure to come.

(66-67)

This story continues by claiming Menemia turned down an offer of 10,000 pounds sterling and the deed to a house in England in exchange for giving Millar “possession of the child until she was eighteen,” to which Menemia said she would prefer “to return and live ... in the land of her birth, with those she had known from infancy, and among her kindred and her friends” (67).<sup>19</sup> Then, “Mr. Smith, the mother and the subject of our sketch, being now free to depart, made their preparations openly to return” (68). Yet “scarcely had the party reached home” when Thompson and Millar arrived in North Carolina, whereby “citizens of Charlotte, learning of their presence and intentions, concluded to give them an admirably fitting suit, composed of good *tar* and excellent *feathers*” (68). The story concludes by implying that a song was written and sung about “Massa Thomsin” (68).<sup>20</sup> This retelling of their rescue intensifies its drama, reinforces a story the McKoys may have told onstage, and explains why Menemia would have given up the freedom offered her abroad and chosen to return to the United States—indeed it gives her agency in the situation—while eliminating negative speculations that Smith possibly forced her back to the United States. This version also supports aggrandized aspects of the twins’ performance by demonstrating the fortitude of the girls in the face of such adversity and their ability to be gracious and compassionate people despite a

<sup>19</sup> It is unclear what is being quoted here, as these are not written as Menemia’s words. Readers may have assumed the quotes were taken from court records.

<sup>20</sup> According to a Charlotte newspaper editorial quoted by Bernth Lindfors, Thompson did show up appearing to be an abolitionist with an interest in Millie-Christine. He was escorted out of town, but the tar and feathers were “rather high in the market” so “it was not thought prudent to waste them upon him” (qtd. in Lindfors 33).

tumultuous childhood. All of these things would have appealed to audience sympathies for the twins and their family while absolving Smith of malevolent intent.

Key differences in this version of the story, as opposed to the earlier one in “The History of the Carolina Twins,” include the removal of: the two Black women who posed as Millie-Christine’s mother; Menemia’s coercion into allowing Millar (via Smith) to continue performing in Europe; the abuse everyone suffers at the hands of Millar; and Smith and McKoy’s need to escape in the night to avoid retribution by Millar. The revised pamphlet paradoxically makes Menemia into a more hysterical mother, perhaps capitalizing on the popularity of domestic melodramas of the period, while elucidating her desire to return to the United States and offering her some voice in that decision-making process. In the second version, Millar and Thompson have to escape at night to avoid a public tar and feathering session, as opposed to Millie-Christine, their mother, and Smith, who “made their preparations openly.” Strategically, this change absolves Smith of bullying Menemia into a contract with Millar and mismanaging the girls by putting them in an abusive situation. Rather than be portrayed as a slave owner continuing to exert control over his now-freed slaves and putting their lives in peril for his own material gains, Smith instead can be seen as a good guy helping to save the twins and return them to the United States, where they would *prefer* to be. Suggesting that Millar and Thompson escaped being tarred and feathered further emasculates the men, eliminating any lingering speculations of abuse by Millar and Thompson by people who had read the previous biography or seen the twins perform at an earlier time. Since the McKoys continued working with the Smith family, it also would have been in their best interest to portray Joseph as a man who had the McKoy family’s best interests at heart,

despite the occasional misstep. The removal of the two Black women who were paid to impersonate Menemia is interesting, because it may have been byproduct of Millie-Christine taking more control over their representations, or at least fighting certain battles. By the time this version was reprinted between 1902 and 1912, Millie-Christine were outwardly arguing with medical professionals, advocating for the rights of people of African descent, and setting up investments to help educate former slaves, so it is conceivable that they asked for this portion of the story to be removed. This is a generous reading, to be sure, but the date coincides with a period in their careers that would have made it possible, as the twins are thought to have been taking more control over their representations and management. All of these alterations speak to the fluidity of representations of conjoined twins whose biographies changed frequently to appeal to contemporary audiences and their perceived sensibilities. These examples also begin to illustrate how Millie-Christine's representations changed over time to normalize, if not give agency to, people of African descent living in white-dominated worlds.

As the twins aged, they started wearing formal dresses in publicity images, often made of satin and velvet, and mature hairstyles fastened up instead of hanging down in ringlets with barrettes. In one later photo, both girls show off the diamond hair clips Queen Victoria gave them during a visit to England. Their stage name varies extensively in these images. Sometimes representations simply labeled Millie-Christine the "Two-Headed Girl," while their location changed from "African Twins" in earlier years to "The Carolina Twins" later on. When going for mystery (often at carnivals or circuses), promoters billed them as "The Eighth Wonder of the World," and when promoters wanted to accentuate skill, they were the "Two-Headed Nightingale" in reference to their

duets. These shifts echoed themes in their performances, yet there are no photographs of them singing or playing instruments on stage. In contrast to Chang and Eng and later twins Daisy and Violet Hilton, who performed in the early to mid 1900s, Millie-Christine were not portrayed as active participants in anything except discussion; representations of both other sets of twins included lively portrayals of physical activities. Chang and Eng's early illustrations often emphasized masculine activities like fishing and chopping wood. Notably, most of these images were created prior to the wide spread of racism against Chinese men in the United States; Chang and Eng reiterated that they were Siamese, not Chinese, when they needed to differentiate themselves. However, their later photographs foregrounded their active sex lives with their white wives via the inclusion of their many children. Daisy and Violet were photographed performing with their instruments, dancing with men, or coming in from the beach. Their representations were much more actively engaged than Millie-Christine's, which either might be attributed to their slightly later time period or the fact that they were always marketed as beautiful girls despite their conjoinment, even at a very young age. Text and props might have described or indicated Millie-Christine's talents and abilities, but they remained ever passive for the camera. This may have been a way to add intrigue to their live shows, but it is more likely that passive images helped keep Millie-Christine nonthreatening for audiences who still harbored negative feelings or skepticism toward people of African descent, perhaps especially former slaves now free, highly educated, and well paid.

Later publicity illustrations drawn and colorized for Millie-Christine's 1882-83 stint with the Inter-Ocean Museum, Menagerie, and Circus clearly indicate how Millie-Christine ended their careers in the aggrandized mode. The poster includes words like

“miracle” and “marvelous” and mentions how they “astonished” scientists and other “men of eminence.” They are drawn as two very thin women with upright posture and perfect arms in long, elegant gloves. Millie-Christine were not overweight, but they had full frames for their short heights. In this illustration, from the waist down they could have been one woman with perfectly formed hips, excepting the four petite feet that poke out from under the frilly dress. The unrealistic drawing of the twins makes them look more like one singularly shaped woman, an illusion reinforced by the title “Renowned Two Headed Lady.” During this period, other illustrations touted Millie-Christine as having “Two Gracefully Formed Necks” and “A Single Perfect Body Only,” compounding the idea of the women as both two and one. One circus poster is especially notable. From the waist down, the differences from the Inter-Ocean images are insignificant—only slight alterations to their dress and hairdos were made. Their interactions with people, however, represent something new: a gloved Christine shakes a white woman’s hand while Millie lectures to a white family with two children. Millie holds a pointer, making her look like a teacher but certainly not like a nanny. It is one of the only representations in which one of the sisters touches someone who is not their mother; another is an almost identical image of Christine shaking hands with the Queen of England. This proximity to white women and children emphasizes Millie-Christine’s refinement and ability to entertain, educate, and enlighten audiences. It also delineates later images from earlier ones where the twins were separated from children and audiences by a stage; indeed, in these illustrations, that barrier dissolves. In her book *Sideshow U.S.A.*, Rachel Adams explains, “the existential difference between freak and audience is concretized in the physical separation between the onlooker and the living



curiosities resting on the elevated platform” (12). Not only had Millie-Christine moved away from a platform-type stage setting, they also had broken the boundary between spectator and spectacle by actually touching their audiences, at least as represented in these illustrations. In a post-Civil War era, audiences may have seen this interaction as a symbol of peaceful living between races; certainly Millie-Christine were portrayed as comfortably crossing into upper-class spaces and being nonthreatening in them. Moreover, these advertisements and posters broke ground in a way “freak” promotions rarely dared by suggesting Millie-Christine circulated with “normal” upper class white people. These advertisements speak to Millie-Christine’s ability to engage with people in such a way that they overlooked the twins’ race to instead focus on their anomalous bodies and intelligences. This diversion of thought allowed the twins to talk not only about being conjoined but also to illustrate that people of African descent could be well-mannered, smart, and cultured.

Millie-Christine’s movement into co-managing their affairs paid off monetarily and socially, but the most important aspect of this situation may have been the control they exerted over their own bodies. After the Civil War, at the age of fourteen, they successfully instated a new rule: no more medical examinations. Most conjoined twins underwent physical examinations by doctors regularly and continuously as their shows moved from town to town.<sup>21</sup> Managers often allowed doctors in each town to examine their performers, and doctors took advantage of the skepticism between sideshow exhibits and audiences. Adams explains, “sideshowes are hardly spaces of restraint or decorum, and things seldom go as planned: freaks talk back, the experts lose their authority, the

<sup>21</sup> Medical examinations were not exclusive to conjoined twins. Many people with anomalous bodies were examined often, or approached about being examined often, regardless of whether or not they were touring performers.

audience refuses to take their seats” (13). Since “experts” in sideshows were managers or talkers who took on titles like “Professor”—or even performers who did the same—and since so much of the performance relied on narratives about the exhibitions and the props that accompanied them, the line between reality and humbuggery was in constant flux. Furthermore, the spectacle “relies on a degree of submission that has little consonance with the rowdy, undisciplined clientele” (13). As such, and understanding that audiences were well aware of humbugs, “freak shows promised to shock and amaze, but also encouraged their audiences to question what they saw, to remain vigilant about the possibility of deception” (13). This is where doctors came in: they could trade their stamp of approval for the chance to examine someone with an anomalous body. Doctors’ curiosity presumably stemmed from the advancement of medicine, and they used these situations to their advantage, sometimes making their careers off publications about, or relationships with, “freaks.” Frequently, doctors did not examine sideshow performers individually. They often invited colleagues to “private” examinations, and each confirmed the others’ reports. In medical lectures, other esteemed professionals or medical students may have witnessed the proceedings, and doctors often published their findings in medical journals.

For female conjoined twins, visits to doctors prior to public exhibitions usually included full-body examinations. From a very young age, since Millie-Christine shared one vagina, doctors insisted upon gynecological exams, and the twins underwent their first vaginal examination as early as four months old. When Millie-Christine played the first North Carolina State Fair at the age of two, one newspaper article explained that the girls had been examined by “many” physicians and that the way they were conjoined

made their connection “much more intimate” than Chang and Eng (Martell 8), who were connected by a band of flesh on the front of their bodies that protected their conjoined livers. After the State Fair ended, Millie-Christine immediately went to New Orleans, where doctors repeated the procedure. Prior to their fifth birthday, at least eleven doctors examined Millie-Christine in one session (Quigley 114). These exams occurred regularly, as they did for Daisy and Violet Hilton, which is why both sets of twins openly expressed hatred toward doctors. In contrast, Chang and Eng’s examinations consisted of the mere removal of their shirts, though the Toccis Brothers—Giovanni-Batisto and Giacomo, who were fused from their sixth rib downward and shared two legs—were routinely, and thoroughly, examined by doctors starting when they were about a month old. They shared one penis, which had a second undeveloped organ behind it, and they had three buttocks with one anus. Nude, full-body photos were taken of the Toccis at least twice. Their nether regions were discussed frequently and publicly, speculation about their genitals drew continual interest, and nude photocards of them circulated, which might have contributed to their complete disappearance from society in 1897 at the approximate age of twenty.<sup>22</sup> Many authors conjecture that, like the Toccis, Millie-Christine’s popularity hinged on speculations about their genitalia, as audience members would have wondered where their conjoinment began and ended. Millie-Christine never commented on this specifically; they only printed excerpts from medical records stating that they were authentically conjoined. Their decorum helped uphold their reputations as ladies, assisted them in controlling public discussions, and kept audiences focused on

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<sup>22</sup> Reports of the Toccis’ birth year vary. Most sources say they were born in 1877, though some say 1875 or 1878. They reportedly purchased a secluded home in Venice after retreating from society, married two sisters a decade later, and died as late as 1940. It is unclear if the Toccis had children: reports vary but some doctors speculate that the twins were impotent.

more intellectual pursuits. However, they were examined frequently early in their careers, often in each new city that they visited, which is why they started refusing medical examinations after Joseph Smith died.

Millie-Christine achieved some autonomy over their bodies by denying the gynecological exams that doctors and audiences demanded, and although Millie-Christine reportedly wore a dress onstage occasionally that revealed where they were conjoined, they no longer had to take their clothes off to prove their authenticity.<sup>23</sup> They argued with doctors and audiences about this rule for years, and they stood by it rigidly with very few exceptions, one of which occurred while the twins were traveling France in the 1870s.<sup>24</sup> Dr. E. Verrier published a piece stating that Millie-Christine were frauds. Public skepticism spread to the Parisian police, who insisted a medical professional confirm the veracity of Millie-Christine's claims of being conjoined. They enlisted Dr. Tardieu, who invited a Dr. Robin to the proceedings. Millie refused an intimate examination—in fact, Tardieu's report mentions Millie's visible negative reaction to the request. Instead, a compromise was reached: Millie-Christine would hold up their shirts and pull down their skirts so the men could examine their spinal connection. Martell's biography of Millie-Christine describes the situation this way: "The doctors examined each body from head to hips and from knees to toes—all but the most secret parts, the very parts Tardieu and Robin had come to see" (186). Most likely the doctors believed Millie-Christine were conjoined but wanted to satisfy more prurient desires by attaining intimate knowledge of the women's genitalia. Since doctors had been able to do so in the past, being denied would have created an unexpected power struggle. Aside from this

<sup>23</sup> The dates of this costume are unclear. It is possible they stopped wearing this costume after Joseph Smith died as well, as it does not fit with their later performance objectives.

<sup>24</sup> Between 1871 and 1874—the exact date is unclear.

one instance, the twins successfully disallowed gynecological examinations after their fourteenth birthday. Proof of their victory is reflected in the dates listed in the “Certificates of Eminent Medical Men” portion of the “Biographical Sketch of Millie Christine.” With one exception of a very short excerpt from a medical journal, all medical certificates listed and dated after 1858 are linked to the examination performed by Dr. William Pancoast and his colleagues in 1871. Notably, the twins did not include Tardieu’s report—another act of defiance against forced examinations. Inclusion would have bolstered Tardieu’s prominence in the medical community as an expert on conjoined twins, and Millie-Christine (and possibly their managers) did not deem him worthy of a presence in their materials.

When Millie-Christine fell ill in 1871, they visited Dr. Pancoast in Philadelphia, who determined that they had developed an abscess near their genitals. Although it is presumed that he treated the women’s illness, he also created the most controversial and discussed document of the twins—his report in the *Photographic Review of Medicine and Surgery*, which includes a nude photograph of the Millie-Christine as well as a woodcut and an illustration of the twins’ genitalia, both of which were created based on his descriptions of their bodies after the examination.<sup>25</sup> The woodcut was drawn from the perspective of someone at the bottom of the examination table looking between the twins’ legs: their joined vaginal opening is presented at eye level, and their vulva is centered in the woodcut. The illustration, positioned directly below the woodcut, is a

<sup>25</sup> The illustrations are so dehumanizing, indeed offensive, that Linda Frost excluded them from the reprint of Pancoast’s report in her book *Conjoined Twins in Black and White*: “I have chosen not to include the woodcut in this collection in part because it so forcibly undermines the very subjectivity the McKoys claim for themselves in their own writing; its authenticity is also questionable: according to Pancoast, the image was ‘drawn by the artist, Mr. Faber, from my description’” (37 n42). The images are readily available on the Internet.

decontextualized close-up of their vaginal opening, complete with some hair and the twins' two urethras. These decontextualized images dehumanize the women and objectify them to such a degree that seeing these images for the first time is jarring. They completely reduce Millie-Christine to isolated body parts and turn the twins not only into human specimens but dismembered organs, as if dissected by these artists and ready for glass jars.

The photograph of Millie-Christine shows them wrapped in only a sheet covering their fronts. They are naked in the back, their spinal/back connecting point centered for the camera. Christine does not look at the camera. Her head remains down, her eyes are closed, and her left fist is clenched. While Christine appears uncomfortable, Millie looks downright angry. Millie's arms are hidden under the dark cloth, but her one eye clearly scowls at the camera, unmistakably expressing her discontent, which makes this a rare photo not only for its content but also because it indicates personal resistance to being put on display. Additionally, Millie-Christine were universally known for their charm, grace, and general goodwill, so although they were not effusive in their standard promotional photos, Pancoast's creates a striking contrast to their normal representational mode thereby reinforcing criticisms of the medical community as dehumanizing people with non-normative bodies. Millie-Christine became specimens rather than humans—a notion supported by the photo's label: "Double Headed Girl." Although Millie's expression provides a response to the situation and collapses standard boundaries between spectator and spectacle—because, in this case, the spectacle talks back—her body nevertheless remains on display in perpetuity in a way that clearly made her uncomfortable.

Pancoast's report further explains the incident and offers insight into exactly what these examinations meant for conjoined twins, and why twins so disliked and distrusted doctors. He writes: "After great persuasion and with the kind assistance of my friend Dr. F. F. Maury (owing to the modesty of the twins and the natural reluctance of [the twins' traveling manager] Mrs. Smith)," the photograph was taken (44). "They clung to their raiment closely, as may be seen, and it was only by earnest entreaty that they were willing to compromise by retaining the drapery as photographed," he continues (44). Pancoast admits that the twins' faces in the photograph illustrate their displeasure, as he normally found them amiable, but tone comes across as indifferent. Pancoast mentions Mary Smith's "natural reluctance" to agree to the photograph, which indicates her support of the twins in their decision not to agree to such examinations. There is no reason he would have fabricated this sentiment, and thus it suggests that in some instances Millie-Christine could trust Mary and count on her to reinforce their wishes. Pancoast never even mentions if the twins were treated for their abscess; instead he concludes that the twins had one vagina and a partial second anus, which appeared to be the site of infection. Moreover, his description indicates the extent of the examination offering a glimpse of what Millie-Christine had been subjected to throughout their lives. When discussing their second anus, Pancoast notes, "Into this I could readily pass a good-sized probe; and I found it to lead upwards and backwards and inwards, as they lay, for some 3½ inches" (48). He gives them a vaginal examination although he had already found the source of their illness and reports:

On examining the vagina, which gave them more annoyance than pain, I found no hymen present, but the orifice naturally small and contracted, as

that of an ordinary young unmarried woman. I readily passed my index finger up its whole length. I found only one vagina, and no bifurcation of it, only one womb, with an unusually long neck, around which the finger could be readily passed until it pressed against the *cul-de-sac* of the vagina, where I could still feel the body of the womb, but no apparent subdivision . . . . (48)

Pancoast then compares his findings with that of a doctor who had examined them in their youth: “Dr. F. H. Ramsbotham, who examined them when five years old, in his report says: ‘There are two vaginae, and without doubt two uteri’ (Fisher); but there is now only one vagina, and the gentlemen who examined the twins with myself could clearly recognize only one uterus in the common vagina” (48-49). Pancoast continues his examination by “passing a metallic female catheter into each urethra” and conducting another exam of the fully formed rectum (49). Pancoast’s report further indicates that at least four visitors were present for one examination, and a second examination was conducted with at least an additional two visitors: “These gentlemen [the other doctors] agreed with me that there was but one vagina, but one womb to be recognized, but one perfect anus, and that the parts are as I have described them” (49). His statements indicate that these examinations potentially were performed seven times during two visits if each doctor performed his own to verify Pancoast’s observations. These descriptions illustrate the thoroughness and invasiveness of the examinations doctors performed on the girls until they started refusing them and make clear that being able to refuse them was a huge step in reclaiming autonomy over their bodies.



The degree to which this was a typical examination for female conjoined twins is impossible to gauge, because this is the most thorough medical record available for Millie-Christine, and there is no similar document for other sets of female conjoined twins with which to compare. Daisy and Violet Hilton also complained of being touched too intimately by doctors at a very young age, so they likely endured similar experiences. However, when discussing doctors in publicity materials, authors framed Daisy and Violet's discomfort as anxiety about doctors' constant talk of separation surgeries they did not want. Their early managers, Mary Hilton and then Myer Myers,<sup>26</sup> likely used this tactic to maintain the twins' innocence; they wanted audiences to see Daisy and Violet as pure, sweet, and innocent girls. Gynecological exams would have tarnished this image. Daisy and Violet's managers also would have wanted to play up the idea of conjoined twins not wanting to be separated, as this would have vexed singleton audiences. Most notably, it seems that Mary Hilton and Myers were able to control what happened to Daisy and Violet's medical records. If reports of Millie-Christine's examination were publicized, it is likely doctors would have wanted to publish findings about Daisy and Violet as well. The fact that no documents currently exist speaks to Myers' business savvy. He likely made their examinations contingent upon not publishing medical reports so that no documents circulated outside of his control. This kind of agreement would have been consistent with his rigid management of Daisy and Violet's reputations and representations, but it also speaks to his ability to negotiate with people, like doctors, to protect his best interests.<sup>27</sup> Millie-Christine also would have had less ground to stand on

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<sup>26</sup> Sometimes spelled Meyer Meyers.

<sup>27</sup> As more medical archives are digitized, it is possible that accounts of Daisy and Violet's examinations will become publicly available.

with Pancoast since they were actually ill than Myers would have had with healthy conjoined girls.

On the other end of the spectrum was the heavily publicized examination of Rosa and Josepha (Josefa) Blazek by twenty-five doctors in New York City in the early 1920s. Bohemian conjoined twins born in 1878, Rosa and Josepha allowed the examination as a publicity stunt at a time when their popularity was waning. This exam built on the public perception that they were promiscuous—a reputation established when Rosa’s son, Franz, was born in 1910. Franz toured with Rosa and Josepha frequently, and although they created a narrative about Franz’s father, Rosa’s “husband,” evidence suggests no such man existed. In fact, even Franz’s legitimacy as Rosa’s biological child is questioned; after the twins’ death, a post-mortem examination led to the conclusion that the twins’ fused pelvis would have made childbirth impossible. Regardless, the Blazek sisters understood that their genitalia and sex lives were a point of curiosity for audiences, like Chang and Eng’s portraits of their many children, and they maximized it. While the inclusion of Franz in their performances was one example of this, their public examination certainly foregrounded it. These situations represent a glimpse into the history of gynecological examinations of conjoined twins, as well as a spectrum of ways in which these examinations interacted with conjoined twins’ publicity, constructed images, and careers. Both Daisy and Violet’s and Rosa and Josepha’s situations were very different than being coerced into thorough examinations by doctors in order to receive medical treatment, as Millie-Christine were, however. Millie-Christine had less control over what happened to their bodies in this instance, and no control over the ensuing representations and their circulation. The fact that this piece is so dehumanizing

speaks to what people could have done with them had they not stuck with the Smiths and wrested control of their careers.

Millie-Christine, in contrast to the Bunkers, Hiltons, and Blazeks, never presented themselves as persons interested in romantic or sexual coupling. They only talked of marriage when asked about it, and they never attempted even to date. They also never tried to fight the system on any of these issues. These decisions set them apart from other conjoined twins who married, attempted to marry, or at least played with the idea of sexuality and reproduction in their shows during similar time periods. It also indicates a way in which Millie-Christine acknowledged the limits of what was acceptable for conjoined women of African descent. They could push back in certain areas without disturbing their predominantly white clientele, but romance was not one of them. Pancoast's report, oddly, engages most thoroughly with the idea of Millie-Christine and matrimony and states that, physically, he saw no "serious objections" to it. He cites a doctor who examined conjoined "Hungarian Sisters" Helen and Judith of Szony<sup>28</sup> in 1709, and writes:

physically there are no serious objections [to Helen and Judith marrying], but morally there are insuperable ones, more particularly on account of the extreme liability of propagating monsters. I [Pancoast] agree with him, in reference to [Millie-Christine] the Carolina twins, that physically there are no serious objections, but that morally there are insuperable ones; but I do not believe with him that such marital union would necessarily produce monsters. (53)

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<sup>28</sup> Their last name is unavailable.

The earlier doctor objected to conjoined women marrying because they might produce conjoined babies, and birthing conjoined twins would have been “immoral,” based on the way this report is written. Pancoast did not believe the theory that conjoined twins would create conjoined babies, as he would have been aware of Chang and Eng’s numerous single-bodied children. Yet Pancoast also opposed Millie-Christine marrying based on “morals,” though he does not elucidate why. The report implies that, since Millie-Christine probably could have had healthy, singleton babies without putting their lives or their children’s lives at risk, “physically” there were no objections. One might speculate that the “moral” objections were also physical in nature; a man inevitably would have to have intercourse with both women at once to impregnate either of them due to the way their bodies were conjoined. Later arguments against women conjoined twins marrying cited similar reasons to classify conjoined marriage not only as immoral but also as bigamy. Pancoast does not return to his thoughts on matrimony, yet this record provides the most extensive discussion of Millie-Christine’s relationship to marriage and procreation, and it is noteworthy because an established (white) doctor answers these questions for the women with a professional opinion based not on science but on implied morals. His mention of their virginity—their “naturally small and contracted” orifice “as that of an ordinary young unmarried woman”—just several pages prior upheld their image as chaste women. His moral and scientific certification of their uncorrupted image aided them throughout their careers, and by declaring that they were as upstanding as they claimed. Being perceived as docile women—women even whose transgressions (like their resistance to the nude photograph) could be rationally explained by authoritative white men—allowed them quietly to work for the greater social good of

African Americans while being perceived as simply making a space for themselves in their world. Their grace and manners were incredibly important in achieving this, and being perceived as easy to control likely helped them maintain their autonomy throughout their adult careers and make advances for the education of freed slaves under the radar of those who might protest against such a thing during that period. This may also explain why their larger donations to universities remained anonymous; they needed to appear passive, compliant, and predictable so as to avoid being seen as uppity or activist.

The nude photograph of Millie-Christine remains troubling in many respects and continues to be a locus of discussion about the twins, but it is important to locate it in its many contexts rather than simplifying it to be just about race, pornography, or medicine, for example. In her book *Conjoined Twins in Black and White*, Linda Frost argues that the “specific United States cultural history of black women as inherently sexually rapacious” adds another layer of meaning to understanding Millie-Christine’s bodies (22). She states, “these are in the end black women, figures for whom sexual autonomy and even possession of one’s own body are not guaranteed” (24), and their “sexualized bodies remain in the possession of the general public, the numerous physicians who examined them, and the audiences and readers who were informed by these examinations” (24). Certainly black women’s bodies have been, and continue to be, inscribed with highly sexualized and distressing meanings, and all of these statements hold true for many images of African American women. Paradoxically, this image of Millie-Christine, however, may provide an inroad to understanding how the twins avoided these traps. Throughout their careers, Millie-Christine completely circumvented sexualized or lascivious representations and rumors aside from this one nude medical

photograph. Although a loaded image to be sure, and one that definitely compromised their autonomy over their own bodies, the photo and accompanying woodcut and illustration (because they are part and parcel of one another) are not traditionally sexualized and do not fit into tropes of erotic photography of the period. Most erotic photos at this time included women with pleasant expressions and playful, if not performative, set ups. If women's faces were concealed, the erotic focal points of the images (breasts, buttocks, or vaginas) were always made clear through costuming, pose, and staging. Erotic photos also incorporated regular parlor décor such as pedestals and reclining lounges, and in that way have more in common with traditional sideshow photography than with this medical photograph. This photo of Millie-Christine was lit to highlight the conjoined area of their lower spine and buttocks, but the full coverage of their fronts immediately distinguishes the photo from erotic photography, as do the random curtains and tablecloths in the background. The photo looks thrown together for posterity rather than staged for intrigue, and to place it within the “inherently sexually rapacious” history of pornographic images of African American women potentially does more damage by inscribing eroticism onto the twins. Ironically, it could be argued that the photo is more humanizing than most medical photography of the time, as medical photographs often eliminated faces and heads entirely simply to focus on anomalous body parts; the woodcut and illustration of Millie-Christine's genitalia more closely reflect this compositional trajectory. When people's faces were included in medical photography, they often looked sad or pained, presumably because of the physical discomfort they were feeling, but these wounded expressions differ greatly from the anger Millie exhibits. Millie-Christine's nude photo, then, remains something of an

outsider artifact, as it does not fit comfortably into histories of sideshow, medical, or erotic photography.

Although Pancoast took and distributed a nude photograph of Millie-Christine, a fate most other conjoined twins avoided, Millie-Christine were nevertheless far less sexualized than most of their conjoined compatriots during the time period in which they lived. Since a medical journal published Pancoast's report, the nude photograph was publicly available to some extent but was not a souvenir for mass purchase, as the Toccis' nude photocard were. The medical account that included Pancoast's photograph targeted a specialized audience, and even his description upheld the twins' chastity by indicating that Millie-Christine were virgins. Ellen Samuels notes, however, that Pancoast's arrangement of the nude photo and illustration mimics an 1819 image of Saartjie "Sarah" Baartmann, the "Hottentot Venus," by a French artist "frustrated at not being allowed to see her naked" (74 n31). An extended study of medical representations of women would be useful in identifying if this pattern was widespread, and if so, how it varied among different races of women. It seems possible that Pancoast included drawings of Millie-Christine's genitals in his report as retribution for being unable to photograph them completely naked. Presumably Pancoast would have photographed their genitalia as well, had Millie-Christine let him. In general, however, images of Millie-Christine were a far cry from the sexualized images of Baartmann with her large breasts, and exaggerated buttocks and genitals, which circulated starting in the late 1700s.<sup>29</sup> Again, Millie-Christine's ability to have some control over their representations seems especially noteworthy in relationship to someone like Baartmann who was so

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<sup>29</sup> Baartman's genitals were removed from her body after her death, pickled, and put on display, along with her pickled brain, at the *Musee de l'Homme* in Paris until 1974.

publicly mistreated that she has become an enduring symbol of racial and sexual oppression. Millie-Christine sidestepped being exoticized and sexualized by audiences and the media in part because they did not discuss romance other than to mention that they realized they could never pursue it.

The nude photograph of Millie-Christine is more accessible to the public today than it was during their lives; it continues to be replicated and has resulted in at least two other variations.<sup>30</sup> Samuels discusses the circulation of the images, links the availability of these images to Millie-Christine's race, and notes that "signs of the McKoys' resistance have been undermined by the historical and contemporary circulation of obscene images of them" (70). She points to an 1889 engraving of the nude photograph that was used in an online exhibit by the National Library of Medicine (NLM), which highlights a handful of images of conjoined twins, one of which is the illustrated, decontextualized drawing of Millie-Christine's genitals and another an engraving made from the nude photo. She argues that the engraving reveals more of Millie's body than the original photo. Additionally, Millie "is no longer staring defiantly at the camera/doctor/us. Instead, her eyes are fixed on a distant, resigned horizon" (74). To be sure, Millie no longer looks directly at the spectator in this image. However, she still looks angry, if not dead, as her eye remains open but completely blank, as opposed to her sister's closed one. In this representation, both twins' hair is mopyy (rather than curled), and it looks as if the sheet covering Millie's front is tucked under her arm, rather than willfully held closed as in the photo. This representation is similar to a medical photograph in tone, as all of the body parts remain with all of the emotion removed. This

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<sup>30</sup> It is unclear if Millie-Christine ever saw the photograph and accompanying illustrations, as their reactions to them are not indicated in any surviving biographical materials.



engraved image functions as a no-frills replica of the photo, much like Chang and Eng's plaster casts, created to preserve the memory of the bodies but not necessarily the people who inhabited them. It additionally turns the twins into human specimens with anomalous bodies, completely dehumanizing them. Though Samuels argues that the enduring circulation of this image has to do with Millie-Christine's race, one has to look no further than today's many medical television shows to see that this tradition endures for conjoined twins regardless of race. They continue to be dehumanized and exhibited in a televisual medical theatre that reduces conjoined twins to connected bodies via narratives, voiceover, or computer generated imagery projected onto bodies.

Another engraving made just after the photo was taken appeared in *The Lancet* on May 27, 1871, with an accompanying article that recaps what other medial examiners said about Millie-Christine. In this engraving, both twins' faces are turned toward the spectator. Both have slight smiles, long eyelashes, feathered hair, long earrings, and full lips. This image makes the twins look pretty and pleasant, if not inviting. While more of Christine's back is covered in this engraving than in the photo, this image is more sexualized than either of the other two. The position of Christine's visible arm has been changed to hold the (now white, rather than dark) sheet up to her neck, and much of her chest is revealed: her chest is not visible in the original photo. Christine looks demure, like a shy woman waiting for her lover to return to bed. Millie looks dreamy—happily lost in her own world. With the styling of the hair and faces, this image is more reminiscent of erotic images of the time, especially with the way Christine holds her sheet. This engraving does not read as a medical illustration, despite being published in a medical journal, and it is arguably the most sexualized representation of Millie-Christine

that exists today—even more so than the actual nude photograph.<sup>31</sup> As continues occurring with representations of conjoined twins, singleton publishers, in this case, altered the photo for their purposes, and it is no surprise that one altered it to fit into the genre of the medical photograph while the other made it look more like erotic photos. Both of these alterations force a different contextualization of the images. Turning them into photographic types readers would have comprehended easily removes the oddity of the image, and any controversy surrounding it, by way of removing Millie’s dissent.

The ever-gracious Millie-Christine seemed to forgive Pancoast, as his blurbs continued to be included in their biographical pamphlets, suggesting that their anger over the photo subsided enough that they did not mind being associated with him (as opposed to the aforementioned Tardieu). Millie-Christine additionally agreed to a later exhibition for Pancoast and his medical associates in 1878, though that time they were fully clothed throughout their performance (Martell 193). The nude photograph and Pancoast’s report nevertheless continue to represent a more complex intersection of medicine and sideshow than mere accusations of sexualization or racialization can account for. They blend the sideshow and the medical theater in a more corporeal way than standard photography or biographical pamphlets, which makes them both fascinating and difficult to discuss or rigidly categorize. None of this excuses Pancoast from insisting upon the photo and performing an egregiously extensive gynecological exam; he most certainly exploited Millie-Christine for his own gain. Furthermore, he convinced Chang and Eng’s widows to let him excavate the twins’ grave so that he might examine those bodies—a situation

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<sup>31</sup> This image only recently became available, and I have not seen it discussed in other articles or biographies on Millie-Christine. However, I presume that as journals start to create electronic databases of their full archives, more and more of these images of conjoined twins, as well as other “freaks,” will emerge regularly.

that so horrified Millie-Christine that they insisted upon being cremated<sup>32</sup>—indicating his fascination with conjoined twins and willingness to manipulate opportunities to examine them. Pancoast’s autopsy of Chang and Eng arguably produced a more exploitative exhibition piece than his photo of Millie-Christine: Chang and Eng’s conjoined livers, along with a plaster cast of their chests. Both remain on display at the Mütter Museum in Philadelphia. Pancoast took these body parts with the consent of the Bunkers’ widows’, and certainly the plaster casts humanize the exhibit more than if the livers were displayed without them. Both pieces nevertheless offer another example of body parts delighting the curious spectator under the guise of medical knowledge long after medical discoveries have ceased to be made about the people to which these body parts belonged. It is no coincidence that two of the most famous and intriguing artifacts of conjoined twins resulted not from the sideshow but from the medical community. That both can be attributed to one man underscores the lengths doctors would go to for opportunities to capitalize on people with anomalous bodies for their own profit or professional gain.

During their time, however, Millie-Christine accomplished an almost insurmountable achievement: they turned what could have been a threatening doubled Black gaze into teachable moments foregrounding the intellectual abilities of people of African descent. Discussions of gaze negotiations in performance situations like sideshows tend to follow the line of thinking that audience members enter the performance space being given the authority or freedom to look at will—as long or as little as they would like, and with whatever reactions that might come naturally. The “freak” performers might entertain audiences with stories or acts, encouraging audience

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<sup>32</sup> This wish was not fulfilled upon their death.

enjoyment of the show, or they might sit and passively absorb the gaze. Rachel Adams writes that “spectators may be disconcerted to find their gazes returned, often laden with resentment or hostility” from performers, which disrupts the “reassuring *disidentification*, in which the spectator recognizes her difference from the body onstage” (7-8). Conjoined twins are unique in that they not only return the gaze, they do so doubly with their two faces and sets of eyes. Regardless of whether or not these gazes are hostile or resentful, the mere presence of two people looking back at one disrupts the perceived balance or negotiation of object and spectacle, audience and “freak.” Millie-Christine’s success seems to have been partially due to their ability to overcome this dynamic, or perhaps deemphasize it, by making people feel delightfully enveloped and engaged, rather than overpowered, despite sometimes having two conversations at once, even in two different languages simultaneously. The fact that they could face opposite directions may have helped as well, as all four eyes would not necessarily have been concentrated on one focal point at any one time. Myriad accounts use terms like “agreeable,” “delightful,” “pleasant,” and “intelligent” to describe the women and interactions with them, but an excerpt from the *Liverpool Leader* included in their “Biographical Sketch of Millie Christine, The Carolina Twin” depicts an encounter with the twins in a most unique way. The author notes the twins’ “two distinct minds,” “marvelous intelligence,” “extraordinary trunk,” and “very pretty feet” while also calling their singing the “sweetest duets” and their dancing “the very poetry of motion” (77-78). Furthermore, the author writes:

the spectator is rewarded not by one smile, as in the case of ordinary young ladies, but by two distinct smiles, winked at you by two pairs of

sparkling and roguish eyes, and thrown at you by two different sets of the purest ivory that ever adorned the mouth of an Indian Sultana. ... She [Millie-Christine] has you on both sides. If you remove your head from one position you are immediately the victim of another pair of eyes, which fix you and, in fact, transfix you. We candidly admit that we were fascinated, and that we immediately lost sight of the phenomenon and became overpowered by the influence of this dual brain. (78)

This author writes as if delightfully seduced by Millie-Christine. The use of the phrase “victim of another pair of eyes” speaks to the idea that a spectator might be overpowered by conjoined twins and their returned gaze, and the word “transfix” potentially reinforces the interaction as a negative one, since the word has a dual meaning of feeling immobilized and mesmerized. However, the author admits his or her fascination and speaks to a pleasurable loss of power, as the author seems beguiled by the twins’ conversation and performance. Intriguingly, a seemingly singular author even goes so far as to start referring to him or herself in the plural “we.” The encounter illustrates how the spectator moved beyond seeing the error or potential threat in conjoined bodies or their race to enjoying a human engagement with two people. Millie-Christine seemingly overcame being seen as “disabled” or “freaks” time and again in situations like these—at least as their existing artifacts would have contemporary readers and scholars believe. Even if their achievements are exaggerated, as was common in the aggrandized mode, they nevertheless left behind a narrative of successful African American businesswomen in a time when options were extremely limited. They found their place of privilege and

utilized it not only for their own survival but also for their family and former American slaves more largely.

Millie-Christine's play with naming and pronouns spoke to their unique corporeal situation and encouraged people to engage with the idea of the twins as people—both singular and plural. This helped emphasize their personhood but also may have had broader ramifications for understanding the humanity of different races of people, if not collective groups. In fact, Millie-Christine might be seen as forerunners to later play with language and naming as a political stance against white systems of oppression and categorizations that undermine African Americans. More than any other conjoined twins, authors do not seem to know how to address Millie-Christine. Sarah Gold notes, “The choice to refer to these sisters as Mille and Christine (two people) or Millie-Christine (one person) was one I struggled with immensely” (2 n.4). She uses “Millie-Christine” and refers to them with the singular “she.” Martell oscillates erratically between singular and plural pronouns and the names “Millie-Christine” and “Millie Chrissie.” Certainly the twins' publicity materials played with the intrigue of naming, if not encouraged the ambiguity. One subheading of their “Biographical Sketch” is “Sketch of the Life of Millie Christine; or, Christine Millie, The Carolina Twin” (60), and the prose therein states, “there can be only one NONPAREIL, one UNEQUALLED, and that is the subject of our brief sketch, for only one living creature is like Millie Christine, and her name is Christine Millie” (60). The emphasis of there being *only one* obviously plays on words, but it also calls attention to that *one* person being a dual person whose names can be said, written, and used interchangeably as both one and two—categorized as both and neither. Their biographical pamphlets oscillate between “Millie Christine” and “Christine Millie”

fluidly and seemingly randomly, which calls attention to the arbitrariness of which name comes first in relationship to the egalitarianism of their bodies.<sup>33</sup> It is as if Millie-Christine were outside of a traditional system of naming and did not really care to engage with it in standardized ways. Outsiders could call them what they liked, because the twins were beyond the systems and ways of thinking that (white) singletons used—and persist in using—yet the twins utilized their name play for intrigue. It piqued interest in their bodies and shows and offered them a space of existence outside traditional definitions, norms, and categories. Daphne A. Brooks takes Millie-Christine’s play with self-identity a step further, noting that the twins, by “their insistence on maintaining that they were one ‘extraordinary body,’ push[ed] the limits of what and how ‘Black’ and corporeal authenticity might be redefined and reimagined in the nineteenth century” (310). Furthermore, the twins’ persistence in wanting to be called both one and two “blurs the distinctions between singular and multiple subjectivities” such that they might signify “the broader collective consciousness of recently emancipated African Americans hovering in the liminal social and ideological sphere between personhood and ‘thingdom’” (311), especially since Millie-Christine used a line in their “History” that they “wish[ed] to be viewed as something entirely void of humbug” (qtd. in Brooks 311). Brooks, in other words, argues that Millie-Christine actively wanted to stand for African Americans as a “real” and “authentic” people with widespread but untapped abilities who should be offered similar opportunities as those given to the twins; they used their “disability” to illustrate how “abled” an entire race of people could be. The possible

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<sup>33</sup> Most contemporary English-speaking authors refer to conjoined twins by name from left to right as one is looking at them—like words on a page. This ease of reference also privileges the singleton’s position over that of the conjoined twins, who obviously do not always address people from exactly the same position or vantage point.

ripple effects of this line of thinking would have been seen best in their actions, like setting up and funding educational programs, or removing negative images of people of African descent from their publicity materials, like the two women who pretended to be their mother in the European courts. Strategically, these ideas were not elucidated in their publicity materials, as they would have alienated audience members and been out of place in the genre of sideshow pamphlets. Political ideas also were not addressed in their duets, which instead turned romantic sentiments into pseudo-memoirs of companionship paired with self-reflection.<sup>34</sup> In songs Millie-Christine wrote, they often played with references to their anomalous bodies through quotes like, “My maker knows what he has done / Whether I’m created *two* or one” (“Biographical Sketch” 71). However, the songs and their on-stage discussions steered clear of politics, which would have been bad for business. These arguments link Millie-Christine to a political history for African Americans yet also are reiterated in numerous conjoined twins’ representations over the years regardless of race. In fact, they continue today and can be seen in televisual representations of conjoined twins like Lori and George Schappell or Abigail and Brittany Hensel. They speak both to how broadening the spectrum of definitions about humanity, or the single and the collective, potentially affect conjoined twins and numerous other people in oppressed groups or oppressive situations.

Millie-Christine’s changing and elusive narratives of freedom and personhood also call to mind discussions of P.T. Barnum’s “What is It?” exhibit (later known as Zip the Pinhead). The “What is It?” was portrayed by William Henry Johnson, a developmentally disabled African American “wild man” clothed in furs, given a staff,

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<sup>34</sup> Daisy and Violet Hilton sang several of the same songs as Millie-Christine, and people also took the lyrics to be statements about being conjoined.



and told to jump around while gnawing on raw meat. Johnson was billed as a quasi-human “missing link,” both animal and man but unidentifiable as wholly either. His definition as human or animal, and discussions about it, was left entirely in the hands of the audience, and his humanness depended on context. Johnson was portrayed as having a very close lineage to the animal kingdom, but by being seen as at least partially human, he created an animal – human spectrum for audiences to ponder on their own, without the slant of the sideshow talker. Some claim the “What is It?” performance opened up possibilities for “spirited public discussions about the racial boundaries of ‘humanity’ without specific reference to *any* of the dangerous subtexts normally fundamental to such discussions” (Cook 153), because the exhibit deliberately did not define Johnson’s performance by race or even human qualities. For example, he was said to walk on all fours but trained to be bipedal. He also could not physically engage in agrarian labor, thus directly opposing widespread ideas held during the time about people of African descent. This does not mean the exhibit was “positive” or that it was not heavily racialized—it certainly was, and in the most base ways. However, the complete removal of terminology and arguments common to discussions of race, according to Cook, made the “What is it?” exhibit a possible site for alternative kinds of conversations or debates about humanness.

Millie-Christine’s play with words and signification may have lead spectators down a similar path, though one loaded with positive imagery. Instead of an animal-human spectrum wherein a being pushed possible boundaries of humanity toward the animal, Millie-Christine broadened the spectrum for perceptions of African Americans to include people who were intellectual, fluent in several European languages, well

mannered, and of means. Since they were touring because of their doubled bodies and not because of a political agenda, they had the advantage of catching people off guard with their smarts and being pleasant without being intimidating. They engaged with their aggrandized performance mode to demonstrate their abilities and overcome the stigma of being African American in a white society by illustrating their intellectual capabilities as part of their show. Like Chang and Eng, Millie-Christine found privilege within their “disability,” and their utilization of it broadened notions of the capabilities of their perspective races. The twins differ, however, in that Chang and Eng owned slaves and mistreated them as a means of dis-anchoring their racial identity by providing a “lower” base so that they could align themselves with white people. Millie-Christine, in contrast, exhibited their worth, and the worth of their people, through conversation rather than demeaning anyone to push themselves up. They mastered talents like singing, talked of the grand people they met and places they saw, and of their rich lives in general. In return, exhibitors emphasized their manors, grace, and good humor, and by the end of their careers, they were almost singularly referred to as “ladies.” However, their inability even to consider romantic relationships indicates the gendered and, likely, racial bias or boundary that existed for them. Although Chang and Eng married, and later twins Daisy and Violet Hilton openly dated singleton men, Millie-Christine avoided being linked with romance at all. They acknowledged and adhered to the limits of what was considered acceptable behavior for them, but the situation still represents an inequity in how their conjoinment affected their rights.

Millie-Christine’s use of the aggrandized mode nevertheless was masterful and allowed them to overcome seemingly insurmountable barriers. Even when their

representations moved beyond their control, as in the case of the nude medical photograph, they still sidestepped most negative reverberations that could have ensued, in part because they deliberately avoided presenting themselves in potentially threatening ways. By at least partially controlling their careers and publicity, they by and large avoided negative stereotypes and actively attempted to create positive images—images that, in turn, theoretically helped broaden ideas about African Americans for audiences who interacted with Millie-Christine. The twins advocated for the education of freed slaves covertly but represented the larger possibilities for what African Americans could achieve. The spectacle of Millie-Christine’s doubleness overshadowed their race, allowing them to be conjoined first and Black second. This unusual situation gave them access to increased opportunities and achievements during a period in which race defined the whole of the American experience for most people of African descent living within the United States.

## Chapter Two: Daisy and Violet Hilton and the Business of Living

Despite being born considerably later than Chang and Eng Bunker (1811-1874) and Millie-Christine McKoy (1851-1912), Daisy and Violet Hilton's connection affected them legally in ways that differed from the earlier sets of twins. Born joined at the base of their spines in England in 1908, the Caucasian twins were essentially enslaved for the first two decades of their lives, even after settling in the United States. Unlike Chang and Eng and Millie-Christine, Daisy and Violet were considered unfit to care for themselves because of their conjoinment and were court ordered to remain under in the custody of Myer and Edith Myers until the twins sued them for emancipation; the twins were twenty-three years old. Chang and Eng, in contrast, were allowed to self-manage almost immediately after entering the United States in the 1830s, and they became citizens within just a couple years. They owned land and slaves, married white women, and procreated freely. Millie-Christine were born into slavery, but with the help of their family, former managers, and the Emancipation Proclamation, they began to have more control over their careers and representations by the time they were in their early teens. They never attempted to date and rarely even discussed the idea, seemingly because they knew it would be too controversial. Daisy and Violet, in contrast, engaged in numerous public love affairs after they were granted their freedom. Unlike Chang and Eng, however, marriage was a struggle for Daisy and Violet, and authorities in nearly two dozen states declined them licenses for reasons of indecency and bigamy, and because the marriages were presumed to be publicity stunts. The popularity of Daisy and Violet's stage performances nevertheless rivaled, if not exceeded, that of both Chang and Eng and Millie-Christine, yet the Hiltons died in poverty in 1969.

Throughout their careers, Daisy and Violet had trouble separating their lives from their representations: they used the press to manipulate the public, yet the public did not always differentiate between the truth and the exaggerations, which ended up complicating real-world situations for them since their reputations and representations at times became indistinguishable from one another. In their early careers, while under the management of Myer Myers, the Hiltons were presented in the aggrandized mode, one of the two predominate ways people were exhibited in sideshows. In this mode, “showmen flaunted, exaggerated, and created prestigious and high-status attributes” for the performers (Bogdan 147). Aggrandized performers illustrated how they overcame physical limitations by showcasing the talents they had learned—from activities like singing and dancing to accomplishing basic tasks with unexpected body parts (like sewing with one’s toes if missing arms)—or taking on made-up names, titles, and backgrounds to create more impressive backstories. As children, the Hiltons’ were presented as British in an American world to make them slightly more refined than American children. Eventually, they became “San Antonio’s Siamese Twins,” and their act dropped the associations to England. Until their emancipation, Myer Myers strictly controlled their innocent image in shows and promotional materials, so much so that they were isolated from other people, including performers. Once they broke from Myers, Daisy and Violet continued performing, but they lacked a cohesive shtick; they continued presenting themselves in many of the same ways they had before, accompanying one another on duets and dancing with men, but in brushing aside their innocent costumes, they embodied more of themselves onstage, which moved them somewhat out of the aggrandized mode and left them with less of an act. Furthermore, stories about their love

affairs and publicity-stunt marriages colored their performances. Daisy and Violet attempted using the press to counter these suppositions and paint themselves as victims throughout, but instead of admiring the sisters, audiences began pitying them, something most anomalously bodied performers tried to avoid because it was bad for business. All performing conjoined twins' popularity ebbed and flowed, but Daisy and Violet had little to fall back on. They did not have other businesses, interests, or family of which to speak, and the narratives that continue to define their lives are that of romantic impoverishment and careers gone awry.

The Hiltons did attempt to take advantage of motion picture audiences twice in their careers. They acted in Tod Browning's 1932 film *Freaks* shortly after their emancipation and the 1952 exploitation movie *Chained for Life*, which was loosely based on their lives and which they were coerced into financing. It bankrupted them. Neither film was successful upon its release, but both were influential to later film and television representations of conjoined twins in formal or narrative approach. Each brought elements of the twins' performances into the film world so that neither totally separates fact from fiction. *Freaks* blends documentary-style footage into the story, while *Chained for Life* incorporates biographical details. In *Freaks*, makes romantic space for the still-conjoined female twins without passing judgment on them, creating the only American film to date that does so. Later films about female conjoined twins only engage with topics of sexuality if the twins already have been separated.<sup>35</sup> The mise-en-scene of *Freaks* also creates a world in which they fit; the singletons crowd them out of their spaces, not vice-versa, and control of bodies is constantly in flux. However, the film still

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<sup>35</sup> Chapter Three includes an extensive analysis of images of conjoined twins in fictional American film and television shows.

entertains the idea that conjoined twins can have romantic others, even if complicated, and does not condemn the women for doing so. *Chained for Life*, in contrast, utilizes framing and staging to separate the twins so that during certain scenes, the audience only sees one of them at a time. *Chained for Life* begins a history of fictional representations of conjoined twins that privileges separation and suggests that happiness can only be achieved upon doing so—a message reiterated not only in fictional film and television shows but also in medical documentaries about conjoined twins.<sup>36</sup> Unlike *Freaks*, which never mentioned separation, *Chained for Life* does not treat marriage as a real option for the twins. Not only did the film add another layer of restriction to Daisy and Violet’s lives with its message of separation, but the twins also became bound to it because they needed to try to recoup their costs.

The twins severed ties with the press later in life, as they became recluses working in a North Carolina grocery store after being abandoned at a Drive-In by one of their managers. In their early years, however, they presented themselves as Stars. They stressed their identities as musicians and celebrities who ran with the most interesting and famous crowds, yet even at the height of their stardom, they were considered “freak” performers and they never fully could overcome that label. This in part had to do with their reliance on the press to tell their story, which became increasingly sensational and pitiable. However, their relationships with men also threatened standards of monogamy, if not patriarchy, and although they theoretically should not have caused more alarm than the generative Chang and Eng, they did. Their popularity soared when they were seen as adorable, innocent, nonthreatening girls but diminished when they became sexually

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<sup>36</sup> Representations of conjoined twins in non-fictional television shows are examined at length in Chapter Four.

engaged adult women. Although they attained the ability to be openly sexual in a way that Millie-Christine never were allowed, Daisy and Violet remained more limited professionally than Chang and Eng or Millie-Christine, because they could not define themselves outside of their performances, publicity, or celebrity personas.

### **Daisy and Violet: The Biographies**

Daisy and Violet Hilton were born conjoined at the base of their spines on February 5, 1908, to an unmarried twenty-one-year-old named Kate Skinner in Brighton, England. Skinner, who did not have money for medical services nor support from the children's father, went to the Queen's Arms pub, which was known for allowing pregnant women to work in exchange for proprietor Mary Hilton's midwifery services. Skinner purportedly never fully accepted the twins as her daughters, and shortly after their birth, Mary and her husband, Henry, adopted the twins (Jensen 12).<sup>37</sup> The girls were exhibited in the pub, and an article appeared in the *Brighton Herald* by the time they were six-weeks old. Customers poured in for a glimpse of the babies, and when they arrived, they could purchase *cartes de visite* of them in their carriage. In later publicity materials, Daisy and Violet would say they remembered spectators freely pulling up their dresses and looking at their conjoined bodies during these visits. Thus began the twins' careers

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<sup>37</sup> Dean Jensen's book, *The Lives and Loves of Daisy and Violet Hilton*, is the most exhaustive biography on the Hilton sisters, yet it relies heavily on sideshow publicity materials, which were partially fictional and partially constructed for dramatic effect, and conversations with people who had secondhand knowledge of the Hiltons. By and large, Jensen treats these sources as factual. For example, his account of Daisy and Violet Hilton's birth stems from correspondence with both the son of a local doctor who arrived at the Queen's Arms shortly after the twins' birth and from the son of a woman, Maggie, who "was present in the household" (390). Jensen's reliance on secondhand tales of people loosely affiliated with the twins makes the veracity of these stories questionable, and therefore the biography is difficult to cite as fact. Additionally, Jensen conjectures about the twins' feelings, emotional desires, and even sexuality somewhat freely, and the book is not diligent with citations, so any biographical information used here that is mentioned solely in his book is handled delicately, if not speculatively.



in showbiz. By late March, they made their first press-covered appearance at their baptism (17). They were already starting to be known as “Brighton’s United Twins,” though it was not until the spring of 1910, two years later, that Mary and her daughter, Edith, took the girls on their first roadshow, traveling to various European fairs and carnivals. It is rumored that, on this tour, Harry Houdini saw the girls for the first time at Pickard’s Waxworks in Glasgow, and encouraged promoter Ike Rose to tour the girls (29).<sup>38</sup> In 1912 they began touring under Rose’s management and Mary’s oversight after she closed the Queen’s Arms pub due to Henry Hilton’s failing health. The twins were learning to sing, dance, and play instruments like the violin, saxophone, and piano, and Rose is credited with teaching them to become performers. He worked with them on their musical skills and taught them how to interact with an audience—to play bits for comedy, tease, and throw off the crowd so that performances had natural peaks and valleys and maintained interest throughout. Many aspects of the twins’ performances were established at an early age, and some speculate they began doing a bit where Daisy stepped to the edge of the stage and excused the conductor so that she could conduct the orchestra herself at this time. The girls also started accompanying each other on duets.

When Henry Hilton died in 1912, the cultural climate in Europe was becoming inhospitable for Rose, a Jewish man, so the group followed a lead that took them on tour in Australia. The Hiltons were meant to be a grand attraction for the opening of Luna Park St. Kilda (near Melbourne), but the Australian public did not show up in the

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<sup>38</sup> Jensen cites a *Billboard* article, “Ike Rose’s First Fifty Years in Show Business” (December 8, 1928) for this information, which is only noteworthy because Ike Rose was a promoter and, therefore, a chronic exaggerator by trade. Often the information Rose provided news organizations included wild overstatements or embellishments meant to pique the public’s interest in his shows and his persona. Since the Hiltons did eventually claim to be friends with Houdini (they met him at least once), and since Rose did tour the Hiltons during their childhood, it is possible he invented this scenario in which Houdini first introduced him to the Hiltons to improve his clout.

numbers Rose had predicted. Rose returned to Europe, abandoning Mary, Daisy, Violet, and Mary's daughter, Edith (48-49). Mary made arrangements with a traveling carnival to continue exhibiting the twins in Australia, and along the way, they met balloon salesman Myer Myers, who would eventually marry Edith and become the twins' manager. In 1916, the group made their way to the United States, the country the twins would call home for the rest of their lives. As the story goes, eight-year-old Daisy and Violet encountered difficulties entering Angel Island. They were made to undergo a medical examination and were deemed "unfit for entry" because their "disability" would negatively affect their ability to earn a living (57 - 58). Myers and Mary explained the twins' popularity in other parts of the world and tried to convince officials that the twins would have a thriving career. They hoped for an appeal, but when they were unsuccessful, they left Edith with the twins in the holding tank and proceeded to the mainland to plead their case. In short, Mary went straight to the *San Francisco Chronicle* and told their story, and when news of the twins appeared in the newspaper the next day, their hearing was expedited and the Hiltons were cleared to enter California.

Once in the United States, Myers came into his own as stage manager for the "Royal English United Twins," who took audiences by storm. Daisy and Violet's new title and advertising firmly established them in the aggrandized mode; their banner showed them in velvet, fur-lined robes and diamonds with Buckingham Palace in the background. Their outside talker, "Professor" Jay Henry Edwards, spoke of the girls as British princesses—descendants of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert—who lived in a castle and spent their time reading famous British authors (75 – 78). Soon Myers had a castle façade constructed for the midway, replete with Beefeater ushers, to draw crowds

(86). Myers used additional promotional tactics that set him apart from other managers. For example, he set up publicity photo opportunities for the twins with Mayors or Governors while traveling. More noteworthy was his use of radio. In the 1920s, Myers was booking the girls on radio shows as a means of making them a national name; the twins would answer questions, sing, and perform instrumentals (90).<sup>39</sup> Myers' willingness to embrace the new medium demonstrated his promotional savvy, since it allowed the twins to expand their audiences beyond places their printed promotional materials reached. It also provided a unique opportunity for the twins: they could perform and be evaluated based on their musical skills rather than on how they looked. This is the only time in their careers that their talents overshadowed their bodies. Recordings of their musical performances were made but are now difficult to find, whereas sheet music featuring their images is still readily available. They relied on visual souvenirs in general, so it makes sense that the music they are most remembered for is graphic in nature. However, Daisy and Violet did sell some recordings of their mid- and late-career performances, yet the lack of surviving recordings reinforces their personal tension between being seen as legitimate performers, or being seen as "freaks" with anomalous bodies—a problem that plagued them throughout their lives. This first step in promoting them as musicians via the radio, however, speaks to Myers' talent—something that is often understated because he was abusive. He utilized publicity materials to try to separate Daisy and Violet from other "freaks" and, in fact, made the argument that this is partially why he kept them isolated from society: allowing them to be seen outside of performance venues would have meant people would see them more

<sup>39</sup> Jensen dates the Hilton sisters' foray into radio at 1917 based on an interview with Joe McKennon, a lifelong circus man and carnie. Although the first musical broadcast did occur in 1917, most states did not have radio stations with regularly scheduled programming until the early 1920s.

frequently as “freaks” rather than as musicians. Embracing radio performances was a profound attempt at highlighting their musical talents instead of their bodies.

Daisy and Violet were under the supervision and management of Mary until she died in 1919, at which time Myers and Edith Hilton became the twins’ legal guardians. The twins were eleven. According to an account in the “Private Life of the Siamese Twins,” Daisy and Violet tried to escape at Mary’s funeral. Myers was known to be even crueller than Mary, not just beating the girls but also intimidating them with threats of being locked up in an asylum, or deported, so they foresaw a bleak future in this arrangement.<sup>40</sup> In 1927, when the girls were nineteen, Myers was granted full legal control over Daisy and Violet without their knowledge. He petitioned a court in San Antonio, the family’s home base since the 1910s, to grant him legal guardianship of the twins, claiming their “disability” made them unable to care for themselves. The court ruled in his favor, giving Myers full custody over the twins and allowing him to retain all income from their performances. That same year, the twins reportedly attacked him when he interfered with Don Galvan’s courtship of Daisy (Jensen 139). Edith diffused the fight, and as a concession, Myers gave the twins their own room and an allowance of \$500 per week.<sup>41</sup> Previously he had kept all of their earnings, which, based on estimates of weekly salaries, peaked in the late 1920s at over \$200,000 per year, making Daisy and Violet two of the highest paid performers in vaudeville at the time.

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<sup>40</sup> It is unclear if Myers did not apply for citizenship for the twins as a means of maintaining his ability to threaten the twins with deportation. However, the twins did not become United States citizens until 1932, after they were emancipated from Myers.

<sup>41</sup> Edith reportedly felt for some time that the twins should have their own room and more freedom. Edith is often portrayed as Myers’ henchman, but she too might be considered a victim in this complicated family history. She was raised by an abusive mother, married an abusive man, and seems to have earnestly professed her love for the Hilton sisters, whom she said she considered daughters. Though only a few years older than the twins, she spent most of her life raising and caring for them, so it is plausible that she sincerely felt what she knew to be love for the twins and did not know how to help them.

Myers also hired a management team for the road at this time so that Edith and he no longer had to travel with the twins. Press Agent Bill Oliver (listed as WM. L. Oliver on promotional materials) was enlisted to do advanced publicity and travel town-to-town ahead of the sisters. The Hiltons still were being presented as sweet and innocent girls interested in puppies, sports like tennis and golf, and reading.<sup>42</sup> They dressed identically and wore their long hair in schoolgirl ringlets with oversized bows that made them appear more petite, a trick suggested by manager Terry Turner.<sup>43</sup> Their ages at this time were being misrepresented in their advance publicity materials, which claimed they were eighteen. Stating a younger age would have highlighted their innocence and contributed to their aggrandized performances as young virtuoso musicians who overcame great odds. The biographical pamphlet being sold at the time, the “Souvenir and Life Story of San Antonio’s Siamese Twins Daisy and Violet Hilton,” listed them as twenty, and their private lives certainly had taken on more adult tones. Now privy to additional freedom on the road and their own bedroom, both Hilton sisters reportedly began having an affair with Oliver until his wife found out and sued the twins for \$250,000 in damages. The lawsuit turned into a celebrity sex scandal effectively ending the twins’ little-girl image.

Myers began looking for a lawyer to handle the case and was introduced to notorious lawyer Martin J. Arnold.<sup>44</sup> As the story goes, Arnold excused Myers from the

<sup>42</sup> One advanced publicity campaign included a story about how the twins continually searched for a two-headed dog, though they loved their Pekinese, named Boy (Myers 23).

<sup>43</sup> In the documentary *Bound by Flesh*, Amy Fulkerson, Curator of Collections at the Witte Museum in San Antonio (which houses Harry Hertzberg’s expansive circus collection), explains that Terry Turner suggested the large bows and frilly dresses so the girls could look more American when they became “San Antonio’s Siamese Twins” and shed their British background. Dean Jensen suggests that Myers met Turner in 1924, so this costume change would have occurred seven or eight years after the twins moved to the United States.

<sup>44</sup> Camille Rosengren, Daisy and Violet’s goddaughter, says in *Bound by Flesh* that her father introduced Myers to Arnold, and she mentions that her father was one of the lawyers involved with the case. She says the judge also was a friend, which is why they picked him. Dean Jensen, however, claims that former

meeting to speak with the twins privately, and although they discussed the Oliver case, he instead set up a way for them to escape from Myers, began their emancipation proceedings, and helped house the twins until their trial ended. The Oliver lawsuit seemingly disappeared, yet the twins' emancipation hearing became its own media circus. The suit requested a share of their past earnings and sought to nullify a contract they unknowingly signed keeping them under Myers' management until 1937. The courtroom spectacle began on day one when Edith and Myers did not show up, therefore causing the court to recess. San Antonio newspapers covered the proceedings heavily, and as many as seven hundred to one thousand spectators packed the courtroom. When Myers finally took the stand, he argued that Daisy and Violet did not know how to handle their finances, so he did it for them, spent lavishly on them, and invested for the family. When the Hiltons took the stand, only one was permitted to speak, so Violet answered all of the questions because she sat nearest the judge. She elucidated their treatment by Myers—being secluded, beaten, and threatened with deportation—and in late January 1931, the twins were granted their freedom along with about \$80,000 cash and securities and \$20,000 worth of personal items like costumes and jewelry. They had made as much as \$2,000,000 throughout their careers.

It is widely believed that Daisy and Violet took a long break after their emancipation to attend parties and enjoy their celebrity in a way that they had not been allowed to before. However, their friend, dancer, and former husband Jim Moore

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Texas senator and San Antonio lawyer Harry Hertzberg introduced Myers to Arnold. Hertzberg was a circus fanatic who amassed a large collection of memorabilia. Jensen says Hertzberg adored the twins, became friends with them, and planted the seed for their emancipation proceedings. Hertzberg is only mentioned on two pages of Jensen's biography, however, and no sources are cited connecting him to the twins. The only source used is Peyton Green's 1946 book *San Antonio: City in the Sun*, which mentions Hertzberg's emphatic love for circuses. It is unclear if Hertzberg encouraged the Hilton sisters' emancipation, or if his inclusion in their biography is merely a way to link their history to his collection, which includes numerous images of the Hiltons.

explains that they first went to Europe, which cost them much more money than they anticipated, and then they produced their first “unit show,” which he defines as a produced show that played theaters. He says the show cost them about \$100,000 and substantially contributed to their eventual financial decline (MacMillan 37-38). It is certainly that they started working on the film *Freaks* within a couple of years after they obtained their freedom, because the film was released in 1932. Daisy and Violet became involved with *Freaks* when Hollywood casting agent Ben Piazza approached them about starring in the film during the summer of 1931 (Jensen 197). The major stars originally slated for the film—Myrna Loy and then up-and-comer Jean Harlow—had been replaced with actresses who had less to lose from such a risky film, so *Freaks* needed the reliable star power that the Hiltons could provide. They hesitated to say “yes,” because they tried to dissociate themselves from sideshows and “freaks” in general, but they also saw it as a potential career move and a way to differentiate themselves from their earlier little-girl image. The film not only flopped, but it also caused a national outrage. It was recut to eliminate some of the more horrific or sexual scenes. A preamble also was added—a scrolling warning about the “highly unusual attraction” the viewer is about to see—as was a “happy” ending in which Hans and Frieda, the two main characters, reunite. However, the film’s overall gross remained disappointing—it lost close to \$200,000—and MGM buried it, while England banned it, for thirty years. Daisy and Violet essentially did the same: they left it out of all future publicity materials and divorced themselves from it until the 1960s when they again started promoting it because they were desperate for money.

The twins' only other foray into motion pictures occurred in the 1950s. The twins were facing financially dire times, so when promoter Ross Frisco contacted them about making a film loosely based on their lives, they heard him out. He was not a filmmaker, but he was aware of the increasing market for low-budget exploitation films. He approached Daisy and Violet with the idea for *Chained for Life*, the story of Dorothy and Vivian Hamilton, conjoined twins on the witness stand for killing a lover who had wronged them. Though the film's narrative became increasingly sensationalized, the initial pitch allegedly included a promise to humanize the women and illustrate their real-life struggles with love and the law. After much persuasion, Daisy and Violet agreed to star in and finance the film. It is a fairly typical independent exploitation film, replete with poor acting and D-list stars, and Daisy and Violet are the film's only unique element. This, unfortunately, returned the twins to "freak" territory despite their best efforts to prove their acting chops and prowess as producers on the film. *Chained for Life* flopped and bankrupted the twins, who became independent distributors traveling Drive-In to Drive-In attempting to recoup their costs.

Aside from *Freaks* and *Chained for Life*, most attention paid to the Hilton sisters after their emancipation had to do with their romantic encounters. The first time Daisy went public with a relationship, it was with Don Galvan, a musician the twins met while on tour in 1927. Don went to San Antonio during their trial, and although he purportedly did not like the transformation he saw in Daisy from innocent to flapper, he asked her to marry him (Jensen 189, 194). They never married, and according to the "Private Life of the Siamese Twins," Daisy declined the proposal because Galvan suggested an arrangement where they would be together only for six months of the year so that Violet



could visit her (already otherwise married) beau, musician Blue Steele for the other six (IV: 19).<sup>45</sup> Daisy said that she could not bear to be separated from her husband for that long, and although it is unclear if this was the real reason, the couple never married. Thus began a string of relationships for the twins. Daisy began dating musician Jack Lewis around 1932, and they quickly became engaged. However, they postponed their wedding purportedly to wait until Violet, too, was ready to marry (Jensen 218). Later that year, the twins traveled to England where Violet became engaged to boxer Harry Mason. When the twins returned to the United States, Jack Lewis's band backed out of Daisy and Violet's show, and he recommended Maurice Lambert's as a replacement. Lambert and Violet quickly fell in love. When they announced their engagement in 1934, Daisy announced that she would marry Harry Mason instead, since she was no longer attached to Jack Lewis, though nothing came of it (244).

Lambert and Violet's marriage attempts became a public debacle. In July 1934, they applied for a marriage license through the state of New York and were denied based on grounds of immorality and indecency. It is speculated that some city officials thought the marriage was a publicity stunt. However, photographs and newsreel footage of Violet and Lambert suggest the two were very much in love. The two often kiss passionately, constantly touch each other, and speak as people sincerely enamored with one another. Violet and Lambert headed to New Jersey and were denied a license there as well. Eventually, twenty-one states denied them licenses.<sup>46</sup> Although Lambert was not

<sup>45</sup> In an interview with Jim Moore, he claims Blue Steele and Violet never were romantically involved: "I don't think ... that Blue Steel ever had any romantic feelings toward Violet. He liked her, everybody liked the twins ... they were very likeable girls" (MacMillan 17).

<sup>46</sup> In the documentary *Bound by Flesh*, sideshow aficionado James Taylor suggests the Hiltons deliberately requested marriage licenses in states that would have been more likely to deny them. Being turned down repeatedly would continue to fuel the story and allow them to capitalize on it longer.

comfortable in the public eye, and the attempts weighed on both their relationship and him personally, in 1934, they sued New York City for acting arbitrarily in matters of the law by denying them a license to wed. The prosecution's arguments included the idea that, of all places, New York should not be concerned with two women sharing a bed with one man: close-quarters living was common in New York tenements. Their lawyer also argued that Daisy's freedom was not in question: Daisy and Violet were two people (who paid separate taxes and had separate passports) and therefore the law should apply to them as singletons. Additionally, Chang and Eng were married in the 1840s, thus setting a precedent for this kind of situation. The court, however, ruled against Violet and Lambert because of the indecency in having a third person present for the intimate moments of marriage. Much had been made in the press speculating about the sexual shenanigans between Lambert and the twins, and although Daisy and Violet were no strangers to controversy, it was too much for Lambert. He fled.

Violet's "successful" marriage occurred just a couple years later as part of a publicity stunt in 1936. Daisy and Violet's careers were in flux, and although well-paying gigs surfaced from time to time, vaudeville audiences were declining as people turned their attentions to motion pictures. The twins accepted a booking at the Texas Centennial Exposition that included an invitation to take part in a marriage ceremony. As long as the promoter could get a marriage license approved, Violet agreed to marry someone—whomever was chosen for her—at the Cotton Bowl arena. Unbeknownst to both Violet and Jim Moore, a longtime friend and dancer who toured with them, he had been chosen by the promoter: they found out via a billboard on their way into town.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Most sources state that Jim Moore was gay. However, he married his dance partner Anita (no last name is given) after his marriage to Violet was annulled (MacMillan 23).

Violet and Moore married in front of a crowd of approximately five thousand people, though the twins would later report that 100,000 to 150,000 people attended. Moore and Violet kept up the marriage charade for slightly less than two months when the press learned they were staying in separate hotel rooms. They filed for an annulment claiming they were coerced into the marriage: had they not gone through with it, over a dozen performers would have been stranded without an income. It took over seven years for the annulment to be finalized. Daisy and Violet received a considerable amount of press from the wedding and its aftermath, but even after a well-crafted series of articles ran in *The American Weekly* in 1944, their image never fully recovered.

Daisy also married once—to musician Harold Thomas Estep, who toured under the name Buddy Sawyer. The twins were longtime friends with Sawyer, and he often attended parties with them. Daisy’s proposal to Sawyer, however, caught him off guard when it seemingly came out of nowhere in 1941 (Jensen 295). Sawyer was twenty-five years old, eight years younger than Daisy. On September 16, 1941, the couple wed in Buffalo, New York.<sup>48</sup> No press was present, and the wedding went off without a hitch. Unbeknownst to Sawyer, a party had been planned at a local nightclub, and the press had been notified of the wedding, thus setting in motion the relentless pursuit of information about the couple. Sawyer endured nearly two weeks of married life (and the accompanying attention) but took off unannounced, like Maurice Lambert had before him (299). The official divorce went through two years later. Even years later, Sawyer claimed he did not get married as a publicity stunt: “Some people thought we got married only for the publicity. They were wrong. I loved Daisy very much. She loved me. Even

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<sup>48</sup> It is unclear why they were granted a marriage license in New York at this time when Violet and Maurice Lambert had been denied one not even a decade earlier.

when we parted, I thought that when the hysteria of the press died down, maybe we could get together again and have a life together after all. It just never happened” (299).<sup>49</sup> It seems certain the twins contacted the press and set up the party, since they at times favored publicity over the feelings of loved ones, and this speaks to how intertwined their lives were with publicity and the difficulty they had separating the two, especially after the Lambert marriage license debacle wherein it becomes difficult to tell at what point a legitimate misfortune became a press opportunity. However, the twins seemingly did not understand or care about boundaries between their public and private lives by the 1940s; they simply needed to do whatever they could to make money. It also is impossible not to notice the patterns that appear in this situation—the potentially gay husband, the husband’s inability to handle the stress of the publicity, the husband disappearing unannounced, and the twins’ ensuing sob story to the press. If one believes that Sawyer was also gay and that this marriage also was a publicity stunt, this situation becomes merely a rehashing of old tricks.

Throughout these relationships, Daisy and Violet were in and out of work in theaters and cruise ships, sideshows when they were desperate, and strip or burlesque clubs when in despair. Under Myers’ management, they brought in as much as \$4,000 per week (132). Although they never made that much again, they remained successful overall, earning \$1,000 to \$3,500 per week to average around \$75,000 per year through the 1940s (318). If nothing else, the twins worked hard. The final two decades of Daisy and Violet’s lives, however, were spent mostly out of the spotlight. They opened a snack bar in Florida briefly, which sources speculate local businesses boycotted, lest the area

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<sup>49</sup> Other sources claim that Harold Estep was gay. In the film *Bound by Flesh*, Camille Rosengren, Daisy and Violet’s goddaughter, states, “They were attracted to gay men. There was some advantage to that.”

become known as being hospitable to “freaks.” When it closed, the twins went back on the road with *Chained for Life* and, sometimes, Drive-In revivals of *Freaks*. Eventually a promoter stranded them at a Drive-In in North Carolina.<sup>50</sup> Locals took pity on the twins, and they made their way to Charlotte, where they lived the rest of their lives working as grocery clerks. They became reclusive in their old age, staying away from press and performances. In 1968, Daisy contracted the Hong Kong flu, which Violet eventually caught. Daisy died sometime between December 31, 1968, and January 2, 1969, and the twins were found dead, lying across a heating grate, in their home on January 4, 1969. Since Daisy’s body had already started decomposing, examiners deduced that she died two to four days prior to Violet. When they died, they had less than \$5,000 in savings. The twins died humbly, if not horrifically; little is more terrifying than imagining carrying a dead twin around on your person for as many as four days while waiting to die yourself.

### **Daisy and Violet in the Context of Conjoined Twins and Representations**

Looking at Daisy and Violet’s histories and representations in relationship to Chang and Eng Bunker and Millie-Christine McKoy provides thought-provoking insight into how the twins were treated in comparison, where their representations overlapped or diverged, and why. While Millie-Christine’s image followed a similar trajectory as Chang and Eng’s from the exotic to the aggrandized, Millie-Christine’s medical representations have the most relevance to contemporary images, because they portend how medical documentaries and television shows would approach conjoined bodies over

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<sup>50</sup> Reports vary on if they were promoting *Chained for Life*, *Freaks*, or a double feature including both.

one hundred years later.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, although Daisy and Violet's life histories diverge somewhat significantly from both other sets of twins, their filmic representations still resonate when looked at in relationship to contemporary films and television shows about conjoined twins. However, the Hiltons suffered from surprising inequities in treatment when compared with the other twins, and it is notable that they attempted to use their publicity materials to address some of these situations. The Hiltons' blurring of lines between fact and fiction, and things like legitimate and exaggerated abuse, in addition to the incorporation of titillating language about being conjoined in general went further than most. While many performers did this to some extent, the Hiltons openly discussed things like love affairs, yet the information with which they went public is unpredictable, which contributed to their inability to create a coherent, positive star image after their emancipation. For example, they never openly talked to the press about their affair with Bill Oliver even though it was public knowledge because of the media coverage it received. They did talk openly about their relationships with Jim Moore and Harold Estep, but they never admitted that either of these were publicity stunt marriages. Some men were fair game for the press, others were not, and lies peppered their biographies regardless of whether or not the truth was common knowledge. They deliberately tried to elicit sympathy from readers, but while accomplishing that, they became seen as somewhat incompetent or senseless, and not as charismatic musicians who could draw crowds and charm the masses.

Far more publicity images exist for Daisy and Violet than the other two sets of twins, in part because photography became less expensive and more widespread during

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<sup>51</sup> This idea is explored in Chapter Four.

the 1900s than it had been in the 1800s. Daisy and Violet's photos by and large feature only the two of them until they reached their late teens, and most of the images accentuate their cuteness, innocence, and talent through costuming and music-oriented props. Early photocard, taken from three weeks old, show the girls already beginning to be displayed in the aggrandized mode though mostly separated from family. In one, a stern-looking white woman (presumably Mary Hilton) holds the girls. The twins wear long, classic white baby gowns, not unlike those Millie-Christine wore in their early illustrations, but the photo does not indicate any affection between the woman and the girls. The twins appear uncomfortable, as one rests centered in the woman's lap while the other, closer to the camera, looks as if she is falling off it. At four-years-old, their images became a little more complicated, as a nude of the girls sitting back to back is imprinted: "Daisy and Violet (4 years old) The pretty grown-together Children, The Modern Siamese Twins." The girls' front legs are crossed inward to cover their genitals. The twins are not stretched apart to emphasize their connection, as Chang and Eng sometimes were in their younger illustrations. Instead, they simply look like two girls sitting back to back, and the properness of this photo allows it to be titillating but not untoward—an important standard upheld by Mary Hilton and, eventually, Myer Myers. Another photo taken around the same time achieves a similar effect: the girls wear sailor dresses, which are hitched up above their connection, and the placement of dresses shows only their two legs, which look squished together but not particularly abnormal. The dresses again reveal enough to be intriguing without crossing into the obscene. In this photo, a woman of African descent holds the girls. She looks directly into the camera but does not appear confrontational. Including her would have made it easier for Mary to

claim the girls had the best care, replete with a private nanny, regardless of who this woman really was.<sup>52</sup>

As pre-teens and teenagers, Daisy and Violet primarily were portrayed practicing their instruments, sewing, reading, or talking on the phone. These images showcased their talents and “normality,” thus trying to make them performers rather than “freaks.” The Hiltons were photographed once with Edith and Myers in a formal family portrait, but as children, they were featured primarily alone. Their early look did not change much; they wore their hair in long ringlets with oversized bows and always dressed alike. Myers strictly managed this consistency, which to some extent trapped them as ageless performers in a decontextualized and unchanging show business. Photographs after their emancipation, however, included a range of looks and activities like going to the beach or posing with new cars, outfits, or other stars. One particularly beautiful 1932 series by Martin Munkácsi shows the twins engaging in everyday activities like putting on makeup, preparing for a show with their dog, or sitting in a café. In almost every photograph, one twin’s face is obscured, adding a sense of mystery and privacy to the images. When contrasted with their publicity images, which are lighter in general and clearly staged for mass consumption, the Munkácsi photographs feel reserved, as if the viewer is obtaining artful glimpses into a world few penetrate. In these photographs, the twins dress alike, though at this time, they had started wearing different outfits more frequently. Daisy also began bleaching her hair, while Violet dyed hers a darker brown. This visual contrast spoke to their interest in being seen as two people and differentiated from one another, yet it also reinforces the idea that they did not wholly know what their

<sup>52</sup> Interestingly, this photo is used twice in *Bound by Flesh*, the 2012 documentary about the Hiltons, but the woman’s face is cropped from the photo both times, thus dehumanizing her and reducing her to a disembodied prop.



public persona was later in their lives, or how to craft it in a coherent way.<sup>53</sup> They simply played different versions of themselves for the camera.

Robert Bogdan explains that some “freaks” exhibited in the aggrandized mode began to blur the line between reality and performance, in part because their lives occasionally overlapped with the high-class status they assumed onstage. Daisy and Violet, for example, seemed to believe that crowds would continue to love them and their act forever. Bogdan explains that “high aggrandized attractions” were additionally haunted by the notion that “People saw them as caricatures of elite adults, as freaks first and performers second. High aggrandized exhibits may have developed ways of insulating themselves from this view, but it remained their constant plague” (175). Daisy and Violet actively engaged with distancing themselves from the notion that they were “freaks” through their promotional materials—first via Myers and then on their own.<sup>54</sup> Not only were their talents privileged, but the brochures also blatantly said things like, “‘Siamese Twins’ are in no sense ‘freak’ creatures” (“Souvenir and Life Story” 4), and:

In being the only “Siamese Twins” alive today,<sup>55</sup> an enormous interest is attracted to their vaudeville appearance, yet the countless admirers of these two charming and talented eighteen-year-old girls find in their presentation more than a curiosity or “freak” attraction. There is an

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<sup>53</sup> In the book *Vaudeville, Old & New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America*, author Frank Cullen states that Daisy and Violet got their hair cut shorter earlier in their careers after they showed Edith a negative review of their show that said they had outgrown their little-girl images and hairstyles (511). His account aligns this occurrence with their demand for their own bedroom.

<sup>54</sup> Amy Fulkerson suggests that Myers deliberately kept the twins away from other performers so they would not be associated with “freaks” (*Bound by Flesh*).

<sup>55</sup> They were not the only conjoined twins alive, and they knew this. This exaggeration helped augment their claims to uniqueness.

offering of genuine talent and entertainment—in music, song and dance.

(“Advance Campaign” 17)

The twins also name-dropped friends and former colleagues like Harry Houdini, Bob Hope, George Burns, and Gracie Allen in their publicity materials, but press rarely discussed their musical achievements or even their memories of the vaudeville circuit. Once free of Myers, Daisy and Violet wanted to shed their innocent personas. They smoked and drank, and they were photographed for, or mentioned in, celebrity gossip columns often for attending parties. Not surprisingly, the press and public were less kind to this type of celebrity. Articles of substance ended after their affair with Bill Oliver and their emancipation proceedings, and although the twins tried to appropriate the deliberateness of Myers’ engagement of the press and how he used it to maintain their image as youthful starlets overcoming the odds, they either did not understand that conjoined flappers would alienate some audiences previously drawn to them, or they never fully mastered manipulating the press into bolstering the public image they wanted to promote. They nevertheless continued trying to abolish the idea that their popularity was based on “freakishness,” but they seemed confused by, and unprepared for, their poverty later in their lives rather than fearful they were no longer sought after performers. This may have been a side effect of being so sheltered under Myers’ management; they never considered the reality of celebrity, its fleeting nature, or its effect on those whose popularity does not endure.<sup>56</sup> As such, they were most successful in presenting themselves as victims of circumstance, but outside of surviving a series of personal

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<sup>56</sup> James Taylor, of James Taylor’s “Shocked and Amazed!” On and Off the Midway, states that the Hiltons were completely out of touch in their elder years. He said they not only were disconnected from entertainment trends, but they did not even understand that automobiles had replaced train travel throughout the United States (*Bound by Flesh*).

dramas, they never returned to a cohesive aggrandized presentation that suggested they successfully overcame and rose above these situations.

An example of how the Hiltons presented themselves as victims to absolve themselves of consequences from untoward situations can be found in the “Private Life of the Siamese Twins,” a slightly edited version of which later became their biography “Intimate Loves and Lives of the Hilton Sisters World Famous Siamese Twins.”<sup>57</sup> This biography was written to return the twins to public favor after their publicity stunt marriage to Jim Moore, and it portrays the twins and their morals as casualties of a life outside of their control. In retelling the story about how they tried to escape at Mary Hilton’s funeral, they say they had only taken a few steps when Myers caught them:

“You girls belong to us now! ... Auntie [Mary Hilton] left you to us—you and her jewelry and furniture is ours! Do you understand?” [Myers said] He waved a paper in [the twins] faces.

Willed as an old ring or chair! It couldn’t be! While I, Daisy, protested, I, Violet, kept crying. It couldn’t be...yet it was. We had to work as hard—and the only privacy we were to have was in our minds. Our new owners slept in the same room with us. We were never out of their sight! (II: 17)

They highlight Myers’ poor treatment of the twins and how they felt like objects but also mention that he kept them constantly under someone’s supervision. Another comment

<sup>57</sup> The “Private Life of the Siamese Twins” was a six-part series of feature stories in *The American Weekly* published in 1944. The Hiltons reprinted this series, with very minor revisions, and repackaged it as a souvenir biography, “Intimate Loves and Lives of the Hilton Sisters World Famous Siamese Twins.” Not only is some of the biography based on exaggeration, parts of it are flat out lies. For example, it claims their mother, “Kate Hilton,” married their father, “Captain Hilton,” a Texan who died in 1916 while fighting in WWI (I: 17). Their mother, the British Kate Skinner, never married a Captain Hilton. These lies cohere with their aggrandized stage show but they compromise the truthfulness of their biography as fact-based history.

about their isolation from an earlier newspaper story is included: “We were not allowed to have friends, but Edith, Auntie’s daughter, received her beau in our crowded room while we were appearing with a circus in Australia” (II: 17). These comments not only suggest the inequities of their situation—Edith could have visitors but they could not—but it further suggests that Edith and Myers may have had sexual relations while sharing a room with the twins. The twins at the time of publication (1944) had a vested interest in clearing their names after being implicated not only in their stunt marriage to Jim Moore but also in the Bill Oliver scandal as well as other marriage attempts and public affairs. Incriminating Edith and Myers for raising them without clearly established sexual boundaries places blame elsewhere for their own controversial behavior, a trend they would use throughout their careers. During their emancipation trail, for example, the Oliver scandal eventually was overshadowed by the tale of two sweet, abused young women who wanted to make their own way in the world. The Hiltons would utilize something akin to this pattern for the rest of their lives; the press would pick up on a romance (often presented to them by the Hiltons), and when it failed, it was characterized as a publicity stunt until the Hiltons went public with a tale of persecution. After breaking from Myers, they never created a second cohesive entertainment identity for the press to latch on to, and in continually representing themselves as victims, they started to diminish any remnants of their aggrandized images. Instead of being performers the masses could look up to, they became objects of pity, which lead to dwindling interest in their careers. In short, they became not only “freaks,” but also “has beens.”

It is additionally difficult to fathom that the Hiltons did not have more expansive legal rights than Chang and Eng. However, whether or not Daisy and Violet Hilton

should be allowed to marry, and if they should be considered one or two people, fueled ambivalent discussions in their promotional materials throughout their lives, which may have affected the legal rights afforded them. Confusing rhetoric in their souvenir booklet tows the line between talking about the twins as one and/or two, and this intentional ambiguity helped maintain interest in the twins. The questions about shared sensations, especially during intimate moments, potentially negatively affected their ability to get married. For people like conjoined twins, publicity materials were basically the only information circulating about them, so their press had the ability to influence their lived realities offstage. While William Pancoast's medical report indicates that intellectuals contemplated the moral ramifications of conjoined twin marriage—Millie-Christine's specifically—nothing like this existed for the Hiltons, and no questions outside of mainstream disability rights were being raised or discussed. As such, critical distance between manipulative publicity pieces did not exist. The fact that their “freak” and private personas were one and the same as far as anyone knew potentially put the Hiltons in the place of accidentally contributing to their own mistreatment unbeknownst to them.

An example of this contradictory rhetoric can be found in the Hiltons' “Souvenir and Life Story,” which was published when they were around twenty-years-old and still managed by Myers. Questions are posed asking if the twins are “separate individuals incompletely fused or ... an incompletely divided single individual? ... two persons partly joined or one person partly separated?” (4). The twins are explained as being of a “single origin,” with the clarification that all conjoined twins originally were one egg that incompletely separated (4). Five paragraphs later, the twins “really are two personalities,” only “closer than any other pair of sisters or any other identical twins” (5).

They are called “nearly alike as it is possible for any two humans beings to be” due to their similar life experiences, yet “different paths in life have made some differences” (5). This particular pamphlet goes back and forth nearly a dozen times. Biologically, the brochure describes them as having one body with different nervous systems and mostly individual senses, except where prolonged stimulus is involved. However, shared sensations may not be “communicated through the nerves at all, but may be due to prolonged inactivity lying besides the sufferer [if one is sick] or to suggestion” (7). The language tends toward the innocuous, including afflictions like headaches or sensations like people touching the women’s arms. However, the allusions to bedroom activities would have been interpreted other ways though obliquely enough to make them seem unintentional. “Prolonged inactivity” while lying beside “the sufferer” could be seen as explaining what occurs when one woman was having sex while the other was not. Daisy and Violet possessed separate vaginas, unlike Millie-Christine, so sex with the Hiltons would have been less like having sex with two people at the same time and more like having sex with one person while another was present. Nevertheless, this situation makes it difficult to define if sex with conjoined twins involves being intimate with one or two people and complicates legal judgments, and the fact that Daisy and Violet played with these ideas intentionally may have complicated others’ understandings of conjoined twins, identity, and individuality.

The same biographical pamphlet does its best to describe the twins as “normal” young women with traditionally feminine goals of finding a life partner and getting married. Under the subheading “Siamese Twins Admit that Physical Bondage has Variety of Limitations in Social Life,” the author stresses the “naturalness” of women’s

thoughts turning to marriage at a certain age, indeed calling it “human nature.” One of the only times the women are purportedly quoted in the brochure is where women’s rights and roles are concerned. Violet says, “We do not care much for women in business, in offices. We believe in the so-called bromide that ‘woman’s place is in the home’ and, of course, we are ‘kidded’ a lot about it” (13). Violet continues, “we believe that the career of every woman is marriage, or should be. It seems to us that Nature meant the race to go on . . . . We seem to feel that a woman who puts marriage behind her for the sake of a business or artistic career is not doing her allotted task” (13). Myers likely wrote this brochure, but having these ideas presented as quotes—especially in a piece that did not rely heavily on quotes—places additional emphasis on them. In keeping with Myers’ stringent control over the twins’ images as innocents, he also would not have wanted them to be seen as feminists, civil rights advocates, or troublemakers in general. However, throughout the ideas oscillate between what the twins might or might not be able to expect from romantic relationships. For example, Violet is quoted as saying, “we have never discussed marriage as applied to ourselves,” and immediately follows with, “We have thought of it . . . and we have talked it over seriously and sensibly with each other time after time” (13). The brochure ends on a somewhat sad note, which is unusual for aggrandized performers. It suggests Violet, at least, has resigned herself not to pursue romance: “We have thought of love coming to one of us some day and we have solved the problem in advance. Perhaps, it is better to say that it was solved for us at birth. At best, love can only complicate the business of living for us, and possibly bring us unhappiness” (13). The brochure ends with another “quote” from Violet: “In discussing marriage we feel that we are merely spectators and should be permitted the

license to talk freely of it without our own relation to it being brought in” (14).

Distancing the twins from marriage was a way for Myers to dissociate them from ideas of sexuality and procreation, perhaps following in the footsteps of Millie-Christine, yet the pamphlet exudes a sadness that portends Daisy and Violet’s eventual dealings with men.

The reasons Daisy and Violet initially were denied marriage licenses remain unclear, though it seems rooted in sexism. It was more difficult for judges to come to terms with the idea of two women having intercourse with one man, especially if the judge was unclear on how the twins’ were conjoined in their intimate areas. Presumably the way in which male and female reproductive organs are formed factored in as well, and since male organs are external, it would have been more like male conjoined twins were having sex with just one person. For example, when Chang and Eng married, objections to the marriage did not stem from their conjoinment, but rather from their race.<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, even though Maurice Lambert and Violet filed for a marriage license in earnest at first, after they were denied one in several states, that situation turned into a publicity event, which then fueled the fire to deny them licenses. However, Allison Pingree explains that since Daisy and Violet successfully worked outside of the home and were each others’ “soul mates,” their self-sufficient and doubly female presence posed a

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<sup>58</sup> Chang and Eng married white women, sisters Sarah and Adelaide Yates, in 1843. David and Nancy Yates, Sarah and Adelaide’s parents, initially forbade the marriage, but after threats of elopement, they hosted the wedding. Initial objections to the marriage had less to do with the twins’ conjoining band and more to do with skin color. Until 1868, North Carolina enforced an “Act Concerning Marriages” that required a guarantee that there were no legal obstacles to the proposed marriage. One such obstacle might be bigamy, but the women were not found to be committing bigamy by marrying conjoined brothers. Also included in the Act was language prohibiting the marriage of a “free white” to “a person of Indian, Negro, mustee, or mulatto blood down to the third generation” (Wallace and Wallace 178). Since Chang and Eng were Chinese, and since North Carolina’s laws had not specifically included people of Chinese descent, the state allowed the marriages. Had Chang and Eng tried to marry white women later in the 1800s, say in the 1860s when anti-Chinese sentiment increased dramatically in the United States due to the influx of Chinese immigrant laborers, Chang and Eng likely would have faced harsher judgment—socially and legally. As it happened, they encountered only minor legal problems obtaining their marriage licenses.



threat to patriarchal values. Daisy and Violet additionally embodied the idea of a “companionate marriage” in which women were seen as more socially equal and sexually engaged (175-176). This is illustrated primarily in the comfort with which the twins spoke to the press about their affairs with men and how they then incorporated these tales into their own biographical pamphlets, but it also is reinforced through photographs and illustrations in which men constantly surround or touch Daisy and Violet. Later biographical articles also become more interested in the assertion of rights. Since Myers no longer would have been in charge of their press, this move seems logical and indicates how they attempted to use the press to advocate for themselves. In the “Private Life of the Siamese Twins,” Violet says, “I have a right to love and marriage, just as my sister has. We have always longed to have homes and husbands and simple lives others experience” (I: 16). To be fair, she discredits herself with her follow up lie about her happiness during her publicity-stunt wedding: “I looked over the crowd and pulled my wedding veil over my face to hide my excited tears—but Daisy was convulsed with mirth” (I: 16).<sup>59</sup> The twins never fully came clean about this publicity stunt, or how it damaged their careers. Instead, the marriage was dramatized.<sup>60</sup> However, there nevertheless is a clear declaration of what they should and should not be able to have: “I

<sup>59</sup> Some reports of the Cotton Bowl wedding say Daisy giggled her way through the show, so this may not have been an exaggeration.

<sup>60</sup> Overall, this biography is full of exaggerations and fallacies. Both women candidly discuss several love affairs and note that these amorous relationships began before their “Souvenir and Life Story” brochure had been printed. However, it includes an elaborate cover up for the Bill Oliver scandal, blames several former lovers for not having the fortitude to marry conjoined twins, uses of the word “slavery” to describe their lives with Myers very freely, and recounts an unverified story about a purported death threat. Additionally, the structure of the piece implies that their publicity-stunt marriage re-started their careers: “the stunt paid off. We went to Hollywood and made several films” (VI: 18). However, *Freaks* had been made prior to the Cotton Bowl marriage, and *Chained for Life* was made more than five years after this piece was written. At this time, the Hiltons were interested in self-preservation at any cost, so they rearranged and exaggerated events to create a narrative of success in the fact of victimization.

have a right.” A man marrying into this kind of situation would put himself into a “two against one” scenario (180), and since patriarchal marital structures stand no chance when men are outnumbered in their own homes, Daisy and Violet posed myriad threats to traditional notions of marriage. In this way, a legal decision allowing Daisy or Violet to marry would have been about more than just sexuality, morality, or decency. It would have been an opening in the restructuring of marriage—a legal endorsement for the move from the Victorian marriage to the companionate one, or even a case for non-traditional familial structures involving numerous people. The coupling of the sensational with the menace the twins’ relationships could cause to conventional configurations of marriage surely affected their legal fight to marry in negative, if not insurmountable, ways.

Not only were the Hiltons disallowed the marriage rights afforded Chang and Eng, but they also were victims to a form of slavery for their first twenty-three years—and long after slavery was abolished in the United States. In many ways, Daisy and Violet’s situation shared similarities with Millie-Christine’s, who were born into slavery, sold from one family (the McKays) to another (the Smiths) early in their lives, and managed beyond their control until slavery was abolished. Millie-Christine, however, reentered into a business partnership with the Smith family for the entirety of their careers. Although the particulars of the agreement remain contentious, Millie-Christine seem to have gained more autonomy over their performances, finances, and lives in general, but they had the input of their family as well as their managers to balance each other. It is unclear whose desires weighed most heavily on decisions, but having three sets of invested parties indicates that negotiations would have taken place, since the twins financially supported all of them. This is in contrast to Daisy and Violet, whose “family”

were their managers. Their biographies and publicity materials suggest that they had no other close friends to speak of. If the Hiltons had true family connections, or even friends in show business willing to advocate for them, their situation may have been different. However, they were isolated from interpersonal relationships throughout the first two decades of their lives, though adored on stage, thus leading to a situation where the dominant source of love they received was from spectators while they performed. This surely lead to a confusing reality for the twins, and it makes sense that they would engage with celebrity as their reality, because it was the only non-abusive experience or “love” they knew for the first twenty years of their lives.

Daisy and Violet’s lives also present a contrast to Millie-Christine’s and Chang and Eng’s, who were able to segregate their performances from their personal lives when so desired, and combine them when useful to attain success in both. Chang and Eng left the stage to become farmers as soon as they could, thus being able to use their performances as an economic back-up plan. They also created their own community in North Carolina with their extended families, and they assimilated by adopting “white” American values like owning slaves. Millie-Christine maintained ties with their community as well, eventually helping their family purchase land and nearby African Americans attend school, and they consistently challenged stereotypes of African Americans through their informed discussions with spectators while on tour. Their success was bolstered by their complete disavowal of romantic inclinations; they simply gave the press nothing to engage with in that area, which helped them maintain cohesive images of grace, purity, kindness, and intelligence. Daisy and Violet, however, were never able to overcome being “freaks.” They engaged the press in their personal lives in

ways that seemed to mimic what Myers had successfully done earlier in their careers, but they never put forth a new star image for the public to latch on to other than one of victimization at the hands of numerous men. The strategy backfired as they became valued less for their talents and pitied more because of their outlandish love affairs. Though they managed what they would and would not say to the press—they never admitted being romantically involved with Bill Oliver, did not discuss stripping or the film *Freaks*, and never talked about the child Daisy gave up for adoption—they nevertheless overestimated the public’s admiration for them, and they died impoverished and forgotten. Theirs is not necessarily a unique tale for “freak” performers, but it indicates the complexity of being able to leave the “freak” identity onstage, and the legal differences those with anomalous bodies face. Even when compared with other conjoined twins, unpredictable inequities exist that influence the relationship between performance, representation, person, and persona.

### ***Freaks and Chained for Life: Conjoined Twins hit the Big Screen***

Although the Hiltons considered their forays into filmmaking failures during their lifetimes, their roles in *Freaks* and *Chained for Life* nevertheless opened up the fictional film world for conjoined twins. Despite allegations of exploitation, *Freaks* remains more receptive to the possibility of limitless configurations of domestic lifestyles, including active sex lives, for people with non-normative bodies. Furthermore, Daisy and Violet are not part of the mutilation sequences and, therefore, engage only in the domestic aspects of the film. They are two conjoined women trying to make marriages work on the circus backlot, not killers in any sense in this narrative. *Freaks* does not suggest that

conjoined twins need to be separated in order for relationships to work, in fact it molds its mise-en-scene to suit those with non-normative bodies, and it also does not ethically question new romantic configurations that suit affairs involving more than just two people. Most conjoined twin films that came after *Freaks* do just the opposite: they reserve workable relationships for conjoined twins who have been separated and avoid female conjoined sexuality almost entirely. *Chained for Life*, the twins' second and last film, is loosely based on Daisy and Violet's lives and attempts to answer the question of whether or not both twins should receive the death penalty if one is a murderer. However, romance is the focal point of the film, which puts Dorothy and Vivian Hamilton (the roles the twins play) at the center of a love triangle/rectangle involving Vivian's betrothed-for-hire and his girlfriend. Although the film flopped, the ways in which it approaches conjoined twins remains influential to contemporary films, their narratives, and the style in which they are shot. The film's suggestion that separation is the only way Vivian can achieve romantic fulfillment gets picked up by numerous later narratives, thus effectively shutting out notions that still-conjoined twins can have fulfilling lives, sexually or otherwise.

With a running time of an hour, a plot that can be boiled down to a few sentences, and a cast where the people who do not have all of their body parts outnumber those who do, it is difficult to argue that Tod Browning's *Freaks* (1932) is not simply a perverse and voyeuristic look at "living monstrosities" with no real point. Indeed, many viewers regard the film as nothing more than an anomalous movie about sideshow "freaks" who mutilate people, from a director with questionable taste. The complicated history of *Freaks* began when Harry Earles, who acted in Browning's *The Unholy Three*,

approached him with the short story “Spurs,” by Tod Robbins. In “Spurs,” a dwarf punishes his normative-bodied wife by riding her piggyback across the country: Earles wanted to play the main character. Browning, who had a personal history in vaudeville, minstrel shows, circuses, and sideshows, utilized these spaces and their tricks in numerous films. The story appealed to him. Browning recently had lost his long-time collaborator Lon Chaney to cancer, and he had been told by MGM production head Irving Thalberg to make a film that “out-horrors *Frankenstein*” (Cahill and Norden 87), so he approached MGM with the project. Based on Browning’s *Dracula* starring Bela Lugosi, the studio approved *Freaks* and gave Browning considerable creative control aside from the script, which underwent a number of rewrites. The resulting story was dramatically different from its source material yet more sympathetic toward the “freaks.” The film focuses on a little person ringmaster, Hans (Harry Earles), who falls in love with the beautiful trapeze artist Cleopatra (Olga Baclanova). Hans, however, is engaged to Frieda (Daisy Earles, Harry Earles’ sister), who rightly believes Cleopatra is using Hans for his fortune. Cleopatra and her lover, strongman Hercules (Henry Victor) poison Hans so they can steal his inheritance, and when the “freaks” discover this plot, they plan and enact their revenge turning Cleopatra into an ostracized sideshow attraction—a mutilated bird girl so incomprehensible she cannot even fit in with the other “freaks.”

The film’s plot, however, is interrupted throughout the first two-thirds of the film by moments documenting sideshow performances and day-to-day life on the backlot, thus resulting in something of a docu-horror film. The film’s documentary style and scenes of sideshow acts force viewers to look at the “freaks” longer than is necessary to progress the film’s narrative, and in a more naturalistic way. These elongated shots of the

performers, who engage in every day activities like drinking a glass of wine with one's feet or rolling a cigarette with one's mouth, accustom the audience to seeing non-normative bodies in a way that is not played for shock value. In doing so, the "freaks" are normalized in what starts to feel more like an expose of the sideshow rather than a horror film. Browning also used Daisy and Violet's real names, as he did with the majority of "freaks" in the film who were not main characters, including Roscoe Ates.<sup>61</sup> This choice further blurs the line between documentary and fiction and added authenticity to this expose of the sideshow.<sup>62</sup> Browning took pride in having cast so many well-known sideshow performers, and he wanted to show them off. The choice blurs the line between the performers' real lives and bodies, and how much of their stories are fictional. For example, many performers did their most famous tricks for the film, but Violet may not have felt Phroso pinch Daisy's arm. However, in acting that way, audiences would have believed it to be true, presenting another instance both of how difficult it is for "freaks" to separate themselves offstage from their on-stage performances and illustrating the complicated time Daisy and Violet had doing so.

Viewers protested the horror of seeing *real* people with non-normative bodies turn violent and take revenge on normative-bodied people (as opposed to actors in makeup, which 1930s viewers did not object to). Legend has it that people ran out of the theater during preview screenings of *Freaks*, and one woman attempted to sue MGM after seeing the film, claiming that she suffered a miscarriage because of it (Skal and

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<sup>61</sup> No other still-connected conjoined twins have starred in fictional films since Daisy and Violet except for Lori and George Schappell.

<sup>62</sup> Notably, even contemporary directors remaking *Freaks* make claims to authenticity by trying to cast at least a few actual sideshow performers, and those with non-normative bodies get the most clout.

Savada 174).<sup>63</sup> The studio recalled and recut all prints of the film to eliminate the mutilation scenes of Cleopatra and Hercules and a few others, including a seal getting fresh with the “Turtle Girl,” which were deemed objectionable by censors and audiences alike. The original film concluded with Hercules performing as a castrato in the sideshow near Cleopatra’s bird-woman pit, and incorporated more prolonged scenes of the violence enacted against them. In the remaining film, however, audiences only see the characters being chased into the forest. The documentary elements of the film, however, create an empathetic portrayal of marginalized people and challenge viewers by forcing them to look for an extended period of time at people who scare them.

Due both to its revenge plot and the backlash it originally caused, people tend to discuss *Freaks* as a film that falls into the “Obsessive Avenger” stereotype of disabled male characters in horror films while overturning the corresponding “Sweet Innocents” model for disabled female characters. “Obsessive Avengers” traditionally turn violent and seek revenge against people who have wronged them, while “Sweet Innocents” are characterized exactly as that—sweet, innocent, and generally pitiable.<sup>64</sup> To make this argument, however, one must lump all of the sideshow performers in *Freaks* together and discuss them in the same way—as eventual outraged killers—and most scholars do this. However, if one splits up the “freaks,” three categories emerge—revenge planners, revenge extractors, and peripherals. Many of the female “freaks” help plan the mutilation,

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<sup>63</sup> Initial responses were perhaps more split than people seem to realize, however. While many critics found the film exploitative, cruel, and worthless, some said that it was engaging, suspenseful, and even endearing. *Freaks* reportedly broke attendance records in Boston, Houston, Cleveland, and Cincinnati (Skal and Savada 175).

<sup>64</sup> For an extended analysis of these archetypes, see *The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies* by Martin F. Norden.



but they do not appear in the violent scenes themselves.<sup>65</sup> The vast majority of revenge exactors are men, and small men at that—they seem chosen for their ability to fit comfortably under a circus wagon, likely for cinematic effect. The Hilton sisters fall into the last category: peripherals. They, like the fire eater, the sword swallower, Madame Tetrallini (the pinheads' caretaker), Roscoe (a stuttering clown and Daisy's husband in the film), and Freida attend the wedding banquet, but none of them plan the revenge or drink from the "loving cup" used to initiate Cleopatra. While Frieda fits into the "sweet innocent" category of images of disability, most of these peripheral characters have so little development that they are hardly worth mentioning. The fire-eater, for example, appears only in The Wedding Feast scene to perform briefly. That Daisy and Violet attend the "The Wedding Feast" at all is basically inconsequential. Although they play saxophones, the twins remain in the background throughout the majority of the scene, and no close-ups of them are included. They do not even chant "Gooble Gobble" with the rest of the table. The twins also are omitted from the planning and enactment of the mutilations. Being on the periphery and absent from the revenge, however, allows an uncorrupted romantic subplot to develop between Daisy, Violet, and Roscoe that interrogates the logistics of marrying a conjoined twin but does not moralize about it. These scenes are noteworthy, because they are the first still-connected conjoined twins featured in a fictional film, and they are the only representations of normalized female conjoined twin sexuality and romantic domesticity. Later films, including the other one

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<sup>65</sup> Schlitzie the Pinhead is one complicated exception to this. Schlitzie was outfitted in dresses for practicality's sake (he had incontinence problems), and he then was referred to as a woman for the rest of his life. In writings about *Freaks*, Schlitzie is almost always referred to as a girl even though he was a man, which is important here because Schlitzie is the main "female" killer in the film.

starring Daisy and Violet, privilege separation and only engage with the idea of conjoined twin sexuality if the twins are male.

Daisy and Violet have less than five minutes of total screen time, and they serve two primary functions. The first is to display how their bodies experience physical sensation.<sup>66</sup> In two different scenes, it is made known that each twin feels the pleasure and pain of the other. This is illustrated through pinching and kissing. In their first scene, Daisy and Violet stroll through the backlot until Phroso, a normative-bodied clown, pops out of his wagon to say hello. Phroso asks Daisy about her wedding the following night, to which Daisy replies, “And I’m thrilled to death.” Violet immediately says, “She thrills at anything.” As they continue to talk, Daisy says that Violet will like her betrothed, Roscoe, “lots after she gets to know him better.” Phroso says, “That reminds me,” and he tells Violet to close her eyes while he pinches Daisy’s arm. Violet identifies what he has done. The scene is both played for laughs—it is funny to think Violet would not know Roscoe as well as Daisy, since they are together all the time—and it also establishes shared sensations between the twins. It is no accident that Phroso is “reminded” of their shared physical sensations when Daisy suggests that Violet and Roscoe will get to know each other better after the wedding night. Additionally, the shots utilized in this exchange show the entirety of the Hiltons’ bodies. They walk into the scene and, while talking to Phroso, are shot from the front. The reverse shot of the

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<sup>66</sup> This film was, in part, created to play with ideas of “freak” sexuality. One of the film’s taglines was, “The Story of the Love Life of the Sideshow.” The bearded lady and living skeleton have a baby, it is implied that a little person has sex with a “big person” trapeze artist, and many of the “freaks” are romantically partnered. The Hiltons’ “sexual” scenes are innocuous enough that MGM retained them in the final cut—unlike the Turtle Girl scene, yet all were deliberately included to foreground the fact that sideshow performers are sexually active people. This is, in part, why people found the film horrifying. It violates notions of normative sexuality and suggests the possibility for a world populated with people who have non-normative bodies.

conversation also features both twins, even if only one is speaking. This not only shows both of their bodies, it also places them both in the conversation throughout. The frame is not trying to trick the audience into seeing just one or the other twin at any time. Instead, it makes space for both of them always.

The scene is interrupted by a shot of Roscoe becoming angry from across the way. The twins turn to face him, and Violet jokes to Phroso, “Her master’s voice is calling.” Violet then walks right up to Roscoe and makes fun of his stutter: “Well, c’mon, c’mon. You’ll have to hurry.” Their confrontation utilizes three shots. In a medium-long three-shot, Violet and Roscoe argue face to face while Daisy half smiles, her body positioned toward the camera. This shot is intercut with two-shots of Daisy and Violet and a close-up of Roscoe, thus visualizing the two-against-one marriage situation Roscoe is entering into. Roscoe eventually says to Violet, “You shut up. I’m marrying your sister, not you,” to which Violet says she has to go and starts their bodies moving out of the frame. This scene inverts stereotypes of squabbling married couples by having the husband-to-be bicker with the ever-present sister-in-law. Interestingly, Daisy is both most present in the frame during the argument—her body faces the front and physically takes up more space than Violet’s—yet her voice is essentially absent. The framing and scene establish not only that their relationship will be a complicated three-person affair, it also foregrounds the presence of both women in the marriage through one’s silent body and the other’s domineering voice. Daisy and Violet’s romances are nevertheless standardized in the film by being heteronormative and placed within day-to-day encounters. While the story foregrounds marital bickering between the twins and Roscoe, it does not condemn the relationship. The film opens up the idea of conjoined

twin marriage for inquiry by asking how marriages might work for these couples, threesomes, or foursomes, and the film's narrative and shot style deliberately does not privilege one position over another but rather interrogates all parties. It chides Roscoe for trying to claim control over his wife and, thereby, his sister-in-law's body, yet it also represents Violet as overbearing. Simultaneously, it illustrates how the twins could be overly present both during domestic and amorous situations and overpowering in what would be normal marital conflicts for singleton couples.

The twins' relationship with Roscoe nods to sexual pleasure but also complicates ideas about ownership of the body in marriage, as Violet continues to have as much control over Daisy and Roscoe's relationship even after their wedding (which is not shown). In their second scene, which takes place in their bedroom, the three prepare for their day. In the larger context of the film, the scene occurs just after the Living Skeleton and the Bearded Lady have had their baby; it is part of a string of scenes about the sex lives of the "freaks." The scene implies that Roscoe lives with the twins, and that he and Violet are having another spat. It opens with a long shot of the twins making the bed. Violet is foregrounded in the frame, and Daisy is asking her not to quarrel with Roscoe. He enters, dressing, just as Violet starts making fun of his stutter.

Roscoe: "I'm the boss of my home."

Violet: "Half of it, you mean."

The two of them continue arguing until Violet demands that he hook up their dress. He complains that he does not want his wife hanging out with the "tramps" Violet runs around with, nor does he want Daisy lying in bed half the day nursing Violet's hangover. This scene provides the best example of how Roscoe and Violet fight for control of

Daisy's body. The blocking makes Daisy essentially invisible, and the dispute seems like lovers bickering, except that the sister-in-law is arguing with the husband over how the (invisible) wife's time should be spent. During this disagreement, Violet again has no qualms about making fun of Roscoe's speech impediment. Roscoe, like the twins, is a peripheral "freak," even though he is a clown who performs with normative-bodied people. Violet uses her ability to move the twins' body and speak without a stutter to exert control over Roscoe and Daisy's relationship. Daisy is noticeably silent, again the third and weakest voice in the marriage.

Allison Pingree argues that these scenes emasculate Roscoe both through Violet's ability to control where his wife goes and how she makes fun of his stutter: "the creators of *Freaks* spell out in no uncertain terms the threatening impotence men could feel when confronted with these joined women" (182).<sup>67</sup> Certainly these scenes illustrate confrontations between Violet and Daisy, but since Violet and Roscoe dominate Daisy in the frame, who is hidden behind or beside Violet throughout, it becomes difficult to argue that this scene is simply about Roscoe's voice in his marriage. Daisy's certainly is the weakest in the scene, which ends with Violet saying she has to go and initiating their exit from the frame. Simultaneously, this scene opens up a conversation about conjoined twin marriages without moralizing about the "right" or "wrongness" of them; they require complex negotiations, and it is noteworthy that both scenes are harmonious until Roscoe enters, at which point the arguments begin, which may support Pingree's assertion that the twins were each other's best life mates, making a marriage with a man untenable. However, Pingree argues that "normalizing narratives" constructed for the twins "mostly

<sup>67</sup> Overall, Pingree's argument is that situations like these in turn show how Daisy and Violet were representative of the larger threat the "New Woman" caused to men during the twins' heyday.

by men” use “the twins’ bond to reaffirm traditional women’s roles” and “transmute them into safer feminine figures” that “contain the chaos that their threatening bodies presented” (177). In other words, they were “symbolic representations of solutions” to the dangers they presented (177). This is difficult to argue in the context of *Freaks*, because the twins constantly engage with the other’s beau, in positive and negative ways, and the film in no way restricts the twins from doing this. They remain actively vocal and sexual in the film, but in being absent from the revenge sequences, they also represent a normalized voice of reason, despite constantly negotiating domestic power in nontraditional ways, in the context of this narrative. Ultimately, the idea of conjoined relationships are not deemed completely undesirable, as later scenes show Daisy and Roscoe both expressing enthusiasm about Violet’s engagement to Mr. Rogers.

In the scene between Violet and her suitor, Mr. Rogers, he visits the twins’ wagon. The scene is shot from basically the same perspective as the scene with Roscoe, though the camera is slightly lower and the scene occurs all in one shot. Rogers proposes to Violet, who accepts, and when they kiss, Daisy puts down her book, closes her eyes, and enjoys the moment as if feeling it through her body. Interestingly, Daisy is the focal point of this scene. Even though Violet and Rogers have a discussion, and Violet is centered in the frame, since she is slightly behind Daisy and less visible. Also, Rogers wears a dark suit and is poorly lit; Daisy, however, wears white and sits just below a lantern. When Rogers leans in to hug Violet, the focus immediately shifts to Daisy because Violet and Rogers blend into the dark background. Whereas Daisy is essentially absent from scenes involving her own marriage, she is noticeably present in her sister’s romance. Again, these marriages rely on a constantly shifting balance of power and

presence, but ultimately they are shifts the film is willing to engage with. In the scene that follows, Roscoe complains that Violet wants to stay up all night reading. The juxtaposition of these two scenes further implies that if Violet is reading, she still experiences their sexual activity through her conjoined body. If Daisy feels pleasure from kissing while reading, Violet will as well.

Roscoe's scenes with the twins foreground his access to Violet's body as well, but also without moralizing about conjoined sexuality. While hooking up the twins' dress, he comments to Violet, "Oh, if it isn't your dress I'm hooking up, it's something else." Though deliberately ambiguous, it is likely their bra he hooks up, which provides another nod to the familiarity Roscoe has with Violet's body. This closeness may explain why she argues with him so intensely over control of it in different ways—through her schedule, who she hangs out with, what she drinks, and Daisy's necessary participation in those things. She has lost privacy of her body, or agreed to make it more public for the sake of her sister's happiness, but she is unwilling to relinquish control of other aspects of her life or to submissively agree to Roscoe's rules. In her essay "Browning. Freak. Woman. Stain," Eugenie Brinkema discusses how "Browning's films work very hard *not* to form a couple" (171). Utilizing Jacques Lacan, she postulates that Browning's three films most associated with the sideshow—*Freaks*, *The Unknown*, and *The Unholy Three*—utilize *amor interruptus* to deliberately thwart not just couples but desire in general. This seems true, as Browning was a dark filmmaker who often prevented happy endings, opting instead for ominous turns representing sinister parts of the human psyche. However, in these films, most of the couples are interrupted via extreme circumstances resulting in death or dismemberment, so this argument best applies to Hans, Cleopatra,

and Hercules (and it is notable that Hans' happy reunion with Frieda is only included as a result of later studio interference in the film). However, nothing horrific happens to Daisy, Violet, or their suitors in *Freaks*. Oddly, it is romantic coupling that makes the twins *not* form a couple, which suggests that their marriages create the potential horror for singletons through the film's allowance of such transgressive relationships. Again, by remaining on the periphery of the violence, the twins and their suitors open up dialog about what a conjoined relationship might look like. *Freaks* does not punish the twins for doing so, though the idea seems challenging for spectators who have difficulty engaging with these ideas outside of the realm of horror.

Throughout the film, the camera additionally plays with spacing to make normative-bodied people seem too big for their carnival wagon homes, while the sideshow performers fit spaces more appropriately. Joan Hawkins points out that Cleopatra "appears here as somehow too large" and is referred to with language that suggests she outsizes or does not fit with this world: she is the "most beautiful big woman" Hans has met and referred to as a "big horse" independently (267). Furthermore, when in Hans' wagon, she has to hunch over substantially to fit. While Hawkins argues that this staging simply reinforces the idea that Cleopatra is the monstrosity, it indicates a cinematic world built for non-normative bodied people—a world in which their comfort and fit is privileged over that of the "big" or even singleton human. For example, in the mutilation sequence, the bodies that exact revenge are small and able to fit under wagons. In the aforementioned bedroom sequence with Daisy, Violet, and Roscoe, the twins fill the space appropriately—they have room to move comfortably, and until Roscoe enters, the bed does not seem too small. However, upon



Roscoe's arrival, the camera moves in to tighten the framing, creating a more claustrophobic sense of space while calling attention to the inadequacy of the bed for three bodies. Since the space was established as suitable, and thereby "normal," for Daisy and Violet before Roscoe entered, he becomes the odd man out—the singleton who does not fit this world made to accommodate conjoined twins. This is not to say no singleton could occupy the same space, but in the cinematic world of *Freaks*, spaces are established first for non-normative people, while "big people" who enter later tend to disrupt those spaces. Roscoe sits or hunches over for the majority of the scene, and Daisy and Violet eventually leave him there, stuttering, and ultimately unable to "control" his wife or her sister. The cause of his anger is elucidated several scenes later when he complains to Phroso that Violet wants to stay up all night reading. Phroso's reaction—a knowing look and giggle—imply that Roscoe wants Violet to fall asleep so that Roscoe and Daisy can have sex. He desires more absence from her, or perhaps more participation, neither of which is likely to occur. The idea of conjoined twins marrying seems comical but also routine; they will bicker like "normal" folks and complain about things like not having enough alone time. Through scenes like these, and the way in which the film is narratively and physically constructed, *Freaks* presents a complicated look at conjoined twins and marriage: too many voices are present in not enough space. However, the film does not give up on the idea of conjoined marriage. In the world of Browning's films, these scenes are surprisingly optimistic, as love in his world often is tragic and unattainable, and while that might seem to be the case here too, these scenes represent complicated but not particularly dire love affairs.

The film returns to Daisy, Violet, and Rogers one last time, and they now stand in the twins' wagon. Rogers is again in shadow, and the framing is such that the three of them fill the space. However, the camera pans slightly to the right to make room for Roscoe's entrance. When it does, Daisy and Violet become the center of the frame, squeezing out Roscoe whose side and back are to the camera. The room feels cramped and claustrophobic. However, Roscoe congratulates Rogers on the engagement, and in a bit of comedy, both men invite the other to come visit sometime, yet it seems impossible that the four of them could share this cramped space or small bed. Again, the normative-bodied people fill the space *too much*, not the conjoined twins. While this scene echoes the twins' desires for normalized marriages, it also suggests that relationship configurations made with two people in mind might not be suitable for all people. Marriage in this situation needs to be re-theorized in order to account for the four people involved in it and the slippage between roles of "wife" and "sister-in-law." The horror in *Freaks* as it pertains to Daisy, Violet, and Roscoe, then, seems to be gendered. From Roscoe's perspective, it might be the horror of being married to two women, thus losing jurisdiction over one's home, relationship, and sex life. From what we see in the film, Violet dictates many of Roscoe and Daisy's activities, from morning to late night. Alternately, Violet's horror stems from having to be married, for all intents and purposes, to someone she does not like and losing autonomy over her body. Issues of ownership and control are actively negotiated and, it seems, never settled. The too-small bed sits quietly, but not benignly, behind these exchanges, punctuating them all. However, the film gives all of these characters happy endings, in that Mr. Rogers exits the film on an optimistic note—he is in love and getting married—and Roscoe and the twins attend (and

leave) The Wedding Banquet together, unscathed by the shenanigans taking place. This story world does not judge on the basis of marriage between one man and one woman. In fact, it seems open to at least entertaining how it all might work, and it encourages spectators to think beyond rigid understandings of traditional social institutions or the desire to make all bodies fit one design, including that of a two-person marriage or bedroom.<sup>68</sup> One might also re-theorize understandings of private and public space, and who fits those spaces appropriately, since conjoined marriages complicate those ideas as well. *Freaks* implies that there is a world built for non-normative bodied people, both physically and politically, if viewers start looking differently at its characters and their individual stories.

Although the Hiltons distanced themselves from *Freaks* and realized that film may not be the best way to further their careers, they nevertheless were entranced by the idea of starring in a film all about their lives, and by the time they made *Chained for Life*, they had many more experiences to draw on. Though both films blur the line between fiction and documentary or biopic, *Chained for Life* undeniably reinforces singleton ideas about happiness rather than engaging with the complexity of conjoined relationships. Indeed it uses the film format to visually separate the twins and begins a history of conjoined twin films that insist singleton bodies are the key to human and romantic fulfillment. Made in 1952, *Chained for Life* is a low-budget exploitation film of a publicity stunt marriage gone wrong directed by Harry L. Fraser. Fraser had written and directed dozens of B-movies from the 1920s through the 1940s, and he had a reputation for making films on time and under budget. However, *Chained for Life* as a creative

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<sup>68</sup> Even Hans' marriage in *Freaks* never only involves two people, and he is the main character. His relationship always actively includes Cleopatra, Hercules, and Frieda—and vice-versa.

exercise belonged as much to its producer and stars; Fraser was merely a person who helped put the pieces together. Producer George Moskov thought he had struck gold when he came up with the idea to do a movie loosely based on Daisy and Violet. He convinced them that the film would bring in substantial profits and propel them back into the limelight. He also persuaded them to bankroll the film—a move that put them in poverty for the rest of their lives. The twins took an active role in the film’s production, including making script changes and helping direct (though it is speculated that the film’s budget allowed for only one or two takes most of the time). Fraser claims that Daisy and Violet fired a number of directors before he got the job, because the other directors did not know much about vaudeville, while he had been a vaudeville comedian (Jensen 330 – 331). Indeed the film resembles vaudeville in that it often feels like filmed theater. However, or perhaps in contrast to its desired vaudeville aesthetic, the film uses staging and editing to separate the twins physically, thus reinforcing normative ideas that they would be better suited for the world if they occupied singleton bodies. The film illustrates the trouble their bodies cause romantically and legally, as both twins must go on trial because one killed a man. *Chained for Life* even indulges in a separation dream. The film unquestionably privileges the singleton spectator through its moralizing about the difficulty of being conjoined, its visual attempts to separate the twins’ bodies, and its message that the guilty party must go free so as not to imprison the innocent. Even though *Chained for Life* is so boring it is nearly unwatchable, the way in which it handles its material became much more common in films and television shows in later decades, thus making it in some ways more influential than *Freaks*.

*Chained for Life* features Daisy and Violet as Dorothy and Vivian Hamilton, aging conjoined twins whose vaudeville shows are starting to lose their crowds. Their manager dreams up a publicity stunt to increase revenue: Dorothy will become engaged to pistolero Andre Pariseau (Mario Laval), another performer in their show. Vivian is skeptical of Andre in general (she mentions a previous “mental act” gone wrong), but he is nevertheless paid \$100 per week to act in love with Dorothy. Dorothy actually starts to fall in love with Andre, much to the chagrin of both Vivian and Renee (Patricia Wright), Andre’s girlfriend and stage assistant. However, crowds start pouring in, and soon Andre is making \$150 per week while the twins make \$1,500 per week, each. When Andre and Renee realize this, he and Dorothy announce their wedding. Unbeknownst to the twins, the wedding is scheduled to take place on stage immediately following one of their shows, but Andre calls off the marriage one day after the ceremony and asks for an annulment. He still continues traveling and performing with The Hamilton Sisters show, though Dorothy is heartbroken. The twins watch Andre’s act the following day from backstage, and when he rolls his pistol cart toward them, Vivian impulsively grabs one, shoots, and kills him. The twins do not go to jail, however, because the judge feels his job is equally to protect the innocent as to punish the guilty: in this scenario, he says, a higher power will need to judge.

To some extent *Chained for Life* is based on true events, and many provided inspiration for plot points. For example, they were aging vaudeville stars, and they had been denied marriage licenses in twenty-one states, though the film claims twenty-seven. Moreover, Violet had engaged in a publicity stunt marriage that ended in an annulment to a man who traveled and performed with their show. Even the surprise wedding might be

seen as referencing the shock of groom Jim Moore at the Cotton Bowl wedding or the unannounced wedding reception for Daisy and Harold Estep. However, the film does not attempt at any sort of verisimilitude with these events, as opposed to *Freaks*, which aimed to present life on the backlot naturalistically. *Chained for Life* tried highlighting titillating ideas via the murder trial, but it also borrowed plot points from *Freaks*, including the “freak” engagement to the “normal” person who was otherwise romantically involved and solely interested in money. The only original thing the film succeeds at is using framing and editing during key scenes to physically split the twins as a means of strategically presenting them as two separate people.

During a dinner scene wherein Dorothy is meeting Andre and Vivian is meeting Hinkley (Allen Jenkins), their manager, Vivian and Andre immediately begin fighting.<sup>69</sup> When he brags about the crowds they are pulling in, she reminds him that *any* man could take his place. Moments later, Andre realizes how much money the twins make when he sees a dollar amount written in large numbers on their payment envelopes, which Hinkley delivers. Thus begins a series of alternating two-shots. The first includes Dorothy and Andre, and the second Vivian and Hinkley. Each shot is framed so that the audience cannot see any portion of the twin not featured in the shot. These shots not only trick the viewer into observing only one of the two twins (indeed, it is easy to forget that they are conjoined during this sequence), they also underscore both the immediate and larger narrative themes: Dorothy gets paid individually, and separation is an ideal overall. This series ends after Dorothy slips Andre some additional money, and Andre proposes to her. The splitting up of the two-shots makes it narratively plausible that Vivian does not see

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<sup>69</sup> Vivian and Andre’s relationship in *Chained for Life* is very similar to Violet and Roscoe’s in *Freaks*, except that Vivian’s actions are all in the best interest of Dorothy, not herself.

these events. The individual two-shots visually separate the twins as a sort of gag for the audience, but the effect is also one of humanizing the twins. It is easy to forget that they are conjoined. Interestingly, it is obvious that Dorothy is being taken advantage of here, so the narrative implies that she cannot take care of herself, or that being a singleton leaves her more (or differently) vulnerable to exploitation.

Two additional scenes separate the twins. The next is a dream sequence in which Dorothy walks into the garden by herself to be picked up and twirled in circles by Andre. Immediately prior to this scene, Andre sings to Dorothy by phone. Renee is in the background of Andre's apartment, creating another similarity between this film and *Freaks*. *Chained for Life* borrows this plotline of the lover marrying a wealthy "freak" to steal his or her money, and in the Browning film, Cleopatra woos Hans while she is inside her trailer with Hercules and Hans waits outside. Dorothy falls asleep feeling in love and longing for separation. An actress playing her enters the garden (she is only shown from behind and at a distance, but she is obviously taller and thinner than the Hiltons), though two close-ups of Dorothy's face beside and behind a tree are featured. The tree obstructs any view of Vivian so that Dorothy seems alone. When she awakens the following morning, she is angry and ready to be separated, thus resulting in another key scene in which Dorothy and Vivian are visually removed from one another.

The twins remain in bed the next day to have a discussion about being conjoined, Dorothy's love for Andre, and possibly undergoing a separation surgery. During this scene, a shot reverse-shot pattern is used again to separate the women so that each has her own frame for the discussion, but it also makes clear they are talking to each other.

Although Vivian is trying to console Dorothy, Dorothy keeps saying things like "I want

to be free” and “The only way I can be happy is to be alone with the man I love.” When Dorothy mentions the possibility of separation, Vivian invokes language from their biographical pamphlet, stating, “We’ve been prodded and examined since the day we were born,” and she appeals to a story they have heard about two brothers who were separated after one died: the other brother only lived a couple days.<sup>70</sup> Vivian acquiesces to seeing a doctor, and through a series of confusing scenes, they decide not to be separated. In the first, a doctor meets with people, but not the twins, to explain the medical concerns involved with separation surgeries. Then the twins visit an aging, blind doctor in a garden. He examines a twin bud on a plant and encourages them to embrace who they are. Soon after, Dorothy gets married. Soon after that, she gets dumped.

The final scene is which Dorothy and Vivian are framed out of each other’s shots includes the last sequence of vaudeville numbers. Dorothy and Vivian sing onstage, and a close-up of just Vivian is intercut with images of Andre and Renee kissing offstage. Vivian becomes visibly upset, though Dorothy does not see them. When the twins leave the stage, they stay to watch Andre’s act. To see better, they stand behind a stage pole that divides them in half; each twin peers out from the opposite side of the pole. This technique is used to hide the act of killing from Dorothy. Andre pushes his pistol-holding cart toward Vivian, who shoots him, while Dorothy remains innocent. Presumably this was necessary to allow for Dorothy’s freedom at the end of the film, as it makes clear she was not an accomplice and had no clue the murder would occur. However, it also underscores the individual nature of the twins: Vivian has her own motives, desires, and reactions, yet she cannot be held accountable individually. By utilizing this technique of

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<sup>70</sup> This is not a true story but one made up for the script.



separating the twins, the film visually privileges separation in the same way the narrative does. Both imply that conjoinment is confining and miserable, and neither can be happy nor fulfilled living that way. By the end of the movie, conjoinment also is seen as unjust in that it forces judges to “protect the innocent” by allowing guilty twins to walk free.

*Chained for Life* blurs reality and fiction through its use of biographical topics while simultaneously setting in motion a narrative trend for fictional conjoined twin films that privilege separation surgeries as a means to fulfilling lives. Interestingly, in this film, the authenticity of Daisy and Violet’s bodies disallows them this fictional happy ending; even in stories about them that they control, they cannot find love.<sup>71</sup>

The aesthetics of *Chained for Life* work in contrast to *Freaks*, which not only cinematically creates room for conjoined twins but also works to include both twins in shot reverse-shot sequences. *Freaks* implies that the conjoined twins are not too much for the frame but rather that singletons and other “big people” crowd out those with non-normative bodies, and it does not insist upon separation for conjoined twins to envision fulfilling lifestyles. *Chained for Life* makes very clear that conjoined happiness cannot be attained. It deliberately frames conjoined twins out of each other’s shots and key

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<sup>71</sup> *Chained for Life*’s technique of framing the twins out of each other’s shots to create the illusion that they are singled-bodied women opens the recent documentary about the Hiltons, *Bound by Flesh*. The film begins with newsreel footage of Maurice Lambert and Violet talking about their desire to marry. The documentary initially uses graphics of film stock to mask Daisy’s portion of the frame. Eventually the shot widens to reveal her sitting beside Violet. It seems as if the film’s intention is to shock via a big reveal that the woman the audience has been watching is a conjoined twin. However, the cropping makes the reveal demeaning, because Daisy is covered up merely for the sake of a cheap gag. The *Bound by Flesh* title card then appears in a horror/science fiction font, while a rock-and-roll song kicks in. This use of music and design recalls 1950s exploitation films and abruptly interrupts the twins, and the title obviously references *Chained for Life* in its structure and tone. The music and aesthetics are jarring when juxtaposed with the earnest newsreel footage. The documentary utilizes inconsistent style throughout, though, and it does not stick with an exploitation look or feel. It very quickly transitions into Ken Burns-style still image segments with voiceover by Leah Thompson and Nancy Allen. Still, the documentary calls upon *Chained for Life* as a legitimate influence, which perhaps gives it too much credit and undermines the twins who persist in being used as tabloid fodder.

narrative moments and remains influential to contemporary films, their narratives, and the style in which they are shot; the film's insistence on separation prior to romantic fulfillment continues to be reiterated throughout conjoined twin narratives. Furthermore, both films blend the Hiltons' biographical information with exploitation, creating a strange blend of authenticity and misrepresentation, a trend that continues into contemporary film and television shows about conjoined twins, including the documentary about the Hiltons, *Bound by Flesh*. This blend echoes the Hiltons' lives in that their histories and performances were constantly blurred through promotional materials, press, and even contemporary biographies, and it suggests that it may be as difficult now as it was during Daisy and Violet's lives for performing conjoined twins to separate their onstage and offstage roles and their onscreen and offscreen identities.

### Chapter Three: Conjoined Twins in Fictional Film and Television

Daisy and Violet Hilton might be considered the godmothers of conjoined twins in film since they were the first real-life twins to be featured in narrative motion pictures. By starring in Tod Browning's *Freaks* (1932) and *Chained for Life* (1952), they expanded possibilities for conjoined twin narratives, even if neither film was a success upon its release. However, *Freaks* and *Chained for Life* were not the first films about conjoined twins. *The Corsican Brothers* novella by Alexandre Dumas (1844), which is about separated conjoined twins who continue to feel physical sensations through one another despite being raised apart, had been made into a film at least four times prior to *Freaks*.<sup>72</sup> The 1898 short by George Albert Smith is one of the first uses of double exposure in film, but the earliest widely available version is Gregory Ratoff's 1941 film in which Douglas Fairbanks Jr. acts in dual roles playing both brothers. *The Corsican Brothers* has since been remade several times, and as such, it is the most widely recreated "conjoined twin" tale, and the most versatile; it has been adapted as a drama, adventure, comedy, and children's film.<sup>73</sup> Between *The Corsican Brothers* and Daisy and Violet Hilton's film roles, some semblance of a tradition of conjoined twins on film starts to occur within the first few decades of motion pictures.

Unlike *Freaks* and *Chained for Life*, however, many films and television shows associated with conjoined twins, like *The Corsican Brothers*, utilize twins that are not conjoined throughout the narrative. Other films feature conjoined bodies that are not twins. It is helpful, then, to break down "conjoined twin" films into categories as an

<sup>72</sup> Internet information suggests *The Corsican Brothers* was made twice by George Lessey in the 1910s, but this seems likely to be misinformation about a missing film made sometime between 1912 and 1915.

<sup>73</sup> Remakes of *The Corsican Brothers* include Cheech and Chong's *The Corsican Brothers* (though Cheech and Chong are never conjoined nor identical), a children's Good Housekeeping cartoon, and, loosely, *Start the Revolution without Me*.

entry point into analysis, and doing so reveals five primary types.<sup>74</sup> Two categories are central to this study: full-bodied, not separated, conjoined twins, like in *Freaks* or *Chained for Life*, or characters that crossover from the two-headed “monster” category into fully formed conjoined twins, like those in *The Manster*, *The Incredible Two-Headed Transplant*, and *The Thing with Two Heads*.<sup>75</sup> For the sake of succinctness, all of these narratives are English-language and the films or television shows were made in the United States, the United Kingdom, or as a co-production with Hollywood and another country, as in the case of *The Manster*.<sup>76</sup> The human-monster spectrum is blurred in the two-headed “monster” category; most are animals (real or mythical), but when these films involve humans, they typically suggest scientific experiments gone awry. These might be considered “conjoined twin” films not because the humans are twins, but because one human body possesses two heads and, therefore, two personalities

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<sup>74</sup> This chapter does not discuss nonfictional narratives, which are the focus of Chapter Four.

<sup>75</sup> The other three categories of conjoined twins include already-separated conjoined twins, parasitic twins, or conjoined twins as minor characters. The first category generally focused on continued mental or physical connections between twins after separation, and these characters often represent a good/evil binary. Films in this category include *The Corsican Brothers*, *Sisters* (1973, remade in 2006), Nickelodeon’s *Cry Baby Lane* (2000), and, to some extent, *A Zed & Two Noughts* (1986). The *Basket Case* films crossover into this category as well, though one of the separated twins is parasitic and both have evil tendencies. The second category is that of the parasitic twin, which shows up frequently either still attached to, or previously detached from, its host twin and also embodies the good/evil dichotomy. These narratives not only include *Basket Case* (1982) and its sequels but also *The X-Files* episode “Humbug” (1995), and to some extent *The Dark Half* (1993) since a fetus in fetu becomes an author’s killer alter ego. Parasitic twin films tend toward the horror genre and underdeveloped twins usually are more closely affiliated with an indefinable animal than a human. *Basket Case II* (1990) turns this on its head a bit when parasitic twin Belial becomes more “human” once comfortably associating with a larger social group of “freaks,” while Duane, his normative-bodied brother, feels it necessary for the two of them to be reconnected against his brother’s wishes. The third type of conjoined twin film features conjoined twins as minor characters. Sometimes they emphasize a major point, as in *Big Fish* (2003) when the conjoined-twin singers reinforce the main character’s penchant for telling tall tales. Others, including two episodes of *Grey’s Anatomy*—“Don’t Stand so Close to Me” (2006) and “This Magic Moment” (2012)—utilize conjoined twins as minor characters to emphasize points in the larger narrative about singleton characters. Conjoined twins also may add to a film or television show’s atmosphere, as in *The Magic Sword* (1962), *The City of Lost Children* (1995), the single-season HBO show *Carnivale* (2003), or *Hansel & Gretel: Witch Hunters* (2013). In these cases, conjoined twins are not central to the main goals or outcomes of the narratives.

<sup>76</sup> Conjoined twin film and television shows continue to be made in India, South Korea, and Hong Kong, and I assume many more exist beyond those of which I am aware.

constituting two (human) beings, a dualism that speaks to patterns seen in conjoined twin films. These films also play on singleton fears of, or ideas about, real conjoined twins. *The Thing with Two Heads* (1972) and its predecessor, *The Incredible Two-Headed Transplant* (1971), both involve heads being transplanted onto singletons unbeknownst to them, resulting in a conjoined twin of sorts, though one body acts as host to the second head. In *The Manster* (1959), the main character also unknowingly becomes the subject of a scientific experiment, this time to create a new species. He is given a serum that produces a second monster body that eventually extracts itself from its human host, though not without turning the human into a killer.<sup>77</sup> These narratives typify common ways conjoined bodies are used in popular culture and recall not just *Freaks* and *Chained for Life* but also patterns in the lives of real conjoined twins when addressing social issues or negative representations. In *The Incredible Two-Headed Transplant* and *The Manster*, the formerly singleton humans begin to be treated like beasts, which diminishes their humanity and reduces them to specimen. These representations present a through-line from images of conjoined twins like Millie-Christine McKoy and their medical journal images and later nonfictional televisual representations of actual conjoined twins. In *The Incredible Two-Headed Transplant*, a misguided doctor attaches the head of a psychopathic killer/rapist to the body of a kind, strong, and mentally disabled man. Since the experiment's goal is to replace the original head with that of the newly attached one, the "good" half cannot overpower the "bad" half, which now controls the other's body.

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<sup>77</sup> *How to Get Ahead in Advertising* (1989), a comedy, also features a man growing a second head that eventually takes over the host body. However, once the second head develops, it takes over the host head's body very quickly, and thus not much screen time is devoted to the conjoined body. Instead of a scientific experiment gone wrong, instead in this film, the main character's body revolts against the stress of modern life. The anxiety of trying to create a campaign for a pimple cream hysterically manifests itself in the form of a boil on his neck that grows into an alter ego and overtakes his body completely.

In each of these mediated uses, concerns for the humans inside the bodies are compromised in the name of science reflecting a tendency to privilege the body as vessel for experimentation over personhood.

Two-headed “monsters” also often indicate the good/evil binary playing out within bodies for the sake of facilitating discussions of ethnicity, race, and nationality or simply to suggest a multiplicity within people. In literary representations, identical and conjoined twins often illustrate harmony over difference, frequently to present a story of national unity (de Nooy 115). Films in the two-headed monster category disrupt this tendency, thus indicating a break between literary and filmic representations. The good/evil binary frequently corresponds with racial, ethnic, or national identity conflicts as played out in doubled bodies. In opposing one another, they suggest constant negotiations for control of bodies or racial supremacy, often disharmoniously, and usually they end with one “side” triumphing over the other, though not to suggest to unity but rather dominance. In both *The Manster* and *The Thing with Two Heads*, the “good” and “bad” twins represent different sides of political issues. In *The Manster*, the “good” twin falls victim to Asian religion, customs, and women after being injected with a serum that produces his nefarious side. As the evil grows through and takes over his body, the white, American man cannot control his urges, and the racial and political tensions between a post-war United States and Asian customs play out in his body and through his actions. Similarly, *The Thing with Two Heads* features African-American Jack Moss (“Rosey” Greer) as the “good” twin, albeit a man saved from execution by the “bad” half, racist Dr. Maxwell Kirshner (Ray Milland). Kirshner is “bad” precisely because he is racist and otherwise ethically questionable. However, both “good” and “bad” are

complicated in this film: Kirshner initially would seem to be the good guy, since he is the well-respected doctor. Moss, on the other hand, is a convicted murderer, and thus initially presumed to be the “bad” half.<sup>78</sup> Two-headed monsters are more useful in these endeavors than naturally born conjoined twins, because they allow for, say, different races of people to exist within one conjoined body—a possibility that does not exist for real conjoined twins, who are always identical even if not fully developed. Two-headed monsters also start engaging with the possibility that two separate individuals might exist within one body, something that becomes overshadowed by the agreement forced upon them in literary representations. Furthermore, similar approaches are used to “solve” the problem of doubled bodies in these film and television shows, which portends later nonfictional representational approaches as well.

*Twin Falls Idaho* (1999), *Stuck on You* (2003), and *Brothers of the Head* (2005) feature still-conjoined twins as central characters, as does the 2004 “Rose and Raven Rosenberg” episode of the television show *Nip/Tuck*, though all diverge from one another in genre. In each of these films, separation is privileged to varying degrees and reveals not only that *Freaks* is only conjoined twin film that has not mentioned separation but also that *Chained for Life* was the last fictional film in which twins remained conjoined without attempting separation to some degree. The Farrelly brothers’ comedy *Stuck on You* plays conjoinment for laughs. Although the twin characters do get separated, the film represents conjoinment as a life situation that can theoretically work, and the film calls to mind both Chang and Eng Bunker and Daisy and Violet Hilton’s representations.

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<sup>78</sup> *Sisters* also plays out issues of feminism and agency through Danielle and her eventual stand-in sister, investigative reporter Grace Collier. Though not exactly good or evil, the women are both active and transgressive—sexually or professionally—and thus they must be contained by the end of the film. This is achieved through Danielle’s death and Grace’s insanity, which places her back in her mother’s house acting and communicating like a child.

However, being conjoined works best for the twins in *Stuck on You* once they are able to control it; after they are separated, they create a Velcro contraption that allows them to reattach strategically. Ultimately the film wants to have it both ways, and it does, though it reinforces the idea of separation as a means to a happily ever after. *Twin Falls Idaho* is an indie drama about two men trying to find their mother before they die. This film does not approach conjoinment as a problem to be fixed, yet it too “solves” the situation when one twin dies, allowing the other to fall in love and live a “normal” lifestyle. In this way, it also privileges the normative singleton body. *Brothers of the Head*, like *Freaks*, blurs the lines between documentary and fiction. A faux music documentary (it lacks the humor commonly associated with mockumentaries), the film not only incorporates elements of famous music documentaries but like *Freaks*, it also uses the real names of certain characters. Despite its formal departure from the other films, it nevertheless treads similar ground: being conjoined is a means for exploitation and ultimately a situation in need of resolution. The twins succumb to the rock-and-roll lifestyle and die as a result of being unable to manage the excessiveness of their lives. In the “Rose and Raven Rosenberg” episode of *Nip/Tuck* (2004), plastic surgeons Sean and Christian visit conjoined twins Rose and Raven to discuss a separation surgery. Played by real-life craniopagus<sup>79</sup> twins Lori and George (then Reba) Schappell,<sup>80</sup> the twins do not want to be separated. However, Rose has cancer and does not want to risk Raven’s life; a separation surgery seems the best option for Raven’s survival. The episode utilizes the conjoined twins to reinforce ongoing narrative concerns affecting the trajectory of the show’s main

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<sup>79</sup> Joined at the head.

<sup>80</sup> At the time of filming, George was called Reba, and is credited as such, but he changed his name to George in 2007. He was born Dori Schappell, but the twins did not like that their names rhymed, so Dori changed it to Reba while beginning a career as a country singer.



characters, Sean and Christian. However, the idea of conjoinment is central to the episode, thus they play a more integral role in the narrative than just being bodies upon which ideologies are projected. In fact, they become the standard by which Sean and Christian are measured as professional and emotional partners.

The narratives also incorporate romantic coupling into discussions of separation, and often the twins must be placed in traditional couples for films to dabble in twin sexuality. Outside of the two films that feature Daisy and Violet Hilton, *Chained for Life* and *Freaks*, the films that tackle ideas about twin sexuality all involve male conjoined twins. Even when the twins in contemporary representations are female, as in *Nip/Tuck*, the show focuses on the sexuality of men: singleton business partners Sean McNamara and Christian Troy have sex with one woman simultaneously, thus incorporating ideas about doubled sexuality into the program but not via the conjoined women. In *Stuck on You*, the twins date while conjoined, but by the film's resolution, each brother is in a traditional singleton relationship. *Brothers of the Head* also does not shy away from sexuality. The film features one woman having sex with a twin while the other looks on and also dabbles in incest. However, it does not develop the sexual relationships into anything more than brief forays or novelty, and both of the most explicit scenes are staged for promotional reasons—a photo shoot and a fictional film. In contrast, sexuality is completely thwarted in *Twin Falls Idaho* until the twins are separated. Although these films acknowledge conjoined sexuality, the messages come across as a bit conservative compared to a film like *Freaks* and its “anything goes” attitude. The majority of contemporary conjoined twin representations result in heteronormative singleton couples or death—or a combination of both.

This chapter looks at how doubled bodies play out singleton fears and fantasies in fictional representations of conjoined twins but also reflect situations that real twins addressed. Understanding the relationship between depictions and biographies for this small subset of people helps illuminate the intertextual layers to fictional conjoined twin narratives and their patterns. It also portends later nonfictional representations, especially medical, which have more relationship to how living conjoined twins are actually treated due to singleton notions about the relationship between individuality, humanity, and “normality.” While in nonfictional narratives, conjoined bodies become a collection of parts to be separated, in fictional worlds, they might embody social possibilities that threaten the singleton’s desire for predictable bodies or broaden space for thinking about doubled bodies outside of notions of singleton identity. While fictional narratives after *Chained for Life* privilege singleton existence, if viewed differently, conjoined twin characters also can be seen to engage with or challenge the world beyond oft-tread, if not traditional, ways of seeing. Conjoined sexuality represents but one element of this. While male conjoined twin sexuality forces separation, death, or a combination of both, female conjoined twin sexuality has not been addressed at all since *Freaks* and *Chained for Life*. The way in which *Freaks* was destroyed for its horrific ending, inclusion of “freak” sexuality, and use of authentic bodies, either portends or requires excluding potentially threatening situations in narratives, including sexuality, especially when real actors with anomalous bodies play these roles, lest the films be ostracized and labeled dehumanizing. Yet conjoined sexuality as it is presented (or avoided) in narratives opens up a dialog with real conjoined twins’ lives regardless. By dodging female conjoined twin sexuality, the motion picture narratives create a conversation with representations of

real conjoined women like Daisy and Violet Hilton and Millie-Christine McKoy and how sexuality was addressed in their lives. Although the virgin/whore binary is disrupted in all of their representations, circumventing sexuality altogether suggests that Daisy and Violet's seeming transgressions suggest that a taboo still exists about the topic, altogether eliminating any discussion or possibility of female conjoined twin sexuality. While interrogating fictional narratives about conjoined twins that engage with the anxieties and misconceptions of singletons, instead of merely succumbing to them, this chapter asks how fictional narratives might become spaces of possibility to explore ideas that resist or operate outside of how singletons conceptualize conjoined lives.

### **Good Versus Evil and Two-Headed Monsters**

*The Corsican Brothers* narrative relies heavily on the good twin/bad twin dichotomy that pervades films about conjoined twins and, in fact, twins in general.<sup>81</sup> Often these narratives involve a “good” twin trying to control the “bad” twin, usually to no avail, and as Juliana de Nooy points out, one or both of the twins usually end up dead (22). Unlike the 1941 swashbuckler adaptation of *The Corsican Brothers*, in conjoined-twin films, the good-versus-evil trope tends to play out in the horror genre. In films like *Basket Case* and its sequels, *The Manster*, *Sisters*, *The Incredible Two-Headed Transplant*, and the *X-Files* episode “Humbug,” there is a clear “good” twin trying to control, contain, or merely cope with the “bad” twin. Central to this discussion are the two-headed “monster” films *The Incredible Two-Headed Transplant*, *The Manster*, and *The Thing with Two Heads*, a loose remake of *The Incredible Two-Headed Transplant*,

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<sup>81</sup> Juliana de Nooy's book *Twins in Contemporary Literature and Culture: Look Twice* provides an extended discussion about trends in single-bodied twins in film and literature.

all of which present two minds functioning within one body. Although slightly different from naturally born conjoined twins, these films nevertheless play on similar anxieties about conjoined twins and have a relationship with that history. Each film involves a scientific experiment unknowingly performed on a single-bodied white man that turns him into a two-headed creature. In the first two films, the two-headed version of the man kills because the “good” host body cannot control the “bad” person now attached to, or growing out of, him. In his discussion of 1950s horror films, Patrick Gonder argues these films constitute their own subgenre, which he calls “body rebellion films” wherein bodies become “a collection of rebellious parts” (33). Gonder frames his discussion in terms of genetics and race and sees the body-rebellion as a horror film’s version of a hysterical fit. When this type of situation occurs, the human is no longer responsible for the body’s actions. This is useful in discussing the continued tension between body and humanity that singletons continue projecting onto conjoined bodies.

The most straightforward case of the good and evil “twins” is *The Incredible Two-Headed Transplant*, an exploitation film made in 1971. In this film, Roger (Bruce Dern) and his assistant Max (Berry Kroeger) create two-headed creatures in their lab like snakes, rabbits, and monkeys. Max, formerly a brilliant surgeon, has become unable to use his hands skillfully due to his age. Therefore, the two of them want to find a way to transplant Max’s head onto a host body so that he can again perform surgeries using his brain and a younger person’s agility. Initially Roger is seen not as a mad scientist but as an altruistic doctor trying to resurrect his mentor’s surgical abilities. Max, however, seems a bit crazed throughout and too invested in furthering the experiments. When a murderer, Cass (Albert Cole), breaks out of a mental institution, he kills the father of the

mentally disabled Danny (John Bloom) while attempting to murder Roger, Max, and Linda (Pat Priest), Roger's wife. After Roger shoots Cass in self-defense, Max convinces Roger to perform the surgery on Cass and Danny, who is immobilized by his grief over his father's death, after Max declares Cass legally dead. The results go awry, as the psychotic Cass now controls Danny's very strong body, and thus a conjoined twin/two-headed monster is born. Cass obviously represents the "evil twin," as he salivates at the thought of rape or murder and engages (or attempts to engage) in both activities. Danny, meanwhile, cries or murmurs "no" when they harm people. He also controls their body long enough to stroke the hair, mournfully, of female victims.<sup>82</sup> One might argue that Roger and Max are the second two-headed monster in the film, as Max's self-centeredness convinces Roger to privilege science over human lives. Once Roger crosses over, it is difficult to persuade him back to logical reasoning. For example, he has a chance to kill Cass-Danny, and he refuses because Max says they need the bodies alive for further research; the "evil" half has completely polluted the slightly less evil partner.

Cass is nothing if not emboldened by his new body. In fact, the horror of conjoinment is illustrated only through Danny, who is shocked when he first awakens to find himself with a second head and immediately asks about his father. Since Cass easily controls Danny, he simply lies to him and goes on a rampage, and since Danny is so strong, Cass performs *better* than in the past: he is bigger, brawnier, and more threatening. Whereas non-normative bodies usually are defined by what they lack or how they do things totally differently to make up for missing body parts by utilizing others or,

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<sup>82</sup> This film is ripe for a discussion of disability and the maternal. Danny lives with his father and shows special affection for Linda, as he brings her flowers and gets upset when he cannot help her. It is difficult to discern if this is a motherly love—he has no mother—or a sexual attraction. He also returns to an abandoned cave frequently. He was trapped there as a child, and the lack of oxygen caused brain damage. He dies in the same cave when it collapses on the men at the end of the film.

as in the case of conjoined twins, perhaps doing something in sync, Cass does things exactly the same as when he was a singleton, just better. He can fight more people at once and kill or rape them more easily. He can run faster and endure more pain. Teenagers in the film refer to them as a “two-headed giant.” He even has more knowledge, as Cass can access Danny’s memory. In the context of an exploitation film, this two-headed man can be doubly horrible for the fun of it. It is a fantasy of sorts in a world made to shock or titillate—a white body in rebellion against society for no clear reason and represented with such low-budget aesthetics that the mainstream barely cares.

Danny, however, is the real tragedy here. Not only is he treated as a child by every character in the film, his father included, but his life also is so disregarded that no one reassesses his use as a specimen in Roger’s experiment. Roger says Danny’s father’s death “completely unbalanced him,” as if that justifies attaching a killer’s head to his body. The police also immediately suspect Danny when dead bodies start turning up, as he best fits the “two-headed giant” description regardless of whether or not he has ever exhibited violent tendencies. Just as one of the representational patterns for physically disabled people is that they are “violence-prone beasts just asking to be destroyed” (Norden 3), mentally disabled people have been portrayed similarly in horror films especially. This quote may be a little extreme for this movie, but the film insinuates that Danny has uncontrollable strength and violent tendencies. He exhibits joy at pushing over a tree trunk—something two horses were unable to do—and nearly swipes Ken (Casey Kasem) with an ax while playing on Roger and Linda’s porch. Danny also is never treated as a human. He is sacrificed to science even though he is physically healthy and despite the fact that the surgeons wait until the killer is legally dead before

performing the surgery. Cass, though a murdered and rapist, is considered more human than the mentally challenged man-child Danny. Even at the end when Cass, Roger, Max, and Danny die in the collapsing cave, Linda pleads to Ken that she does not want the police to know the true story; she does not want Roger's reputation tarnished. Without hesitation, Ken tells the police that Danny killed Roger and, by implication, all of the murders. Roger's status after death is still more important than Danny's life. This utter disregard for Danny's humanity due to his disability mirrors the struggles conjoined twins have maintaining jurisdiction over their bodies. Like conjoined twins, children especially, who lack say over how their bodies are treated—historically in representations or currently in regard to separation surgeries—Danny's body is donated to science without this permission and with a basic disregard for how it will affect his life. In this case, even his reputation is tarnished because normative-bodied doctors need a body for experimentation. Although this film illustrates a clear example of the good/evil twin binary, it complicates it by privileging almost everyone's needs and humanity, including the mad scientists' and the convicted murderer's, over the "good" twin's. It also makes the "good" twin doubly disabled through his decreased mental abilities—and, therefore, less human or dignified than the rest of the characters, even the "bad" ones.

*The Thing with Two Heads* and *The Manster*, the other "two-headed monster" films that crossover into conjoined twin films, both utilize the good/evil twin trope, but these films incorporate race into the two heads so that each represents a different cultural or racial perspective. De Nooy explains that generally when singleton (often fraternal) twins are utilized to represent cultural divides, the narrative often kills one twin to restore order (114 – 115). Identical twins also tend to illustrate the "triumph of sameness over

difference” in more contemporary tales, while conjoined twins symbolize “national unity over division” played out within one body (115). Neither *The Thing with Two Heads* nor *The Manster* strictly follows these patterns. Both utilize conjoined men to indicate disharmonious relations between two races, and in both, one head or body must be removed from the host body to reestablish harmony. *The Manster*,<sup>83</sup> which is also sometimes entitled *The Split* or, simply, *The Two-Headed Monster*, is the more politically conservative of these two films. In it, American journalist Larry Stanford (Peter Dyneley) lives in Japan for a long-term work assignment to the chagrin of his wife, Linda (Jane Hylton), who worries that he spends too much time abroad. Larry interviews Dr. Robert Suzuki (Satoshi Nakamura) about his groundbreaking experiments in “evolution,” which involve creating a new species. It is to be Larry’s last story before returning home. Dr. Suzuki decides Larry, who has been in the Army, is strong enough to make a good specimen since his last two subjects failed to develop completely. (The most recent resulted in murder.) He drugs Larry. In the next scene, Larry is drinking too much and kissing Japanese women; up until then, he had been a self-professed “good boy.” The monster and Japanese culture become interchangeable as Larry starts having an affair with Dr. Suzuki’s assistant Tara (Terri Zimmern) and taking to Japanese customs like bathhouses, Saki, and Geisha girls as the serum kicks in. Larry’s boss and wife notice the differences, and when she comes to visit unexpectedly, his hand starts growing hair as if her presence makes his monstrosity visible. She also catches him with Tara. He yells that Linda wants him to “settle down,” which he says he cannot, and then he attempts to strangle her. The film reads like a post-war cautionary tale about white American men

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<sup>83</sup> *The Manster* was a Japanese-American co-production originally released in the United States on a double bill with the Georges Franju film *Eyes Without a Face*.



seduced by foreign countries (and their women) and unable to re-assimilate into American culture. Larry possesses a post-traumatic-stress-disorder-type resistance to the domestic life Linda wants him to embrace, as he becomes unable to be tamed after living abroad with the excitement first of the military then of the ever-changing assignments he is accustomed to. However, it is only the serum that allows him to vocalize these things—the drug that turns him into an animal, and an animal he becomes. A monk’s song draws Larry into a Buddhist temple, and he hides his transformed hand as if it is a gun. The temple is full of clay men and masks, one especially that resembles the second head he will eventually grow. Larry speaks to a monk, “I’ve got to talk to someone. I’ve got to get it out of me. I’ve got to get it out of me!” The monk continues singing and praying, and the film cuts to a close-up of the mask while the monk screams offscreen. Larry has committed his first kill, though the image of the mask makes clear that it is not Larry, but rather this hybrid species he has become, who is responsible. He wakes up at Tara’s home.

If in *The Manster*, “good” Larry is white/American/monogamous, then the “bad” monster is Japanese, polyamorous, and potentially non-Christian. Linda and Tara provide the female counterparts to these divisions. The devoted Linda is generally presented as gracious and pristine while making excuses for Larry’s unusual behavior: “The devil’s gotten into him.” Tara, on the contrary, represents a much more ambiguous “bad.” She has an indefinable accent, speaks many languages, and has traveled around the world. Her troubled background is mentioned several times but never explained. When she expresses concern about Dr. Suzuki’s ethics, she defends herself from accusations of being in love with Larry by telling Dr. Suzuki, “Any emotion I had in me

was killed a long time ago,” and “I don’t think I’m able to fall in love. ... You know where you found me, and you know what happens to me if I have to go back there.” Her background is the only reason she goes along with Dr. Suzuki’s plans, including sleeping with Larry initially when Dr. Suzuki arranges it. Tara’s transgressive behavior seems to include sleeping with a married American man and representing cosmopolitanism. The well-traveled and internationally learned Tara is a threat, as is the man who embraces more than one culture. Thus *The Manster* comes across as a heavily xenophobic film—a cautionary tale that too much of another culture can turn one into a confused killer.

Once the monster develops a full head on Larry’s body, he seeks revenge on Dr. Suzuki before running into the hills. Conveniently, Larry must hold onto a tree, which divides the frame in two, in order for the now full-bodied monster to split from its host. The monster grabs Tara, jumps into a volcano, and the two of them plunge to their deaths. Although in body-rebellion films, rarely is the “rebellious body part brought back under control” (Gonder 39-40), Larry returns to normalcy immediately, and the police all but apologize to Linda for having to file a formal arrest. Like *Chained for Life*, the question of how charges will be filed troubles the police. Since the “evil” part of Larry is already dead, will they press charges against him at all? Linda remains committed to her belief that Larry’s dualism has been exorcised: “It wasn’t Larry. It couldn’t have been Larry. It must have been something, someone else.” Larry’s boss ends the film by describing Larry as “an average sort of a guy—the image of us all. ... There was good in Larry and there was evil. The evil part broke through, took hold. Call it an accident or call it a warning.” He concludes with a sort of call to action for military wives, perhaps meant to induce empathy for returned soldiers: “Have faith in the good that’s still in

Larry, and in all men.” Nonetheless, it also presents a clear example of the dangerous Other in the role of the “evil” twin, while the ethnically pure embody the “good.” If the other culture’s customs take root too deeply, the core of a person can change, thus seemingly infecting them for life. In this way, the film fits into de Nooy’s category of singleton twins representing cultural divides and killing one to restore peace or equilibrium. However, if conjoined twins are used to signify national unity, the film completely upsets that paradigm to instead reinforce the idea that if one conjoined twin is polluted, he may have to be amputated so as not to contaminate the other twin. Separation in this case is an imperative to maintaining bodies that are both predictable and controllable. According to the logic of this film, either whiteness or ethnic purity is one way to resist this pollution. These messages signify those Chang and Eng and Millie-Christine quietly resisted with their controlled and consistent representations. Chang and Eng proved themselves to white Americans by, among other things, becoming wealthy fairly quickly but also by embracing slavery, thus aligning themselves with white racial values. Millie-Christine sidestepped topics, like their sexuality, and constantly displayed exceptional manners and grace. By adhering to a deliberate code of conduct, both sets of twins diffused potential white singleton persecution and avoided being seen or displayed as the kind of wild, exoticized doubled creature portrayed in *The Manster*.

*The Thing with Two Heads* (1972), a comedy based on *The Incredible Two-Headed Transplant*’s premise, covers similar ground as *The Manster* but is concerned with racial issues inside the United States rather than international cultural issues. Like *The Manster*, *The Thing with Two Heads* also does not utilize conjoined twins to symbolize national unity but instead treats them more like singleton, fraternal twins in

that one must be removed to restore peace. However, the head that “wins,” as it were, is not the white, privileged head as one might initially expect. Its spoiling quality: bigotry. In the film, the brilliant but aging Dr. Maxwell Kirshner (Ray Milland) has discovered a way to transplant a head onto another body so that the second head may eventually take over its host. He convinces his protégée, Dr. Philip Desmond (Roger Perry), to help him with the procedure so that Kirshner’s genius may live on. Kirshner has cancer, so they need a body quickly. Desperate, they put out a call for death-row inmates to donate their bodies to science rather than being electrocuted. Enter Jack Moss (“Rosey” Greer, as he is credited). Moss needs 30 days to prove his innocence, so he signs up not knowing how his body will be used. While all of this occurs, Kirshner also hires an aspiring young doctor sight unseen—Dr. Fred Williams (Don Marshall). When Kirshner discovers Williams is African American, Kirshner immediately says they made a mistake, he never allows non-white people on staff, and they will not need Williams.

The film’s mise-en-scene initially establishes superiority for Kirshner. The film opens at his luxurious mansion and the first few scenes place him in powerful positions. For example, in his facility’s operating room, a raised platform allows him to survey all operations being performed by his staff in his wheelchair from above. Williams, in contrast, is isolated or the odd man out in his early scenes. If he is not eating alone in the cafeteria, surrounded by other tables filled with groups of doctors and nurses, he is wearing outfits that set him apart. Most of the doctors and nurses wear all white, while Williams wears gray suits with blue shirts. He sits when others stand and performs solo while others work in groups. However, once Moss enters the film, these patterns shift as

Williams and Moss look more alike one another, both in skin color and dress, thus creating a visual alliance between the two.

When Kirshner's head is attached to Moss's body, the film's premise suggests that the host body continues controlling it for ten to fourteen days after surgery. At that time, the second head will take control. However, in the first few days after the transplant, both heads control different parts of the body at different times. They also do not sleep in unison. When Kirshner awakens, he discovers his new black body by raising "his" hand. He asks, "Is this some kind of a joke?" Moss's reaction is more extreme: he yells and struggles until the doctors, who refer to him as "the black head," sedate him. Prior to the next sedative, Moss grabs the nurse and injects her instead, thus allowing him to break out of the surgical room. Moss immediately enlists Williams, the only African-American on staff, to drive the getaway car. When Moss escapes, he puts on a blue shirt and gray suit—the same colors Williams wears. Although Kirshner is Moss's new physical conjoined twin, Williams is his figurative one. Williams at first is resistant to Moss, however, and their differences are highlighted through speech patterns: Williams speaks very precisely and properly, while Moss uses a lot of slang. Williams presses Moss for details about the crime he has committed and does not initially believe Moss was framed for murder. Kirshner reacts more extremely, calling Moss a murderer and refuting the possibility of his innocence; Moss argues that Kirshner is the murderer. At this point in the narrative, Williams remains caught between science and community—his profession and his race. However, Kirshner continues solidifying his place as the mad scientist or "bad" head through his continued racist remarks, while Moss convinces Williams that he is, indeed, innocent. They become a unified team, silencing Kirshner

and his racist comments so that his ideologies no longer have any kind of audience. This turns the idea of the conjoined twin gaze back on itself. When discussing sideshow performances, conjoined twins tend to be seen as disconcerting to singleton audiences because of their dual gaze: one person engages with two people looking back. In this film, however, the dual gaze belongs to African-American men turning it on the racist white man, thus employing the strength of a race-based collective and disempowering white privilege.

The trio eventually makes it to the house of Moss's girlfriend Lila (Chelsea Brown). In contrast to the surgical staff that referred to Moss as "the black head," Lila calls Kirshner "it." This pattern continues throughout the film: Kirshner's white staff responds to Kirshner/Moss as if it is Kirshner's body with his name, while Lila and Williams dehumanize Kirshner by calling him "it" or "Mr. Personality." The importance of naming and mode of address to one's personhood is apparent in these groups and in how racial divides strip each head of his humanity—not just individuality, but humanity at all. This hearkens back to Millie-Christine's struggle with naming, especially in William Pancoast's medical report, where their photo was titled the "2 Headed Girl," and also portends the way conjoined twins will be treated in later televised medical representations wherein they are relegated to bodies for experimentation. Nonetheless, the community of three African-Americans becomes solidified around the dinner table. Kirshner refuses to eat "soul food" and asks, "What do you got for dessert? Watermelon?" Moss jokes that the next day they will have possum and chitlins, and Lila jests, "After supper we can all sit around and sing spirituals." While at Lila's home, Kirshner makes additional racist comments, like asking if sex is all "you people" think

about. Williams' response is to explain that removing Kirshner's head is a "basic amputation" that he could perform solo, which he eventually does, returning Kirshner to his operating room. When the white doctors find Kirshner, he immediately demands another body. The film ends with Moss, Lila, and Williams driving off into the countryside together, reinforcing the value of African-American unity.

Control of the body, and the body itself, is much more important in *The Thing with Two Heads* than in *The Incredible Two-Headed Transplant*, because the back and forth ultimately controls its fate. While Moss is in control, he is able to sedate the nurse and escape. When Kirshner is in control, he returns to his operating room and preps for a self-separation from Moss. Unlike *The Incredible Two-Headed Transplant*, neither head ultimately controls the body at all times. Instead, like a country with racial divisions, there is a constant negotiation of control, interests, and meaning. Although the men could have worked out their differences to become one unified body/nation, they did not, thus representing a break from the tradition wherein conjoined twins signify national harmony. For example, Linda Frost sees in Millie-Christine "the image of two sisters who repeatedly avow that they will not be separated—and whom even the press describe as being 'an indissoluble union'" and "a powerful statement of solidarity" in a post-Civil War United States (17). Similarly, Chang and Eng's bodies have been used repeatedly to symbolize racial harmony or a unified nation-state, a full discussion of which can be found in Cynthia Wu's *Chang and Eng Reconnected*. By thwarting this kind of reading, *The Thing with Two Heads* suggests a state/nation of disunity or disequilibrium—unsettled and unlikely to be easily reconciled within the body and its environment.

Community remains key to the meaning assigned to each head, as white people respond to Kirshner and Black people to Moss, yet both “good” and “evil” become the inverse of what might originally be believed based on stereotypes. The “good” head is the Black head, the convicted murderer, and the framed, innocent man that white people do not trust or believe. The “evil” head is the white, well-respected doctor. People see him as a leader in his field, although he has attempted murder for selfish reasons and is guilty but not convicted. In fact, he exists completely outside of the legal system. (Throughout the film, the police chase Moss, never Kirshner.) Like the sideshow, which provided the chance for spectators to make of liminal performers’ narratives what they would, Moss/Kirshner provide a hybrid body onto which both men’s communities can project meaning. In discussing Zip the “What is It?”, the deliberately racially undefined sideshow performer termed a “nondescript,” James Cook Jr. explains that Zip’s body and narrative allowed for people to “freely associate and signify identity in all sorts of ways, some of them even quite controversial and transgressive” (149). *The Thing with Two Heads* offers something similar for exploitation or Blaxploitation<sup>84</sup> audiences. The film takes a cue from *Freaks* in that the mise-en-scene makes space for the Black partnerships and communities even in a white-dominated world. As in Daisy and Violet’s relationship scenes, bodies and spaces are in constant renegotiation for control, voice, movement, and space. Furthermore, *Los Angeles Times* reviewer Kevin Thomas noted upon the film’s release that it “develops terrific symbolic impact” as Grier struggles “with Milland for control, over what is, after all, [Grier’s] own body. The various ironies of Grier’s plight will be appreciated by many whites—and, it seems safe to say, all blacks.” For Black

<sup>84</sup> *The Thing with Two Heads* is not necessarily considered a Blaxploitation film, though it came out when the genre was popular. Director Lee Frost did go on to direct a Blaxploitation film, *The Black Gestapo*, in 1975.



audiences interested in narratives of resistance, however silly this one is, the film provides not just a talking back to white authority but also community building in opposition to the white lunacy that often is officially sanctioned by science, the police, and other white professionals.

*The Thing with Two Heads* also suggests a continuum between Millie-Christine's career trajectory and images of African-American in conjoined twin films, of which this is the only one. Millie-Christine's conjoined bodies allowed them to interact with different audiences around the world and from all classes, which in turn provided opportunities for them to talk with people of other races and ethnicities about issues of the day without speaking specifically about race. Just as being able to communicate to French people in French made a statement about the learning capabilities of people of African-descent in Millie-Christine's time period, for Moss, being attached to Kirshner allows him to communicate with many people outside of his regular circle of influence, including Williams, about the unjust imprisonment and killing of African-Americans. Moss's conjoinment, albeit temporary, nevertheless provides him the opportunity to prove himself innocent in a way he did not have within "the system." His "disability" leads to an alternative path whereby Moss can communicate with new audiences about his place in society and mobilize his community into action. Silly as it is, then, *The Thing with Two Heads* nevertheless provides a transgressive narrative and opportunities for resistant readings for audiences interested in them. Like singleton twin narratives about nation, *The Thing with Two Heads* also removes one head to restore peace to the land, yet it noteworthy that, in this case, the Black body remains intact while the white head whines for a something new to control as a means of remaking itself.

### **Gender and Sexuality: Conjoined Twins and Coupling**

Despite being hailed as an original and heartfelt film upon its release, *Twin Falls Idaho* (1999) is perhaps the most singleton-normative, if not heteronormative, of the conjoined twin films, and is less daring than most. Francis and Blake Falls (played by Mark and Michael Polish—identical, but not conjoined, twins) rent a slummy hotel room in New York, presumably in which to die after finding their estranged mother. For their birthday, Francis buys Blake a prostitute, Penny (Michele Hicks), who cannot fulfill her job duties. Instead, she runs to the street to take a moment before returning for her purse. They never discuss the failed business agreement, but when she discovers Francis is sick, she befriends the twins and eventually falls in love with Blake. However, unbeknownst to them, she also sets them up with a sleazy promoter who wants to exploit them, so the twins disappear. Penny eventually locates them in a hospital and finds their mother. On the twins' deathbed, a separation surgery spares the life of the healthy Blake from the dying Francis. The surgery is not shown; rather, a dream sequence features both twins riding bikes solo, eventually going their separate ways and waving to each other from opposing cliffs. The dream sequence makes it unclear if the separation surgery is performed before Francis dies, thus causing his death, or if the medical team waits until Francis dies before performing the surgery. Since Francis is alive prior to the dream, it seems most probable that the separation takes place while both are still alive, and as such, one twin, the “weak” twin, is sacrificed in service to the “strong” twin, a pattern that plays out frequently in documentaries about conjoined twins.<sup>85</sup> Replacing the surgery

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<sup>85</sup> Representations of conjoined twins in nonfictional television are discussed in Chapter Four.

with this poetic dream sequence allows the twins to say goodbye internally, suggesting the psychic connections most films imply exist between conjoined twins. The separation additionally provides Blake with the singleton body he needs to be with Penny. Prior to his death, Francis was jealous of Penny and prevented Blake from seeing her. In the film's one bedroom scene, Francis interrupts Blake and Penny's kissing simply by looking them in the eyes. After Francis's death, Penny fills his place. She walks beside Blake, holding him up, as he no longer has half of his left leg or a left arm. She also inserts herself into Francis's role in The Falls Brothers' act by playing the left side of a guitar while Blake strums with his right hand. At the film's conclusion, it is revealed that Blake and Francis Falls were touring with a sideshow prior to visiting New York.

If, in *Freaks*, the narrative opens possibilities for iterations of romantic “coupling” for conjoined twins—marriages that may involve three or four people as well as living situations that require splitting time or traveling from home to home—*Twin Falls Idaho* seems reticent to engage with such topics. Even a prostitute will not have sex with one brother while the other watches, and the conjoined brother watches precisely because he knows it will shut down the situation. De Nooy points out that, in *Twin Falls Idaho*, “there are explicit references to the twinship as marriage” both in Blake's line that he and his brother are “Quite a marriage” and, when he says goodbye to Penny, in his joke, “Maybe I'll call you when I'm single” (85). In this narrative, relationships only have room for two people. In discussing Daisy and Violet Hilton as symbols of threatening, financially independent New Women, Allison Pingree states that the “power behind” their image

was that they were both permanently single because they were

permanently doubled. They were already each other's "other half"; their bond thus superseded, and rendered unnecessary, the companionate, heterosexual spouse. Indeed, instead of being fused in marriage to someone else, they were each fused to each other, and that very fusion—the "monstrosity" they displayed—was the key to their financial independence. (177)

Neither the Hiltons real lives nor their film representations limited them to these ideas, however, whereas *Twin Falls Idaho* comes across as being a more conservative film because it does. Daisy and Violet consistently dated men and talked openly to the press about doing so, while Blake and Francis hide from the prospect of a girlfriend as soon as it presents itself. Daisy and Violet also continually presented themselves as performers, whereas Blake and Francis only reveal that they are musicians in an intimate moment with Penny. They do not mention that they have been traveling with a caravan of performers for, seemingly, their entire lives. In fact, when people look at them in public, they hide under their clothes or into each other's embrace. It is not surprising that the surgeon who eventually separates them tells Penny the surgery was inevitable, because in this film's story world, people are only coupled two by two. At the film's conclusion, the twins' mother visits them in the hospital room, and she holds Francis's hand, not Blake's. Her maternal comforts are reserved for the one twin who needs them. Penny completes Blake's coupling after the men are separated. The way in which she must support Blake when they walk, her arm around him so that he can lean on her for balance, places her in Francis's former position.

*Twin Falls Idaho* tries to humanize conjoined twins as separate individuals, yet it relies too often on the twins' connection for plot instead of developing characters. Many conjoined twin films treat being conjoined as a personality trait, and in doing so, they fail to develop characteristics outside of that one physical feature. Conjoined twin films additionally often rely on doubles in their mise-en-scene to supplant character development. For example, in *Twin Falls Idaho*, *A Tale of Two Cities* plays on the hotel lobby television when Penny firsts visits the twins, and the \$2 bill she receives from a claw-handed cab driver becomes a motif throughout the film. At the Halloween party Penny attends with Blake and Francis, another couple are dressed as "Siamese Twins" in stereotypical Asian costumes with conical straw hats and sewn-together kimono-type shirts. Furthermore, in only allowing Blake to be with Penny after Francis dies, and only then revealing that Blake and Francis were popular musicians and performers, Blake becomes more developed as a character once he is a singleton despite having possessed these traits throughout the film. The now-deceased Francis, however, remains defined by his physical and emotional weakness. Francis's death makes way for Penny to become Blake's stronger counterpart, and Blake will again be the full person he once was, if not more so since he will do so in a more socially acceptable way.

If *Twin Falls Idaho* is a gloomy, singleton-normative film, *Stuck on You* is its upbeat opposite. An optimistic, "conjoined twins can do anything" comedy, the film showcases not just how happy, confident, and adept conjoined twins can be, but also how separation disrupts their lives. In the film, Walt and Bob Tenor (Greg Kinnear and Matt Damon, respectively) live happily in a small, East Coast town. Walt, an actor, decides to follow his dream and move to Los Angeles, where he lands a leading role opposite Cher

on the television show *Honey and the Beaze*. Cher hires him hoping the show will get canceled immediately. It becomes a hit until Walt and Bob undergo a separation surgery, which disrupts their equilibrium. Both twins walk strangely without their other half (each leans into where the other used to be and leads his walk with one side), and Walt's acting style changes radically, resulting in the show's cancelation. Bob moves back east where he finds he can no longer run their once successful Quickee Burger restaurant, which promises meals in less than three minutes, thus relying on their ability to make several meals at once. Eventually Walt moves home as well. Once there, they compromise by reattaching themselves with Velcro strategically—for example, when they work at the Quickee Burger. They remain separated in other endeavors including Walt's acting performances and love affairs.

Walt and Bob accomplish everything singleton men can, if not better, and the film indicates this immediately. *Stuck on You* opens with the twins working out, jogging, saying hello to numerous women, and talking like best friends catching up on each other's lives. They are incredibly athletic and play baseball, football, and hockey; they make an ideal goalie. Their business thrives. Walt succeeds at acting both when he is conjoined and as a singleton after an adjustment period, and he picks up women easily even while conjoined. They overcompensate for being connected by being doubly talented, and the way in which they are connected allows them the ability to do so. A nine-inch band of flesh joins Bob and Walt across the sides of their stomachs, and they share a liver. Since Bob houses most of it, doctors have told them that Walt only has a fifty-fifty chance of survival. Bob refuses the surgery most of their lives—he will not risk Walt's life—but he changes his mind when he feels Walt's career is suffering

because of their connection. Being connected at the side of their stomachs allows them much more freedom to move in general and be separated strategically, even while conjoined. For example, a sheet divides the bed when Walt picks up a woman at a bar, so Bob has absolutely no view of the woman in bed with them. Their conjoinment is a best case scenario for a narrative trying to play up the comedy of conjoined twins while completely eliminating what could be very challenging situations for twins with a less workable connection. If Walt and Bob were joined at the head, the film would be seen as more tragic, if not exploitative, and completely beyond the suspension of disbelief; like *Freaks*, it could become offensive rather than silly.

Walt and Bob's representation calls to mind images of Chang and Eng Bunker, who also shared conjoined livers. A band at the front of their bodies connected Chang and Eng, so they had less mobility than the characters in *Stuck on You*, but their presentation as strapping young men remains consistent though indicative of very different time periods. Chang and Eng were exhibited as adept performers in their early years and also in ways that showed off how they overcame their conjoinment most of their lives. These illustrations played up their masculinity and eventually the American Dream as realized by them. Chang and Eng also were presented as virile men after they married and had numerous children, who were featured often in photographs and illustrations with them. A publicity lithograph made of Chang and Eng best illustrates many of these ideas, as it incorporates images of the two men, their wives, several children, and scenes of them engaging in athletic and status-enhancing activities. These actions include rowing a boat, riding in a horse-drawn carriage, fishing, farming, chopping wood, and playing the violin. In these images, Chang and Eng's connective

band appears several inches wider than it was, an exaggeration that lent the lithographer more leeway in representing the “normalness” of the twins’ lives. In both Chang and Eng’s lithograph and *Stuck on You*, the exaggerated physical connections allow singletons to relate to life as a conjoined twin more simply. The connection would still be challenging, but not *as* difficult as being conjoined at the head or having two fused spines. The more anomalous the body, the harder it would be for audiences to believe in the varied success of conjoined twins being put forth as “normal” men.

These images of Chang and Eng and Walt and Bob simultaneously illustrate the twins’ masculinity, a “can do” attitude, and the ability to not just fit into but to achieve the American Dream by being gifted in, and successful at, numerous activities from athletics to the arts to general good citizenry. Both sets of twins also are associated with food—Chang and Eng fish and farm proficiently and therefore theoretically should be able to provide for their families. Walt and Bob own a popular restaurant that also acts as a community space where everyone is welcome. In fact, in a show of support for the mentally disabled busboy, Rocket, after a tourist refers to him as a “freak,” the whole restaurant takes on a “one of us” attitude—meaning a communal stance against the person threatening the “freaks” as displayed in Tod Browning’s film—toward the outsider, who leaves immediately. Chang and Eng’s images illustrated that they were assimilating from exoticized “Other” into bourgeois family men in the American South, even marrying white women. For Bob and Walt, their representation (which comes over one hundred years after Chang and Eng) indicates that a similar kind of assimilation is still necessary for conjoined twins. As opposed to the reclusive Blake and Francis of *Twin Falls Idaho* who seem trapped in a nineteenth-century existence—they are relegated



to sideshow performances and rural spaces unless they want to be ostracized, as they are in New York—Bob and Walt conform to “regular” social expectations, like being physically active and attractive (despite Walt’s silly hair—a signature of Peter Farrelly’s films). Bob and Walt also are socially popular entrepreneurs. If “conjoined twins [violate] the categorical boundaries that seem to order civilization and inform individuality” (Thomson 5), and individuality is at the core of the American Dream, conjoined twins in fictional representations (film narratives or promotional lithographs) must at least be seen as a version of two single-bodied people in order not to alienate singletons. This is why the upward mobility of *all* of their bodies is so important. In *Stuck on You* and the Chang and Eng lithograph, the twins do not seem to lack anything. Rather, they have the ability to achieve doubly as two individuals what the singleton person can.

In *Stuck on You*, Walt and Bob’s bodies are especially rewarded in Los Angeles where the first person they meet, April (Eva Mendes), assumes they became conjoined deliberately and asks who performed the (plastic) surgery. Notably, the men are outside shirtless when they meet April. When they explain that it is natural, she responds, “Cool.” Not only does this scene imply that their conjoined bodies are nothing to hide, it also highlights the malleability of bodies in Los Angeles and shrinks the spectrum between common plastic surgeries and conjoined twins, or people who get plastic surgery and “freaks.” This attitude only exists in Los Angeles, however, and specifically in the context of people who are trying to be actors there—April and Walt. Bob’s girlfriend May breaks up with Bob when she finds out he is conjoined—several dates into their relationship—because he lied to her. He had been deceiving her for months when they

were only communicating via the Internet, and she does not notice in person, but rather believes Walt is overly emotionally attached to his brother. However, May returns to Bob prior to the separation surgery, again reinforcing singleton status as necessary to romance. Still, *Stuck on You*, Chang and Eng, and *Twin Falls Idaho* represent that “normality” is problematic for conjoined twins. Either they must overcompensate with many talents—artistic, athletic, and entrepreneurial—or they may expect to live somewhat reclusive lives and struggle with or against their bodies and public expectations of them, resulting in anxiety, depression, or seclusion until the situation can be “solved.” Although *Stuck on You* does not privilege the singleton body as dramatically as *Twin Falls Idaho*, it still becomes singleton-normative in that both men complete the film “having it all” through their ability to take advantage of being both single and conjoined.

*Stuck on You* also recalls Daisy and Violet Hilton and Millie-Christine’s performances in its use of song. Both sets of women performed duets together on stage—love songs whose meaning changed through their performances to indicate a complementary existence where one’s being fulfilled the other’s. For Daisy and Violet, the lyrics of these songs and their performances have been seen both as a threat to patriarchy but also as a potential space for transgressive readings. When discussing the song “Me Too: Ho-Ho! Ha-Ha!” Allison Pingree explains that their performance of the “lighthearted song” on vaudeville stages “parallels their relationship with that of a heterosexual couple, and thus normalizes their potential danger” because it is done as a form of play (178). Furthermore, she argues that by “putting into their mouths this heterosexual script, the Hiltons’ promoters could attempt to reduce the threat the twins

posed” of two girls coexisting with men (178).<sup>86</sup> Love songs are used throughout *Stuck on You* to parallel Walt and Bob’s conjoinment. *Moon River* plays twice with its lyrics: “Wherever you’re going, I’m going your way,” and “Two drifters, off to see the world / There’s such a lot of world to see.” The song, which immediately calls to mind the film *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, is an obvious play with the idea of partnership—romantic and otherwise. Bob and Walt are partners, and they go through a breakup once separated, which leaves each longing for the other and lost without him. The second time *Moon River* plays, it is immediately preceded by Gilbert O’Sullivan’s *Alone Again (Naturally)*: “Reality came around / And without so much as a mere touch / Cut me into little pieces / Leaving me to doubt / ... In my hour of need / I truly am indeed / Alone again, naturally.” The use of song to underscore characters’ emotions in film is nothing new, but the intertextuality of these song moments, along with their newly found meaning in relationship to conjoined twins, provides an additional arena of play for the spectator. *Stuck on You* pushes this one step further with its use of Bread’s love song *Baby I’m a Want You*: “Baby, I’m-a want you / Baby, I’m-a need you / You’re the only one I care enough to hurt about.” This song plays during Walt and Bob’s reunion at the Quickee Burger. Bob is alone, the jukebox turns on, Walt stands in the doorway, and the two see each other from across the room. Sensing the homoerotic tone of their reunion, Bob says, “You fag.” Walt immediately hits the jukebox, *It’s Raining Men* plays momentarily, and the men decide to go fishing. Like the moment in Daisy and Violet Hilton’s vaudeville show where they might wink at the audience to indicate that they are in on the double-entendres in their musical performances, Bob’s comment acts as his knowing wink at

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<sup>86</sup> This is complicated by the fact that Daisy and Violet Hilton were still owned by Myer Myers at the time this sheet music was published, which is discussed in Chapter Two.

contemporary film audiences. The difference, however, is that Daisy and Violet remained doubly marginalized, both as women and “disabled” people, off the stage. They could not just acknowledge the joke and then return to a normalized life outside of their performances. In fact, attempting to do so is part of why they were perceived as threatening in “regular” life. In *Stuck on You*, this knowing moment is used to poke fun at a marginalized group before being immediately resolved by a reassertion of their own masculinity via fishing. As recent singleton white men, this reads as a moment of newfound privilege for Walt and Bob who can now crossover into being “conjoined” strategically when it suits them.

Whereas Bob and Walt figure out how to have it all, the “Rose and Raven Rosenberg” episode of *Nip/Tuck* requires that conjoined women be sacrificed in order to resolve narrative conflicts between the singleton main characters in the show—Sean (Dylan Walsh) and Christian (Julian McMahon).<sup>87</sup> In doing so, the conjoined twins become a norm by which plastic surgeons Sean and Christian are discussed and valued, at least initially, but the twins are not doubly capable like Bob and Walt. Instead, they are examples of harmonious coexistence but also reinforce the idea of the “strong” and “weak” twin seen in nonfictional television representations. Played by real conjoined twins Lori and George (then Reba) Schappell, the twins in this episode disrupt the established narrative structure of the show to emphasize the emotional relationship between Sean and Christian through an elaborate exploration of their “twinness,” which includes their medical practice, their mutual love for Sean’s wife Julia (Joely Richardson), and their joint relationship as their son Matt’s (John Hensley) biological and

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<sup>87</sup> Lori and George Schappell also are mentioned in the dialogue of *Stuck on You*, and Reba/George’s cover of Reba McEntire’s song “The Fear of Being Alone” appears on the soundtrack.

adopted fathers. Rose and Raven’s bodies act as a substitute identity for Sean and Christian, thus the episode really is not about conjoined twins or their separation, but rather the difficulty of lifelong collaboration. The episode explores the bonds that unite each man and his inability to function without his counterpart, but the men also project their anxieties about being codependent upon, if not subsumed by, one another onto Rose and Raven as well. Sean needs to work through his psychological state after he discovers the truth about Matt. Not only does Sean use the Rosenberg twins to do so, but he and Christian also hire a prostitute to “be” Julia and have sex with both of them as a form of therapy. During the twins’ surgery, the doctors separate and eventually reconnect the twins as a means of realizing their own symbiotic relationship—and their inability to split. The twins represent a bounded and dual friendship, and although Sean especially wants to be and think “singly,” he cannot.<sup>88</sup>

Most *Nip/Tuck* episodes follow the same structure: there are about fifteen scenes, the first of which occurs in the McNamara/Troy offices, where patients describe their ailments. They say, “Tell me what you don’t like about yourself.” A surgery then takes place while either the doctors or outsiders discuss its larger implications. Scenes of the main protagonists’ daily lives follow, balanced by those highlighting the surgeries and their themes, which apply to various subplot developments. Another surgery proves, disproves, or resolves the patient’s main complication or a minor patient’s problem. More scenes illustrate how the characters’ lives reflect the episode’s theme, often resulting in increased interpersonal complications and a new cliffhanger. The theme then achieves closure, and the patient is back in the world. In “Rose and Raven Rosenberg,”

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<sup>88</sup> My more thorough examination of this episode can be found in the book *Nip/Tuck: Television that Gets Under Your Skin*.

however, the narrative structure differs. While the same number of scenes is included, this episode opens in a lawyer's office and, disrupting the standard opening of the show, the lawyer, asks Sean and Christian to tell her what they do not like about themselves. This immediately upsets the returning viewer's expectations, as the spectator reflects upon facets of Sean and Christian's relationship rather than surgeries. In this scene, symmetrically composed shots show Sean and Christian balancing the frame, divided only by the lawyer. Such visual symmetry helps establish their twinning—and separation—as overshadowing all other concerns. Christian makes several suggestions, which Sean rejects. Christian retorts: "Fine. But it won't be a mole removal. You want out? It's going to get invasive." Their dialogue reinforces the *mise-en-scene* and establishes the similarities between the surgeons' and the twins' connected bodies. This episode further diverges from *Nip/Tuck's* standard structure by spending nearly the entire episode focusing on the main surgical operation, including its preparation, aftermath, and thematic relevance to Sean and Christian. The *only* message is that Sean and Christian are just like Rose and Raven: they cannot function without one another. Furthermore, the main surgery ends in disaster. One twin dies physically, and the other dies emotionally upon learning of her sister's death. She then physically dies as well, at which point Sean and Christian cosmetically reverse their work by reconnecting the sisters for burial.

Throughout the episode, everything sets up the viewer to see Christian and Sean as conjoined twins; they are brothers, lovers, spouses, and business partners. Deliberately or not, conjoined twins are all of these things at once. If we see Sean and Christian as conjoined twins living intertwined lives, this unsettles ideas that normative bodies need be singular. By acknowledging the suggestion that their two bodies are one preparing to

undergo a major, invasive surgical operation—a separation surgery—and then rebuking the desirability of single lives by the end of the episode, the show admonishes notions that independent, “free” bodies are closer to perfection than are twinned, conjoined bodies. The lawyer in this first scene reiterates this point, stating: “Apart, you guys are nowhere near as strong as you are together—not at this phase in your lives.” She is speaking financially, but Christian takes her literally. Sean, who needs more convincing, instead refers to Christian as “dead weight.” The staging of beds later in the episode reiterates these bonds: Sean and Christian need to come together as one twinned body in one joined bed with one fantastically doubled woman, a prostitute hired to play Julia, before they recognize the conjoined nature of their relationship. When they enter the room, their beds are pulled apart. They put them together, have a three-way, and then pull them apart, effectively reestablishing their partnership via a common yet surrogate wife/lover.

Rose and Raven experience the opposite; their beds are pulled apart temporarily during the separation surgery—and for the first time ever—only for them to discover that they cannot live singleton lives, indeed they have no “soul” left for it. Thus, their beds are pushed back together during the show’s resolution so that Sean and Christian can reconnect them to be buried together. The alternative mirroring of Sean and Christian reinforce the fact that, despite embodying the theme of the episode, Rose and Raven are not its focus. In some ways Rose and Raven are just like the other women in the show, since in this episode, all women lose their power and voice and become merely bodies for division, reflection, consumption, or absorption by Sean and Christian. Even the usually influential Liz (Roma Maffia), Sean and Christian’s nurse, becomes a childlike figure.

She too physically divides Sean and Christian during a routine liposuction, standing between them at the head of the operating table. When asked to make a choice between the men, she says, “You’re not just dismantling a business. You’re dismantling a family.” She appears torn between whom to choose, as if considering which parent to live with after a divorce. All women are removed or put at the mercy of Sean and Christian in order for the men to reestablish themselves and, in doing so, the singleton women are turned into dual but unhinged figures. Renee, the prostitute, becomes Julia, while Liz, the lawyer, and a woman on a plane are shot to symmetrically divide spaces otherwise solely occupied by Sean and Christian until they serve their purpose—highlighting the conjoined nature of the men’s relationship—after which they disappear. With women present, Sean and Christian seemingly cannot fully self-actualize or heal, much less grow.

Women’s bodies, however, seem necessarily to facilitate conversation because Sean and Christian have lost their ability to *discuss* matters any more. While they talk about their feelings regularly on *Nip/Tuck*, they come to a standstill in this episode: talking no longer gets them anywhere. Instead, they must have sex and operate their way through their issues, utilizing women’s bodies to do so. In the sex scene, Renee predictably stands directly between the two men, separating them. When Christian says, “We’re not having a three-way,” Sean responds, “Why not? Everything else has been.” He then changes Renee’s name to Julia. Here the three-way echoes the separation surgery and foreshadows the reconnection to come, but in reverse: the men push together, and then pull apart, their identical beds. During the sex scene, two series of shots—one involving dissolves and the other using quick edits—make Sean’s and Christian’s faces



indistinguishable from one another as they kiss “Julia,” who now appears as Julia, though she is still meant to be Renee. This scene ends with a re-establishing shot of the messy, single beds, which the men get into naked. Both turn away from one another when Renee leaves. The separation surgery is the four-way that tops the three-way. After the surgery, which is shot more like a musical number than their standard procedures—it utilizes wide shots and numerous, colorful pieces circulating through the surgical arena—chaos ensues. The cinematography changes to incorporate shaky and erratic handheld shots. Raven starts bleeding profusely and flatlines, and Rose’s heartbeat fluctuates as Christian calls Raven’s death. Sean states, “She’s not giving up. She can survive on her own. She can survive. She can survive on her own!” before frenetically beginning CPR despite another doctor’s suggestion that Rose knows her sister is dead and is, therefore, allowing herself to die. Sean nevertheless resuscitates Rose temporarily. The women provide points of communication for Sean and Christian—bodies onto which they can project fantasies about solitude, betrayal, sex, and death and, in some cases, they even receive feedback via these bodies. The surgical scenes act as a counterpoint to the sex scene and reinforce the idea that Sean wants to function singularly and cannot, though he differs from Rose who might be able to survive solo but does not wish to. Since she is the norm by which he is judged in this episode, his response seems erratic, if not desperate, whereas hers seems compassionate if not “normal.”

Despite the way in which this episode of *Nip/Tuck* utilizes female bodies for the betterment of men, notably it is the only narrative about full-bodied conjoined twins outside of those featuring the Hilton sisters to focus on female twins.<sup>89</sup> It also is the only

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<sup>89</sup> The Schappells are categorized here as women because George was still using the name Reba when the *Nip/Tuck* episode was filmed.

one since *Chained for Life* to use real conjoined twin actors. Juliana de Nooy explains that female twins in general are “virtually absent from legend and literary history” prior to becoming popular in film in the 1940s as good girl/bad girl couples that embody the virgin/whore dichotomy (49-50). The female virgin/whore twins also appear in several 1980s and 1990s films, though they tend to tread the same narrative ground (50).

Interestingly, no narratives about conjoined women play up this trope, and even the doubles Julia and Renee do not fit neatly into these categories despite the fact that one of them is actually a prostitute. *Chained for Life* emphasizes companionship between twins, perhaps in lieu of romantic relationships with men, and at the film’s conclusion, to be sure, it is declared that Vivian (Violet) kills the man who broke the heart of her sister Dorothy (Daisy) because Violet loved her sister *too* much. However, they still do not embody the virgin/whore or even the good/evil tropes, especially since Vivian kills to protect her sister.

The “Rose and Raven Rosenberg” episode of *Nip/Tuck* veers away from romantic notions completely but emulates *Chained for Life*’s idea that Rose and Raven are each other’s best life partners. In fact, they do not want to be separated; Rose has a cancer that is spreading, thus necessitating the operation to save Raven’s life. The lack of discussion about romance may in part be because Lori and George Schappell played the twins. Craniopagus conjoined twins joined at their foreheads, their faces nearly touch each other’s. George also is about a foot shorter than Lori and has a wheelchair that is several feet high to make mobility more comfortable for both twins. Incorporating discussions of their romantic lives into the narrative would have opened up more frank conversations about conjoined twin sexuality, and its potential peculiarities, because of how George and

Lori are connected. Unlike Daisy and Violet Hilton or Chang and Eng Bunker, who were very normative-bodied even with their conjoinment, Lori and George's attached heads force spectators to consider true intimacy with both people at once, and it is much more difficult to believe one twin might "disappear" during intimacy, which makes conjoined sexuality easier for singletons to comprehend or accept. Narratives potentially also have more freedom to delve into conjoined twin sexuality when actors are playing the roles instead of actual conjoined twins, because it seems less exploitative to an audience when there is no mistaking the fantasy for a true story, as in *Brothers of the Head*. Certainly *Freaks*' damnation was linked to the sideshow performers' authenticity. However, it is notable that conjoined twin films about women diverge from standard twin films about women in that something about connecting the women allows them more autonomy of character. None of the conjoined women in *Freaks*, *Chained for Life*, or *Nip/Tuck* are relegated to the virgin/whore dichotomy, though *Nip/Tuck* suggests links to nonfictional television shows that understand conjoined bodies in terms of being a collection of parts usually creating a stronger and weaker twin. Nevertheless, in fictional worlds, being conjoined allows for different discussions about women to take place, if they make it through the narrative alive.

Despite the potential for threesomes and foursomes in conjoined twin narratives, with the exception of *Nip/Tuck*, conjoined twin film and television shows (that are not intentionally pornographic) play it pretty safe by keeping romantic relationships somewhat in line with one-man/one-woman standards. *Brothers of the Head*, a mock music documentary about conjoined brothers Tom and Barry Howe (played by Harry and Luke Treadaway, respectively) who front a punk band called the Bang Bang, plays with

sexuality a bit more freely through Laura Ashworth (Tania Emery), musician Paul Day (Bryan Dick), and the twins. Laura is an academic who arrives at the Humbleton house, which the Bang Bang share with their managers, to do a story on conjoined twins and exploitation. She is no stranger to a rock-and-roll lifestyle, as she dated the legendary musician Chris Dervish prior to his somewhat mysterious death. She immediately takes a liking to the twins and begins dating Tom. Barry is the harsher of the twins, the “evil” of the two if splitting them up that way (though adjectives like bratty or moody are more accurate), and he tends to challenge people brashly while Tom quietly plays guitar. Laura and Tom have a bit of a mother/child relationship, as she acts protective of him, spoon-feeds him, and sometimes interrupts fights between the twins. Since Tom and Barry’s mother died in childbirth, Laura stands in for Tom’s mother, though notably, and akin to *Twin Falls Idaho*, she does not treat Barry the same way. Thus Laura and Tom’s coupling threatens Tom and Barry’s and, like Francis in *Twin Falls Idaho*, Barry quietly protests the romance. Barry, however, also appears to be bisexual and even instigates an incestuous moment. During a photo shoot, Barry starts to make out with Tom and eventually with the two female models. The photographer says it was all Barry’s idea, and that his intention was to shock either her or their audiences. In another scene, Barry and Paul kiss alongside Laura and Tom. However, nothing comes across as very meaningful. Like most rock documentaries, the band’s popularity ups the ante on everything else, namely sex and drugs, and although the photo shoot occurs early in the band’s history, Barry is a natural entertainer—someone who knows what an audience wants and how to titillate them. For example, during the band’s first live performance, he lifts up his shirt to partially reveal their connecting tissue. Eventually, he rips it off

entirely, thus lending the necessary authenticity to their act and making the crowd go wild. Kissing his brother for a publicity shoot, then, is just another act of rebellion. As the film progresses, both twins start drinking more, popping pills, and doing a lot of cocaine, so hinting at foursomes becomes an additional extreme behavior made tame, or at least expected, in this environment. Of all the conjoined twin films, however, *Brothers of the Head* least shies away from potentially transgressive sexual moments and is perhaps most akin to *Freaks* in that it opens up possibilities for romantic coupling outside of singleton male-female relationships more so than the other films.<sup>90</sup>

*Brothers of the Head* nevertheless plays on singleton desires and curiosities about conjoined twins by building a separation mystery into the narrative. A “doctor” sends a letter to Laura Ashworth about a separation surgery consultation. In the book, Laura simply says she inquired about surgery for the twins, but in the film, it is unclear if she asked or if one of the band members sent it to frame her. The prime suspect is abusive manager Nick Sydney (Sean Harris), who has never liked Laura. She resolves the situation by leaving Humbleden forever because, she says, Tom does not ask her to stay. However, in the “present day” interview, she implies that if she had it to do all over again, she would have advocated for the surgery. The film ends with the twins’ sister explaining how she found them in a state of self-separation. She is unsure if Barry died first, but it is clear that Tom tried to sever himself from Barry. This not only leaves open another mystery, but it also implies that a separation surgery might have saved their

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<sup>90</sup> The book *Brothers of the Head* is much more interesting in the realm of conjoined twin sexuality. In the book, Laura, Tom, Barry, and Paul constitute a non-monogamous family of sorts. Each of the men is in love with Laura, and for a while, it works. However, Paul does not renew his contract with the band after it ends. Furthermore, Laura is frank with Tom and Barry’s sister, Roberta, about their sex lives, admitting that she often was with both twins at the same time. Roberta is not judgmental. In fact, the women laugh about it. In the story world created by the book, sexual practices between one man and one woman do not really exist, so the message seems to be that there is no point trying to oppose or condemn them.

lives. Laura and Tom may have been happy together, and Tom and Barry might still be living. Even the doctors in the film say Tom and Barry should have been separated despite the fact that, like Walt and Bob in *Stuck on You*, a weaker twin exists. Tom and Barry also share a liver, and Barry additionally has a heart condition that might flare up during surgery. If death serves as an alternative to separation surgery—and in the case of *Brothers of the Head*, the “Rose and Raven Rosenberg” episode of *Nip/Tuck*, and *Twin Falls Idaho*, it seems to—then separation becomes a different kind of threat, a “get separated... or else” situation. That the “or else” could be as workable as *Stuck on You* only pushes the privileging of separation surgeries further. They truly become *the* pathway to having it all.

## Conclusion

Although conjoined twin films continue to be stuck in somewhat restrictive categories and narrative resolutions, as the pool of fictional film and television shows about them grows, so does the opportunity for a multiplicity of outcomes. Already, conjoined twins are crossing into a number of genres, both expected and unexpected, including exploitation, horror, medical drama, indie drama, comedy, and mockumentary.<sup>91</sup> As this occurs, conjoined twin characters can engage with the world in ways that move beyond oft-tread, if not traditional, curiosities about conjoined bodies. The “Rose and Raven Rosenberg” episode of *Nip/Tuck* represent a more standard usage of conjoined twins, as their bodies serve the narrative functionality of the show overall

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<sup>91</sup> Female conjoined twins outnumber males in documentary and reality television appearances, because female conjoined twins are much more common than males in general. Documentaries, therefore, may be the space in which female conjoined twins are allowed to further develop a range of identities for the simple reason that they are more prevalent.

and the psychological needs of the two main characters specifically—both privileged, singleton, white men. However, the fact that they are authentically conjoined twins playing fictional characters brings a documentary element into the show, because their actual bodies cannot go unnoticed and thus seep into the fictional narrative. Like the intertextuality of Daisy and Violet’s lives and representations, the narrative cannot be completely separated from the truth of Lori and George Schappell’s bodies. Furthermore, being authentically conjoined limits narrative possibilities, lest another *Freaks* be created as spectators judge the use of the real twins exploitative. *The Manster* might be another typical portrayal: the “good” white male half must battle with his inner struggles against the “evil” animal/non-white half until eventually they break apart and the evil half dies. These tales follow patterns established in singleton twin film and literature more largely: two distinct sides battle it out within one body (be it good versus evil, black versus white, country versus country, etc.), and the death of one or both twins resolves the situation. In these ways, conjoined and singleton twin narratives sacrifice their bodies for similar stakes and to appease the fantasies of the masses.

Conjoined bodies, however, also provide an opportunity for breaking out of certain molds created by singleton twin representations. Though there are far fewer women conjoined twins in fictional narratives than male conjoined twins (as is also the case with singleton identical twins), conjoined women are not relegated to the same virgin/whore binary that their singleton counterparts are. This may be because female conjoined sexuality itself is threatening and so at best must be contained by way of complete avoidance, a spectrum seen in Daisy and Violet lives and Millie-Christine’s total disengagement with the topic. Female conjoined twins seem trapped in a

heteronormative story space that privileges single coupling. Even in *Freaks*, when Daisy and Violet's romantic partners meet one another, they talk as if they are singleton couples, saying that one couple must visit the other sometime. This could be seen as a territory battle between the men for control of the women's bodies (both invite the other over), but it definitely reinforces the idea that two couples are involved. However, the constant negotiation of Daisy and Violet's bodies between Violet and Roscoe (Daisy's husband in the film) indicates that there is no easy answer to these questions but rather ongoing compromises. In the context of other conjoined twin romantic situations, *Freaks* opens up possibilities for conjoined relationships simply because the film does not kill anyone involved or separate the twins as a means of resolution. (The film saves its horrific killings for the normative-bodied people threatening the "freaks.") In doing so, neither twin is more sexually culpable than the other, thus relegating the virgin/whore binary moot.

Daisy and Violet's second film, *Chained for Life*, ultimately denies both twins the ability to be in romantic situations, as does the "Rose and Raven Rosenberg" episode of *Nip/Tuck*. In both instances, partial blame indirectly falls onto the twins who are *too present* as the other twin's life partner. In "Rose and Raven Rosenberg," cancer is their reason for undergoing a separation surgery, and when Raven dies on the operating table, Rose's body gives up so that it may pass over with its partner. These women complete each other—so much so that the doctors reconnect their bodies for burial. Ultimately the twins' purpose is to reflect back the main (singleton) characters' problems, and for this reason, their development is relegated to what those characters need them to be—inseparable and nonfunctioning without the other. In *Chained for Life*, one twin kills the



other twin's lover after he wrongs her, and the legal system reasons that the murder was an act of love by one twin for another. Although Dorothy has a romantic relationship with a fellow performer, Andre, during the film, Vivian (Dorothy's twin) never supports the engagement, citing ambiguous past situations. Like *Blake Falls*, Dorothy dreams of separation and bemoans being conjoined, in fact saying she can never be happy because of it. Interestingly, in this narrative, the audience knows that being conjoined has nothing to do with Andre's potential love for Dorothy. He is in love with another woman and only uses Dorothy for her money. Dorothy, however, never learns this, yet Vivian does. If Dorothy were a singleton woman, it is likely nothing would change in her relationship to Andre who first and foremost is motivated by money. The film nevertheless suggests that a singleton existence would make things easier on everyone—from the lovers to the legal system, which has to decide whether or not to punish Dorothy for the murder Vivian commits. It also implies that being conjoined is a source of heartbreak. It does not open up the world for conjoined twins in the way that *Freaks* does; rather, like many conjoined twin films that follow it, *Chained for Life* tries to figure out how conjoined bodies can best be made to fit preexisting singleton-normative structures.

At this juncture, however, women conjoined twins seem to have it as good as, if not better than, male conjoined twins who too often are killed in narratives. Sometimes both twins perish as a means of restoring balance to their story worlds, though often only the “bad” or “weak” twin must die so that the other can achieve normalcy. In the two-headed monster films, if one twin lives, it is because he has completely shed his other, “bad” half. In *The Monster*, this comes across as a message of xenophobia—a cry to protect American men from what they encounter abroad. In *The Thing with Two Heads*,

this idea is played for comedy, as the African-American “half,” who is really a temporary host body, finds freedom only after the racist white head is detached from his body (or, more broadly, from his life, as he has been trapped unfairly in a white man’s judicial system). In both of these cases, homogenous communities are formed after the men are again singletons, though *The Manster*’s upholds a rigid and privileged ideology of monogamy and domesticity, if not racial purity, while *The Thing with Two Heads* operates in opposition to systems of privilege etched into the fabric of the United States to the detriment of non-white people. In this way, the acquisition of a non-normative body, even if temporary, allows a Black man to operate outside of established racist structures to find a workaround with the help of his community, such as being conjoined did for Millie-Christine and Chang and Eng. Again, in situations like this, non-normative bodies can open up possibilities for people restricted by other physical features, including skin color, whereas for people with otherwise privileged features like white skin, a doubled body tends only to restrict them.

In cases where white men are conjoined, separation becomes a necessity for them to function appropriately in society—and when separation is not an option, death occurs. In *Twin Falls Idaho*, although the eventual separation is traumatic for the surviving brother, it nevertheless allows him to be with the woman he loves, and the film still has a “happy” ending for the newly formed heterosexual couple. In *Stuck on You*, Walt and Bob undergo a separation surgery in order to have the best of both worlds. Already at least doubly talented athletically, artistically, and socially, separation allows them to reconnect at will when it suits them rather than having it get in the way. Theirs is a fantasy of having it all on their terms. *Brothers of the Head*, in contrast, seemingly

reproaches the twins for even considering separation on their terms. In an existence where everyone leads them more than they direct themselves (including their managers, band mates, and girlfriend, if not each other), and even the discussion of separation is seen as grounds for romantic breakups and general skepticism. Like Daisy and Violet, Tom and Barry are performers with a controlled persona that personally damages them, yet breaking from it does not provide the ease of autonomy they anticipated. They remain tied to an image and exploitative management system that haunts even their “freedom.” It is never clear why discussing separation is so detrimental other than that it makes Laura look bad. Seemingly it would break up the band, since its whole shtick revolves around the conjoined front men, but no one explicitly discusses this. This is not to say that separation *should* be their desired outcome; however, it seems to be for Tom, as he attempts self-separation. In *Brothers of the Head*, doubled bodies remove control from men who otherwise would have been “normal” and relegates them to the contemporary “freak show,” in this case the world of rock and roll.

Plenty is left to be explored in the world of fictional representations of conjoined twins, though since separation surgeries are increasingly common, one might suspect that conjoined twins will become even more closely associated with the worlds of horror and “freak show” films in the future, or increasingly rare. If singletons can get past their own basic insecurities, curiosities, and fears about being conjoined, however, options exist in these narratives that open up pathways not just for conjoined people but for singletons trying to break out of restrictive classifications as well. Instead of using conjoined bodies to play out singleton fears, they could represent new ways of overcoming rigid categories to broaden ways of seeing race, gender, or other seemingly inflexible divisions as in *the*

*Thing with Two Heads* or Millie-Christine and Chang and Eng's lives. Like the half-men/half-women who are often discussed as being akin to conjoined twins in sideshow situations for their ability to be both doubly defined and indefinable, thus allowing them a fluidity of character, space, and discourse, conjoined twins create limitless narrative possibilities if one is able to see them as boundless rather than bound.

## Chapter Four: Conjoined Twins in “Real Life”: Representations on Nonfiction Television

Nonfiction film and television shows about conjoined twins proliferate as conjoined bodies continue fascinating audiences, just as they did when sideshows and vaudeville were popular entertainment platforms. The desire to look at and engage with people with anomalous bodies transcends eras of popular culture and its many forms, and although conjoined twins rarely become the focus of feature-length documentaries produced for theatrical release, they are a staple of nonfiction television programs; many twins—still conjoined or formerly separated—have appeared on various types of shows, often more than once.<sup>92</sup> These nonfiction shows include reality television programs, made-for-television documentaries, talk shows, and prime time magazine shows. These programs represent the entertainment form most akin to traditional sideshows, outside of actual revival sideshows, because they pretend to present conjoined twins truthfully or objectively, and they offer viewers a safe window through which to watch people with anomalous bodies or lifestyles. Viewers get to look without feeling judged, and they can watch in the privacy of their homes without anyone looking back at them. This chapter identifies representational patterns in several television programs, segments, and documentaries that feature conjoined twins to illustrate a relationship with earlier sideshow practices and representations of conjoined twins. Conjoined twins on television generally are relegated either to spectacle or specimen, and even in nonfiction portrayals, singleton ideals and concerns are projected onto the twins. Alice Domurat Dreger explains that “singletons” are not only “people born with no anatomical bond to *anyone*

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<sup>92</sup> The documentary *Bound by Flesh* (2012) is one exception, but it is not included here because it does not showcase any living conjoined twins and is mostly a historical overview of Daisy and Violet Hilton’s lives.

but their mothers” but they also “understand psychosocial individuality as *requiring* anatomical individuality” (7). Not only do these ideals theoretically help maintain order through predictability, but they also at times help protect the vulnerable or restrict cultural privilege (3). These standards reveal themselves in what the shows privilege—scientific discovery, separation, independence, or some combination thereof—and usually are communicated through voiceover. Interestingly, the shows’ visuals often compete with the narrative provided by the voiceover: images of capable albeit unusual bodies accompany voiceover claiming incompetence or weakness. Voiceover often implies that the twins’ bodies are problems to be solved, while the visuals suggest that the twins already have solved their problems. Identifying representational patterns may help filmmakers break out of them to create more human portrayals of conjoined twins, rather than merely utilizing the twins for singleton audiences’ amusements or confining twin narratives to scientific explanations for their bodies and the feasibility of restructuring them.

Nonfiction television shows about conjoined twins can be broken down into two predictable categories: those about separation surgeries—either before, after, during, or some combination thereof—and those about twins who have remained conjoined. The vast majority of shows focus on conjoined twins entering into separation surgeries, and in these, science, surgical advancements, and medical professionals are foregrounded. All are highly regarded, sometimes to the point that the doctors or the technology overshadows the twins themselves. Much attention is paid to surgeries, including planning for them and their aftermath, and *individual* lives are privileged above all else, at times even the health of the twins. In these narratives, the equipment utilized or the

surgeons' skill is emphasized, if not fetishized, while humanizing the conjoined twins—for example, discussing their histories, interests, or personalities—becomes an afterthought. The twins may be shown engaging in activities, but the focus rarely shifts far away from the surgical theater. Sometimes nonfiction television shows include several sets of twins, and in these cases, usually at least one set has chosen to remain conjoined. In these shows, the still-conjoined twins act as counterpoints to scientific observations made about separated conjoined twins, or their surgeries, but these alternative voices remain safe and basic, indicating that life can be lived as conjoined twins, but it is a constant negotiation, if not a struggle.

Shows that privilege science, technology, and the skill of surgeons reinforce Rosemarie Garland Thomson's notion that "error" replaced "wonder" as the primary explanation for anomalous bodies as modern science and medicine developed. She writes:

The trajectory of historical change in the ways the anomalous body is framed within the cultural imagination ... can be characterized simply as a movement from a narrative of the marvelous to a narrative of the deviant. As modernity develops in Western culture, freak discourse logs the change: the prodigious monster transforms into the pathological terata ... what was taken as a portent shifts to a site of progress. In brief, wonder becomes error. (3)

These documentaries project error onto conjoined twins while simultaneously trying to explain, if not resolve, the problem of conjoined bodies, sometimes at the expense of their bodies and often with minimal concern for post-surgery life. The singleness of the

new bodies is idealized above all else. This chapter examines several nonfiction shows or segments that follow this trajectory but either provide an extreme example of it through their use of the film form or do something anomalous in the course of the narrative.<sup>93</sup> For example, in one show, the way conjoined twins are filmed turns them into museum-quality attractions or bodies onto which the new technologies are projected, diminishing the twins as humans. In situations like these, conjoined twins embody their “error” completely. In another instance, doctors suggest that God intervened in the separation surgeries to make them successful; the doctors seem to want God’s blessing or have a moment of reckoning where they feel they must “check in” to make sure they have His approval. Since there is no logical reason for this, this moment suggests that “wonder” has not completely disappeared from narratives of anomalous bodies even when “error” is emphasized. In *NOVA*’s “Siamese Twins” episode, conjoined toddlers Dao and Duan are brought into the United States specifically for separation surgery as a means of achieving the American Dream once separated. Paradoxically, the fact that they are conjoined twins is the only reason they are brought to the United States, and this show valorizes the doctors and medical advancements while forcing the twins to assimilate into American culture via their bodies.

In each of these shows, discussions of more-perfect or less-than-standard bodies as defining life factors replace personal stories and moments of accomplishment: the desire for “normal” physicality replaces actual humanity. In attaining their aims, these

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<sup>93</sup> Hundreds, if not thousands, of nonfiction television shows or segments about conjoined twins exist—far too many to address here. In fact, traditional local, national, and international news stories are not included at all. Several new news segments appear almost weekly—each time a new set of conjoined twins is born, goes into surgery, or makes media appearance. With the proliferation of reality television, talk shows, and cable television documentaries since the 1990s, conjoined twin appearances become untenable to keep up with. Even conjoined twins who made the choice to stay out of the spotlight as children, like Abigail and Brittany Hensel (who now star in a TLC reality show called *Abby & Brittany*), clock dozens of television appearances.



narratives frequently utilize active visuals of the twins accomplishing daily routines in unique ways that suit their bodies. For example, conjoined twins with two legs might scoot across a floor in an unusual way. Displaying these movements reflects sideshow representations where, say, an armless woman would use her feet to drink a glass of water, thus illustrating agency for people with “freak” bodies and how they adapt. Either the sideshow performer or the talker<sup>94</sup> would reinforce these visual accomplishments by stating that they could accomplish additional feats as well. The use of voiceover narration not just to undermine the visuals, but in fact override them, indicates contemporary nonfiction narratives’ investment in “error” and scientific progress over agency. This “voice of God” knows better than the conjoined twins adapting to, and making use of, their bodies and usually assigns negative meaning to them. Bodies are said to be barely usable or movement is characterized as “struggling” in the service of increasing the importance of separation surgery or advancements in technology.

When television shows highlight conjoined twins who have remained connected, they often go to great lengths to normalize the lives of the twins, stressing that their daily activities are reminiscent of everyone else’s, as are their struggles and achievements. For Abigail (Abby) and Brittany Hensel, dicephalic parapagus twins (each has a separate head joined to one body) born in 1990, these shows tend to reflect common American benchmarks, like turning sixteen and getting a driver’s license or graduating from college and trying to make it in the “real world.” After several television appearances when the girls were very little, the Hensel family made the decision not to engage frequently with the media as a means of giving Abby and Brittany more normal upbringings outside of

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<sup>94</sup> Talkers in sideshows are people who perform the ballys or explanations both inside and outside the sideshow tent. People outside the industry often call them barkers.

the public eye. Media appearances were made strategically, such as the original *Joined for Life* (2003) Discovery Channel documentary made when the twins were twelve years old, followed by *Joined for Life: Abby & Brittany Turn 16* (2006), produced by The Learning Channel. They continue engaging with media, as they began starring in a reality television show, *Abby & Brittany*, in 2012. However, they did not do any press for the show, and if the disrespectful (albeit typical) Internet response is any indication, they may stay away from future series unless in need of money.<sup>95</sup> Though the twins' anatomical makeup is mentioned and doctors are present, these shows veer away from a more scientific approach to foreground normality, often resulting in boring shows. To some extent the message of normality overrides the need for inciting incidences, or narrative climaxes, and although daily activities are manipulated into something of a narrative arc replete with tepid cliffhangers, the end result is dull outside of the twins' physicality, which paradoxically makes their shows remarkable. They could barely be more "day in the life." They eschew conflict for, say, articulating a grocery list or driving a car—feats that are not noteworthy for humans but may seem interesting because of the twins' physical makeup.

The documentary *Face to Face: The Schappell Sisters* (1999), made by A&E Television, also attempts to disrupt stereotypical scientific documentaries in the service of "normality" and to interrogate the gazes of strangers that are a part of the twins' lives. The documentary deliberately tries not to pathologize the twins, so it does not include extensive medical descriptions of their connection or difficulties surrounding separation.

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<sup>95</sup> Much response to the show focused on questions about the twins' sex lives, which were not discussed. In fact, Alice Dreger wrote an article, "The Sex Lives of Conjoined Twins," for *The Atlantic* in October of 2012, several weeks after the show began airing, because she received so many calls asking her to explain conjoined sexual experiences. This response is tame compared to readily available pornographic photoshopped images of the twins on sites like Reddit and Gawker.

It also decontextualizes the twins' lives by not beginning with biographies; instead it reveals the use of several cameras and includes images of people watching footage of the twins, even as an introduction to the show, to foreground the gaze and the apparatus creating the documentary. This structure allows for the twins' histories and facts about their bodies to be treated as secondary information after the viewer engages with the gaze of outsiders. However, the documentary ultimately gets trapped in a strange narrative not just of insisting that the twins can achieve the American Dream, but going so far as to provide an element of it for them. In this way, the documentary ultimately panders to the twins by creating the illusion of success, although their "success" is manipulated and deliberately constructed as entertainment fodder for mass consumption. Thusly, the documentary, though not exploiting the twins itself, to some extent endorses exploitation as a means of achieving "success."

Nonfiction television narratives about conjoined twins reinforce age-old scientific explanations of anomalous bodies prevalent in traditional sideshow banter and promotional materials approved by doctors who vied for access to bodies, as seen in the histories of conjoined twins like Millie-Christine and Daisy and Violet Hilton. Yet these narratives do attempt to talk back to these traditions. By examining the scientific documentaries, it becomes clear how humans are used as specimen in service of medical professionals and the technology they use. This is not to say that scientific progress is "bad," but rather to question the use of non-normative humans to create a narrative backdrop for their unquestioned existence and use. Like using conjoined bodies to represent singleton anxieties in fictional films and television shows, nonfiction shows do the same but not just for singletons but also for science. Identifying these patterns may

open more space for ways in which still-conjoined twins might be represented that disrupt patterns that privilege the correction of “error” over the humanity of those with anomalous bodies. As is the case with many attempts to utilize film differently (e.g. from trying to disrupt the male, white, or heterosexual gaze to making the film form suit differently abled people in alternative ways), early attempts are not necessarily successful. However, they do start to widen the spectrum of representation, push into new discursive areas, or even encourage others to attempt alternative play with film and (viewer or subject) engagement. More of these types of narratives could ultimately break molds that continue reflecting nineteenth century sideshow tropes and patterns that bind singleton interaction with conjoined twins to cursory questions or exploitative models.

### **Science Shows and Twins as Specimens**

Two Discovery Channel shows—the *Mysteries of Mutation* episode “Human Mutants: The Mystery of Growth” and *Extreme Bodies: Conjoined Twins*—best exemplify the trend of utilizing conjoined twins as specimen so that they either act as living examples of bodies that someday will be archived in a museum, or that they are bodies onto which scientific or technological advances can be illustrated. The ultimate goal of these documentaries is never to further understand the psychology of conjoined twins—how they adapt, normalize, struggle, intellectually separate, etc.—but rather to comprehend their physicality and what might be done to alter or prevent such physical anomalies once science and technology catch up to conjoined or other anomalous bodies. “Error” remains ever present in these documentaries, as even if the shows suggest that the twins are “coping” or “leading normal lives,” as most of these shows are wont to say, the

error of their bodies are always central to the narrative. In “Human Mutants: The Mystery of Growth,” Lori and George Schappell<sup>96</sup> are visually compared with pickled conjoined fetuses and given very little speaking time on camera. More screen time is devoted to historical reenactments of doctors dissecting Ritta and Christina Parodi, two of the first conjoined twins with medical records. The Parodis are included in this narrative because the medical community was able to immortalize their bodies (their skeletons are still on display); the Schappells provide a living example of twins who will follow in this lineage of medical history. In *Extreme Bodies: Conjoined Twins*, the Schappells are an example of still-conjoined twins enlightened by scientific advances that now exist and can tell them exactly what parts of their brains they share, and how it affects their thinking. In this show, animated MRIs are projected onto their bodies to foreground the technology, in some ways using animation to mask or obfuscate the people behind the images. Of note here is that this technological advance does not affect the Schappells at all; they tell the doctors what they will find prior to the MRI, yet they submit to it anyway. They also do not plan to undergo surgical separation unless one of them dies, so the technology is essentially useless to them, yet they play along with the narrative. In *Extreme Bodies: Conjoined Twins*, however, the Schappells are one of two sets of twins who stay conjoined, while sets of separated conjoined twins also are featured. The same technology is projected onto all of the twins, dehumanizing them for the sake of promoting the technology while privileging separation and singleton life regardless of the

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<sup>96</sup> George Schappell was born Dori and began using the name Reba while performing as a country music singer. In 2007, Reba began going by the George. However, George’s naming gets confusing because even within shows, George might be called both Reba and Dori, since some interviewers have known the twins since they were Lori and Dori. Additionally, Lori still refers to George as “she,” further complicating how best to refer to him, because it is not clear if the usage of “she” is intentional or habitual. For the sake of ease, when referring to the singer, Reba Schappell or Reba/George will be used to indicate that this is the same person with a stage name.

consequences of surgery. For separated twins Jade and Erin Buckles, the surgery causes a lifetime of additional surgeries and paralysis for Erin, yet the documentary treats it merely as the next chapter in Erin's "errors" to be solved by medicine.

The *Mysteries of Mutation* episode "Human Mutants: The Mystery of Growth," can now be found online in short clips as part of the "Best of Discovery" Internet channel. The only living conjoined twins the episode are Lori and George Schappell as its main interest is providing a history of scientific discovery about conjoined twins and suggesting how they might be formed. The show is not concerned with providing a well-rounded introduction to any of the twins; instead, they are human specimen. The website's misspelling of Lori's name on one clip's label—"Laurie and Reba"—unintentionally reinforces this notion. The episode opens with a reenactment of a surgeon surveying the death of Ritta and Christina Parodi. Considered the best-documented case of conjoined twins in the early nineteenth century, the Parodis were born in 1829 conjoined from the waist down, and they lived less than one year. They died in Paris where surgeons dissected their bodies and left detailed records of the procedure.<sup>97</sup> This reenactment focuses on one key surgeon but the dissection sequence consists mostly of close-ups of primitive surgical tools, men in white wigs, and bloodied doll figures whose heads are never shown though incisions are—all shot using a yellow filter. The show continues following the surgeon, the footage now sped up as he walks around the display of the girls, who "vexed" him. Finally, the girls' actual preserved

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<sup>97</sup> Their deaths are somewhat controversial because the Parodi family had traveled to Paris to make a living exhibiting the girls but were unable to do so successfully. Some say their parents were poor marketers. Others purport that they were blocked by Parisians for a variety of reasons including the well being of the girls and the interests of the surgeons who wanted to study their bodies. After the twins' deaths, the surgeons acquired their bodies, dissected them, and boiled their skeletons for display; they are still housed at the Museum of Natural History in Paris. For a more detailed account of Christina and Ritta Parodi, see *Mutants: On Genetic Variety and the Human Body* by Armand Marie Leroi.

skeletons, and the plaster casts made of them, are shown. The focus throughout resides primarily on the surgeon—his interests, discoveries, and continued fascination with the twins. The procedure and skeletons take on secondary importance; the focus never shifts outside of scientific advancement.

When the Schappells are introduced in this show, George/Reba’s version of Reba McEntire’s song “Fear of Being Alone”—an oft-used song in shows about the Schappells—plays at a distance in the background. The song accompanies a slow-motion close-up of Lori’s feet walking alongside George’s chair’s wheels. Lori and George are joined at the head, and since George is considerably shorter than Lori and has spina bifida, he uses a raised mobility chair. The same yellow filter applied in the Parodi reenactment creates a dreamlike glow as the twins walk through a long, marble hallway. When the twins are finally shown in full, it is in a long shot at a low-angle, but rather than giving them any agency in the frame, the angle coupled with the filter, slow-motion, and distanced soundtrack make the sequence feel like something out of a horror movie. A male narrator says their names and ages. This introduction distances the viewer from the twins and makes them seem as if they are otherworldly, if not unsettling, rather than creating a human relationship between audience and subject. However, in the scene that follows, “Fear of Being Alone” makes its way to the foreground of the sound design and the show cuts to a close-up of Reba/George onstage singing. *Vérité* images of the twins’ connection are crosscut with additional slow-motion shots of them walking down the marble hallway. Although the audience now hears their voices in addition to the voiceover, thus making them more like real people, the continued oscillation between conflicting images never fully places the viewer in the space of the twins’ reality. This

scene ends in the marble hallway where Lori and George, their full bodies now in view, rotate as if pies in a display case. The narrator explains that both feel like individuals.

The significance of the revolving shot of the Schappells can only be understood in the context of the entire episode. While the narrator discusses cephalothoracopagus twins (twins fused at the head, neck, and thorax), he turns the jar that contains bodies of infant with this condition. This shot mimics that of the Schappells, creating a visual connection between the pickled twins and the living specimen. This is followed by a tilting shot of conjoined babies in a glass case followed by a tilting shot of the Schappells. The visual match again reinforces the notion that the Schappells are but living versions of the twins in the glass jars. Not only are all of the twins reduced to how they are conjoined—head to head, chest to chest, etc.—but the imagery also suggests that the future for the Schappells, despite being mobile and capable people, looks like something akin to the pickled fetuses and boiled skeletons—mere display case items for a medical museum. Adding insult to injury, as it were, the show then uses animation to explain how conjoined twinning occurs: it elucidates the splitting of cells in the uterus that make the twins unable to fully detach and results in several types of common connections. The narrator states: “The problem arises when a twin gets in the way.” Not only are conjoined twins in this narrative mere objects for scientific study, but it also seems they are to blame for creating their own “problem.” This kind of portrayal represents an extreme example of dehumanizing conjoined twins on a nonfiction television program to highlight science, though no breakthroughs are included in this particular show.

The Discovery Channel’s *Extreme Bodies* first season opened with the episode “Conjoined Twins,” a slightly less egregious example of dehumanizing conjoined twins



in the name of “discovery.”<sup>98</sup> This episode focuses on several sets of twins, previously separated or still conjoined, to provide insight into a variety of scientific facts about the twins, their surgeries, and how current technology offers new insight into their bodies. This show uses much more footage of twins engaging in private and public activities, thus balancing the science with their daily lives. In this way, the show sets up competing narratives, as is common for nonfiction representations of conjoined twins. The visuals suggest active and healthy conjoined twins or separated twins striving to adapt to singleton life, while voiceover narration or other filmic elements promote the advantages of separation surgery and scientific advancements. This leads to a situation similar to the sideshow wherein the audience is left to select a performance’s meaning. However, without individual engagement with conjoined twins, or at least a fair amount of personal story, the viewer is left with their own prejudices—generally something along the lines of, “I could not imagine living connected to someone else!”—while additional information is offered to help settle personal insecurities about possibly being conjoined. There is a safety in knowing one might be able to resolve the setbacks those onscreen have if the viewer ever encounters something similar. This dynamic undermines conjoined twins’ ability to adapt somewhat seamlessly to being conjoined. The twins compromise and perhaps move or think differently, but to treat them as an “error” to be corrected undercuts their daily existence and potentially relegates them to being seen as *not yet* the people they want to be, or should be. It also potentially defines conjoined twins not just by their bodies but also by some purported problem to be rectified, regardless of their own feelings. The one-way dynamic of television allows singletons to

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<sup>98</sup> This is not to be confused with National Geographic’s episode of *Taboo USA* entitled “Extreme Bodies.”

project these meanings unquestioned, whereas in sideshows, performers might be able to further illuminate the normality of their lives.

In this episode of *Extreme Bodies*, footage of the Schappells going about their day-to-day lives is shown while voiceover explains their physical statistics, including how they are conjoined and that they share thirty percent of their brains. However, the camera interrogates their bodies more than is usual for these types of shows. Footage of them accomplishing household tasks like washing dishes is crosscut with extreme close-ups of their facial connection. These extreme close-ups intimately show where the twins' eyes meet, for example, and since they both hold their heads downward naturally, the camera operator would have to be not just between them, but slightly beneath them, to achieve this shot. The footage is both impressive and uncomfortable, as it violates standard notions of personal space and gives the viewer a more intimate look at their connection. These close-ups provide an interesting counterpoint to later long shots of the twins wherein graphics of MRIs are placed over portions of the twins' bodies. Often these images highlight where the twins are connected or George's back, since he was born with spina bifida. However, one of these images is placed over the back of Lori's hips and reproductive area, as well as their heads, revealing their *real* inner bodies as they walk away from the camera. The placement of the second image over Lori's hips and legs is striking, because it is unclear what the audience is meant to see. Voiceover reminds the viewer that both twins are female.<sup>99</sup> This moment calls attention to the fact that Lori has reproductive organs, but the idea is so out of context that it seems exploitative, if not childish. Lori's reproductive organs are fully formed, though the

<sup>99</sup> In this episode, Lori refers to her twin as George but still uses the pronoun "she." However, this does not seem meant to engage with ideas of transgenderism or to clear up confusion about George. The show treats him more like a woman named George.

show never discusses this aspect of their bodies. This shot, along with the previous close-ups of their connection, reduces the twins to a collection of body parts photographed from numerous angles and through various means resulting in no real knowledge or even place of inquiry to start addressing something new. In most of their television appearances, the Schappells seem willing to play along with the filmmakers' interests. While the twins are invested in convincing people that they are regular humans with individual dreams and interests who do not define themselves by their bodies (in most of these shows, Lori says she does not wake up in the morning and think, "I am a conjoined twin"), they generally do not deny the filmmakers their shots.<sup>100</sup>

MRI technology becomes a central character in *Extreme Bodies*—the character with which all twins must interact to achieve the visual overlays used to reveal their insides. Lori and George do not expect to learn anything new by undergoing this process and even the narration acknowledges this:

Until recently, their rare anatomy had only been visible through X-ray ... Now, using MRI technology, we examine their bodies in incredible 3D for the first time. We find out how they are connected, discover how their bodies work, and will answer the main mystery of their lives—whether, as they've always argued, two minds can exist in a single fused brain.

During this voiceover, Lori and George become 3D images, something akin to *Weird Science*, as they enter the machine. Further explanation of the equipment follows, and voiceover suggests that the twins have been "waiting" for science to prove what they thought to be true, though the twins never express this sentiment. The MRI does prove

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<sup>100</sup> From time to time, one of the twins will refuse to answer a question and say that s/he does not want to talk about that subject. However, in most of these instances, the other twin answers the question instead but does not avoid the topic altogether.

that one can hear and respond to stimuli that the other does not hear, react to, or acknowledge, but ultimately the experiment tells the twins what they already knew—that they share a portion of their brain *and* are able to think independently of one another. Again, the point of this scene is highlighting technology rather than providing new knowledge, but it also presents a strange glitch in the wonder—error dichotomy: What is the point of scientifically explaining “error” when the humans embodying it already know the results without science, especially if they express no interest in being “fixed” by the advancements created to “help” them? The technology ultimately can predict later chances for successful separation if one twin dies before the other, but in this scene, it inadvertently becomes superfluous, if not excessive—an unnecessary accessory made to help doctors understand what twins and their families already know. This idea is reinforced later in the episode when Krista and Tatiana Hogan, young craniopagus twins who share a thalamus that connects their brainstems, also undergo MRIs. The result is some common brain activity including being able to “see” through the other twin’s eyes. Again the technology serves only to prove what the twins and their mother already know about their brains, bodies, and shared sensations, yet the show deems the Hogans “medical mysteries.”

Unlike the Hogans, who doctors are afraid to separate because they are not sure how it would affect the twins’ brains, Jade and Erin Buckles were separated at birth somewhat irrespective of how separation would affect their bodies. *Extreme Bodies* actually notes that many separation surgeries mean a lifetime of follow-up surgeries, which differentiates it from shows that merely foreground science and technology as solutions to conjoinment. The program nevertheless oscillates between humanizing the

twins through personal footage and turning them into animated MRIs that heighten the notion that they are always bodies under scientific scrutiny. In the case of the Buckles, their parents' wishes are central to the narrative of separation, as they seem to fetishize not just singleton but *standard* human bodies so that the girls can experience *typical* life events. Jade and Erin's parents began planning the separation surgeries prior to the twins' births, and the surgeons were "starting to get to know them" while they were still in womb. Born joined at the chest, they went into surgery as babies. MRI images of two hearts show what the doctors found during surgery: the hearts appeared to be wired together by a nerve, and they beat in unison. When doctors cut the nerve (despite not being sure what it was or did), the hearts started beating independently. However, Erin also suffered a stroke during the surgery and is now paralyzed from the waist down. The surgeons say they are not sure what caused it. At the time of filming, Erin's parents were preparing her for a surgery to correct her inability to walk; she rides a special exercise bicycle in case spinal injury research catches up with her condition. Her mother says, "our greatest hope" is that Erin will walk again, while her father talks about being able to dance with her at her wedding. These comments suggest Erin still embodies numerous "errors" to be corrected, which is especially unfortunate and strange considering the corresponding images of her moving expertly in a standing wheelchair. In this case, Erin's parents focus the narrative on singleton and otherwise normative bodies that can walk and dance and have normative lives involving events like marriage. The competing narrative shows Erin moving gracefully and silently in her own way unencumbered by her body, parents, wheelchair, or any implications of what she can or cannot do.

Unlike the Schappells, adult conjoined twins who have some control of what they agree to, Erin and Jade's parents are responsible for the decisions made about what cameras have had access to throughout their lives, and it has been intimate access. *Extreme Bodies* includes detailed footage of Lori and George's connection, but those shots are not nearly as jarring as images of Erin's beating heart as her body is being separated from Jade's. In footage of the surgery, both girls' heads are covered and their genitals blurred, but Erin's heart clearly pumps while half exposed and protruding from a body cut in half. Voiceover indicates that her chest and abdomen will require ongoing surgeries and discusses how surgeons will enclose her internal organs; it then shows the surgeons stuffing her heart back into her body and sealing it. More than most documentaries, *Extreme Bodies* reduces Erin to the perceived limitations of her body. The fact that she is compared with Jade, the twin who emerged more successfully from surgery, leads the viewer to believe separation surgery can be successful, it simply was not for Erin. (Jade, too, needs follow-up surgeries, but the narrative does not focus on this.) Even in more active shots of Erin playing with her sister or other friends (they throw a party for formerly conjoined twins), rather than moving around in her wheelchair, Erin sits somewhat stationary or on a trampoline while others jump. This shot foregrounds Erin's inactivity, creating a disparity between what her body *should* do and what the others' can do. *Extreme Bodies* reinforces notions that conjoined people are a series of medical mysteries to be understood and, ideally, resolved at all costs. Even in cases when twins stay conjoined, like the Schappells and the Hogans, they are explained scientifically rather than psychologically. In other arenas, the Schappells advocate staunchly for giving conjoined twins voices in their own separation surgeries, as they

believe many may not want them. This documentary does not make space for those kinds of voices. Instead, it implies that technology is finally catching up and valorizes science as a potential cure-all for anomalous bodies in process.

Although medical narratives that pathologize conjoined twins are the most common type of nonfiction television representation, interesting juxtapositions of wonder and error occur from time to time. In ABC's episode of *20/20*, alternately titled "Two Lives, One Kidney" or "Conjoined Twins," depending on viewing format (DVD or online), "wonder" meets "error" in the operating room. This segment of *20/20* focuses on Kendra and Maliyah Herrin, conjoined twins born in 2002 and separated in 2006 when this episode was made. Kendra and Maliyah have three brothers and sisters, two of whom are younger twin brothers, and they belong to a Mormon family that is open about their religious beliefs. The episode sets up many questions about conjoined twins and the girls' separation surgery: Why did the parents wait so long? What made them change their minds? Will both girls make it? Unlike some other shows, this episode is couched in sincere love by the twins' parents. They talk of the children as miracles and blessings, and the father is even mournful prior to the surgery, realizing that something in the girls' nature will be lost after they are separated. The episode follows the girls into surgery primarily to document it, but the voices of the parents and even the doctors provide an intriguing, though subtle, counterpoint to the premise that separating the twins was the right choice for the girls, the family, and the surgeons.

The segment begins very typically of conjoined twin nonfiction narratives in several ways. The dialogue reflects a struggle between whether or not to separate the girls and if the girls' bodies can handle surgery. The twins' mother explains that doctors

suggested the twins be separated within the first week of their lives, despite the fact that Maliyah did not have her own kidney. This likely would have killed Maliyah, so the family decided against it. When the twins turned four years old, their chances for surviving a separation surgery increased to ninety-five percent, since Maliyah's body was big enough to handle one of her mother's kidneys. Here one twin is spoken of as being the bigger or stronger twin—in this case Kendra—while the other is the weaker twin—Maliyah, a common trope in nonfiction conjoined twin narratives. This represents a singleton bias whereby twins are not seen as two people working together, but are defined in singleton ways—one is bigger and the other smaller—despite the fact that together they form a whole that functions differently than two singular bodies would. They do not necessarily need the same body parts in singleton configurations. Conjoined twins' bodies, however, are rarely looked at as one operative unit but instead carry the narrative of the feebler twin leeching off its larger host body. If one looks differently, the “weak half” with her smaller arms or legs becomes an integral component of the conjoined twins' ability to move comfortably and naturally albeit differently than what one might think of as “crawling.” Active images complicate the narrative of ineffectual bodies by showing their capabilities in many medical documentaries, but they are overpowered by “Voice of God” narration reinforcing separation for individuality as the superlative outcome. In this piece, the twins illustrate how they “scoot” or crawl utilizing their two legs. (They are joined at the pelvis.) The voiceover explains, “Kendra on top navigates, while Maliyah usually plays caboose.” Suggesting that Maliyah is the “caboose” not only compares her with the portion of a train hauled along by its engine, Kendra, but it also dehumanizes her a bit, making her merely a part of someone else's



body, Kendra's, who "navigates" and simply drags the extra twin. This robs Maliyah of agency and works against the images on screen: Maliyah clearly helps the pair scoot by pulling with one of her arms. These competing messages always favor the narrator in cases where the twins are going to be separated; the narrator convinces the audience that the twins are weak, incapable, or otherwise "disabled" to prove the point that a separation surgery is not only important but perhaps imperative to the twins' survival and their ability to lead happy and productive lives. The twins' voices, which generally are not voices at all but actions, are diminished by words that define them as distressed and in need of help regardless of whether or not the images actually portray them as adapting, if not adapted, to their bodies.

Doctors in these narratives tend to be unemotional and talk about twins as a collection of body parts to be split up in the most convenient and effective manner. One surgeon here hopes to "make them two children from head to toe" and discusses the need to reconstruct the girls' pelvises, because they share legs. However, another surgeon admits feeling a bit fearful, if not regretful, that they have not done the right thing. Seeing the large wound where the girls' bodies were connected causes this moment of questioning. This surgeon appeals to religion, saying they needed God's presence to finish the surgery, thus implying that God stepped in to help and give His blessing so they could proceed successfully with the rest of the surgery. The twins' father additionally projects a sense of "wonder" onto the twins, saying they were not a mistake but a "miracle blessing," and that they bring something "spiritual" into the home. In the context of this narrative, these emotions make sense: the family is openly religious and the story is set in Salt Lake City, a city somewhat defined by religion. However, these

sentiments are surprising in the context of nonfiction television shows highlighting science. It seems odd to suggest that God stepped in to help perform a surgery, even a difficult one. However, the visual evidence of what the surgeons have done—made one body into two—is so striking that it takes them outside of their medical selves and forces them to reframe their decision. Ultimately, they say that they have done the right thing, and with God’s blessing, but it is a moment of double-consciousness—both medical and spiritual—and a concession that “wonder” and “error” still intermingle even for doctors when faced with anomalous bodies. This kind of admission is rare for medical documentaries that generally talk of a scientific mastering of the body. Following the surgery, the parents even treat the results as a rebirth, saying, “Our babies are born.”

While the aforementioned shows and segments illustrate how conjoined twins in medicalized nonfiction narratives often become specimen in the service of science, they also indicate some back and forth between thinking about “wonder” and “error.” “Error” certainly became a more dominant mode of understanding and discussing non-normative bodies in the early 1900s, in part because bodies became standardized in relationship to work specializations or physical and intellectual labor (Thomson 12). Simultaneously, more voice was given to disability activism and rights as people considered labor rights in general (12). Normative-bodied people during this time were looking to “tame,” “rationalize,” help “master,” and “demythologize” anomalous bodies, yet “discourses that now pathologize the extraordinary body,” like genetics, anatomy, and even reconstructive surgery, became tied to representational styles (12). In other words, images of non-normative bodies and their definitions remained intertwined, even as categorization and scientific explanations attempted to segregate the two. These patterns continue into

contemporary nonfiction shows, as even “objective” shows about technological advances cannot break away traditional sideshow representational patterns—or perhaps do not want to. It is an interesting juxtaposition between entertainment and the perceived pursuit of knowledge, as one seems to service the other, whether advertently or not. Furthermore, more focus has been spent on “correcting” bodies, as people became pathologized, and their new accompanying labels became “birth defects,” which beget the idea of “errors” in need of solving.

Not only do these tropes do not disappear even one hundred years later, but representations of conjoined twins also frequently try to connect contemporary conjoined twins to (much) earlier twins, regardless of whether or not there is any real correlation outside of the idea of connection. Just as biographies of Millie-Christine McKoy and Daisy and Violet Hilton connect them to “The Hungarian Sisters” Helen and Judith, who were born in the early 1700s, the *NOVA* special “Siamese Twins,” which aired on PBS in 1995, compares conjoined immigrant toddlers Dao and Duan to Chang and Eng Bunker, who lived during the 1800s. The show uses Chang and Eng to explain how Asian conjoined twins can come to America to pursue their dreams and, thus, places onto Dao and Duan a desire to achieve a singleton’s version of the American Dream despite the fact that Dao and Duan are completely displaced little girls and, essentially, pawns for an overseas medical experiment. Chang and Eng were eighteen when they left their homeland to tour in the United States. They did not necessarily set out to stay, but they did learn English during their voyage over in 1829 and eventually settled in North Carolina where they married, became successful businessmen, and raised families—all while conjoined. It is difficult to see true connections between Chang and Eng’s situation

and that of Dao and Duan outside of their race and conjoinment. Furthermore, the girls are overshadowed by the idea of the American Dream, which is projected onto them as some kind of innate desire. The doctors in the United States can give them this. Dao and Duan's quality of life is to some extent disregarded in "Siamese Twins," and certainly displaced in the service of providing bodies onto which surgeons can operate.

In 1993, two-year-old conjoined girls Dao and Duan were brought into the United States from Bangkok, Thailand, specifically for a separation surgery. They were unfamiliar with the English language prior to arriving, and they only got to know their sponsors, Barbara and David Headley, once in the United States. An international adoption agency sent the twins to see if separation was possible, and the Headleys, both medical professionals, became their sponsor family. Orphans since birth, Dao and Duan lived in at least two different facilities before leaving Thailand. Upon arrival in the United States, the Headleys insisted that the girls call them "mom" and "dad." At the end of the documentary, the Headleys say they plan to adopt the girls; in reality, a national search was conducted in 1996 to find a permanent home for them, and the Schatz family adopted them in 1997, several years after their surgeries. The girls' names were changed to Katie and Julie. The twins' story now seems somewhat unfathomable, and the fact that the Headleys also are medical professionals makes them immediately suspect. One might question if they were truly interested in adopting the twins or desirous of the experience and exposure of being associated with such a high-profile surgery. If they were sincere in their desires to adopt, what happened? The relationship between doctors and "freaks" historically has been tense because doctors are characterized as believing that they have a right to anomalous bodies—that people with non-normative bodies *owe* it to science to be

a part of trials—and, therefore, that doctors act on the side of medical progress or knowledge regardless of how their subjects are treated.<sup>101</sup> It is a complicated situation: doctors seem to believe they are doing the right thing for society, yet their interests may compromise the needs, best interests, and at times even the rights of their subjects.<sup>102</sup> This history is evident in situations like Millie-Christine’s refusal of medical examinations, at times even when ill, because of how poorly doctors treated them when they were children, and how they were coerced into consenting to a nude photograph before receiving medical treatment from Dr. William Pancoast. These private examinations have moved to the public space of television, and the anomalous nature of certain bodies makes people seem to believe that they should be public—open not just to photos and questions, but also experiments or surgeries when desired or deemed necessary.

In “Being Humaned: Medical Documentaries and the Hyperrealization of Conjoined Twins” by David L. Clark and Catherine Myser, they explain that the *NOVA* episode “Siamese Twins” is “arguably not ‘about’ the children at all, except as a means by which to represent the sophisticated medical technology available at Children’s Hospital” of Philadelphia (339).<sup>103</sup> The girls are, essentially, bodies onto which expertise

<sup>101</sup> In *Joined for Life: Abby & Brittany Turn 16*, the twins’ mother says the Hensel family felt pressure to allow access to the girls growing up, and that many people stated that they “owed” the public information about the girls.

<sup>102</sup> Fictional television shows like *Grey’s Anatomy* illustrate this dynamic as anomalous bodies act in service of the narratives of the normative main characters. However, David Lynch’s *The Elephant Man* interrogates the relationship between doctor and subject, medical theater versus sideshow stage, more thoroughly than most fictional representations of “freaks.” Ultimately, the doctor is seen as a benevolent character in the film, but he and others question his actions, while the audience observes various cycles of exploitation at the hands of numerous people, including the primary doctor.

<sup>103</sup> The 2006 documentary *A Lion in the House*, also filmed at the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, follows several families’ journeys through childhood cancer and has similar exploitative tendencies. Numerous prolonged shots of children in extreme pain are included, and in both *A Lion in the House* and

can be demonstrated.<sup>104</sup> The camerawork emphasizes this point when the girls become disembodied parts. Within the first ten minutes of the film (and only two days after arriving in the United States), the girls are filmed from the waist down to reveal their conjoinment and their shared vagina and anus. In a close-up, the camera lingers for a prolonged period of time so the viewer can see nearly as well as both Doctor O’Neill and Barbara Headley. Both girls are crying and screaming. Even though at this point in the documentary, they have not determined if the girls can be separated (that question provides the narrative enigma for the first portion of the show), Doctor O’Neill explains that they were “meant” to be separate, thus articulating the “error” the bodies possess. Throughout the show, Dao is called the “smaller and weaker” twin, while Duan has more control over their shared third leg. David Headley refers to them as “the big one” and “the little one,” before stopping himself, laughing, to note, “I guess I should start calling them Duan and Dao instead of the little one and the big one.” To justify the surgery, the narrator explains, “If the twins are not separated, they face a bleak future. The middle leg is not growing below the knee and soon they will be unable to walk.” This seems to be the primary medical concern for the girls if they stay conjoined. At least, it is the only medical concern articulated.

When the girls are not in the hospital, however, the images of the documentary offer a story that competes with the voiceover and medical narrative. When the narrator talks of Dao’s “weakness,” she looks directly into the camera—fearlessly and inquisitively. The camera pans to Duan. She also looks into the camera before

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“Conjoined Twins,” the medical care is as much the subject as are the people. Children’s Hospital emerges as the hero of each story.

<sup>104</sup> The VHS cover box for the show inadvertently reinforces the idea that the film is not really *about* the girls: it misspells Duan’s name as Duen. To be fair, the pronunciation sounds more like Duen. No last name is provided.

somewhat aggressively sticking a toy directly in front of the lens. They proceed to walk around, illustrating their independence and mobility despite what the voiceover characterizes as a faulty third leg. In the background, David asks the girls, “Coming back?” and Barbara answers, “We’re not sure,” as the girls head down the hallway. The autonomy and mastery of their bodies the girls exhibit here suggest capability rather than feebleness. Clark and Myser argue that television further disembodies the girls, as it provides yet another screen, which in turn makes room for additional medical images (MRIs, CAT scans, X-Rays) until the girls are completely dehumanized (343). Clark and Myser also mention Leslie Fiedler’s notion that at least in sideshows, the spectacle can gaze back at you, which breaks down the distinction between the audience and the exhibit (343). Certainly, much of the documentary does do this, but in these moments when Dao and Duan stare into the camera (and a second one occurs toward the end of the show), the girls look back confidently creating a potential moment for viewer engagement with them as real children first and pathologized bodies second.

Debates over separation surgeries, the allocation of body parts, and notions of whose desires for, or ideas about, “independence” are really being met are not uncommon. Clark and Myser note that the girls become representations of individuality through the parceling out of their body parts, and the doctors make clear that the division of organs is not a democratic process. The narrator explains: “Dividing conjoined twins is not about equality and fairness. O’Neill and his team have given Duan the third leg, the common rectum, and the largest part of the bladder, because the blood and nerves that serve these organs are principally under Duan’s control.” The narrator further notes that the decisions are based on “purely medical grounds” and organs are given to the twin in

which they stand the best chance of thriving. This language privileges the organ over the twin, though the idea is that if the organ survives, the twin has a better chance of survival. Dao emerges from the surgery with one leg, a partial bladder, and half of her pelvis. Duan fares only slightly better, as she is given their third leg, which eventually stops growing. Although both girls are individuals after the surgery, they still are not normative-bodied, and they will face additional medical difficulties, certainly more surgeries, throughout their lives. They will have traded one anomaly—being conjoined—for multiple others. People argue for reconstructive surgery to maintain what Alice Dreger calls an “architecture of certainty” (4)—the notion of independence and singularity as central even at the risk of making one twin’s life more difficult via issues like potentially permanent incontinence. This is clear in the comments of the singletons in the “Siamese Twins” documentary who see the “error” of being conjoined as the epitome of a dilemma to be solved from the narrator’s comment that the girls are “fortunate to be born in the age of high-tech medicine,” to post-separation comments by the Doctor O’Neill, who says:

When you undertake something like this, your goal is to see that you can, if at all possible, come out with two complete individuals who can take their place in society and be productive. I think the other physicians have identical feelings of great gratification in seeing these children grow and develop and behave like normal children.

The need for “normal children” who are “complete individuals” and have a clear place in society trumps all else, including the children’s cultural displacement, general suffering, or even desires for what they might prefer.



The notion of consent is especially difficult with children. When conjoined kids are asked, they often cannot fathom the idea of being separated from their brother or sister. Many say they never would want to be separated. Other children say separation is what they desperately want, though it is difficult to tell if they truly believe this or have been told to believe this. Barbara's description of Dao and Duan pre-separation illustrates this paradox perfectly: "I think they do understand and they just say, 'No, no,' you know, 'Don't let the doctors do that.' But then at times they seem like they want it, cause they'll separate the [conjoined twin] dolls themselves." Barbara wants to believe that the twins "want it," so the act of playing with detachable dolls takes on potentially unreasonable significance. This is very common in nonfiction narratives about young conjoined girls. When they pull conjoined dolls apart, someone—a doctor, parent, or narrator—always provides the explanation that they girls are ready to be separated. Sometimes the consent of the twins matters, though frequently it does not. In cases when twins cannot be separated, such as Lori and George Schappell, an anti-separation rhetoric emerges. The Schappells advocate for allowing twins to grow up to be old enough to decide for themselves. Separating the Schappells would be life threatening, yet they have brought visibility to the problem conjoined twins pose: Whose identities are they intimidating? If not their own, then why do normative-bodied people so believe in separation surgeries that they become almost mandatory, even if conjoinment is not life threatening? An obsession with "error" replaces critical thinking as singletons move to resolve dilemmas of conjoined bodies often solely because they cannot fathom living constantly connected to someone else. Conjoinment imperils the individualism that singletons believe everyone must want while separation may compromise the conjoined

twins' comfortable accomplishment of things like walking, eating, and sleeping. This is not to say that separation never should occur, but rather that the parameters for necessity might be reconsidered and redefined case by case to reflect each set of twins' unique bodies and post-surgery circumstances.

If conjoined twins inherently violate American notions of self-actualization and individuality by being always and inevitably doubled, Dao and Duan's experience traveling to the United States for a separation surgery takes on additional significance—that of achieving the American Dream—a notion played up in the *NOVA* episode and examined in Clark and Myser's article, which argues that the girls embody the American Dream of coming to the United States for a chance at a better life. In keeping with most representations of conjoined twins, singletons—in this case medical professionals who could not ask the twins questions about their experiences even if they wanted to—push these meanings onto the twins. This dual displacement of the twins, which is confounded by additionally being told to call the Headleys “mom” and “dad,” aligns the Headleys and the doctors with sideshow promoters who, for example, kidnapped Millie-Christine and took them on tour in Europe or brought Chang and Eng into the United States. The show likens Dao and Duan to Chang and Eng by noting that the girls want the same kind of opportunities for independence that Chang and Eng had. Although their bodies have little in common (Chang and Eng were conjoined only via their livers and a small band of flesh on their abdomens), and the twins lived over one hundred years apart, the conflation of the two sets of twins is a further indictment that singletons have a difficult time seeing conjoined twins as individuals outside of their subset of “disability.” The documentary's narrator even makes the fallacious claim that, despite their success, Chang and Eng

“wanted more than anything to be separated.” Although Chang and Eng did tour looking for a surgeon to separate them, it is largely believed to have been a publicity stunt. However, this claim is indicative of the documentary’s overall tenor—individuality is privileged above all else.

The non-medical segments of the show also reinforce the girls’ assimilation by providing a contrast between the girls “before” and “after” learning English. Early on, the narrator explains that the girls start undergoing painful procedures “still only speaking a few words of English.” The camera illustrates the pain by, again, showing the screaming girls on a table at Children’s Hospital. Pain here is accompanied by voiceover narration stating that the girls cannot speak English. (The narrator mentions that the girls continue speaking Thai to each other, but they are never shown on camera doing so.) Several scenes later, as the girls happily eat birthday cake, the narrator says, “they’re getting the hang of American life ... they understand some English and can even speak a few words.” Talk of American life is restricted to spaces outside of the hospital and scenes in which the girls appear happy, while pain is associated with being unable to speak English. This rhetoric likens Dao and Duan to early sideshow “exotics,” or people from places like Africa or the Far East who were exhibited for their “strange” cultural customs, which were embellished with elaborate costumes, staging, and narratives. Despite their popularity in the late 1800s (by the mid-1900s, “exotics” still existed, but they were generally American people dressed in costumes), the living situations of “exotics” varied dramatically. Some signed contracts with promoters, while promoters owned others. Some were kept in cages and lived alongside circus animals. While Dao and Duan’s story is not exactly comparable, there is a spectrum of privilege here that

suggests people from countries outside of the United States are still ripe for the picking by Americans invested in non-normative bodies for one reason or another. Although the means of display have changed, *carte blanche* access basically was given to strangers looking to take possession of Dao and Duan temporarily. It is unlikely that Dao and Duan would have been adoptable as conjoined twins from the Bangkok orphanage, and continued quality care for them would have been a concern. However, no mention is made of these kinds of realities, and their elimination adds to the decontextualized medical pageant of “Siamese Twins.”

Although separation surgeries physically make the twins into two beings, they may not actually cauterize the attachment of conjoined twins. This idea is toyed with in the closing remarks of “Siamese Twins” when the narrator says, “while Dao and Duan are no longer physically joined together, they, like most twin sisters, will probably be inseparable,” and studies trying to understand the psychological truth of this statement proliferate. Most formerly conjoined twins claim still to feel psychically bound to one another—an idea played out in numerous fictional representations of conjoined twins, often in horror movies. Barbara Headley acknowledges the unique trauma of Dao and Duan’s separation after the operation:

The two of them won't acknowledge each other. We've been trying to get them to communicate or at least say hello. Once or twice they did talk to each other. It was really brief. We haven't had a chance to put them and their beds together ... But basically they seem angry at each other. When Duan woke up from surgery, she asked where Dao was, and I showed her. When Dao woke up from surgery, it was like there was a phantom person.

She woke up and was screaming and flailing her arm that was where Duan was. And she was pounding on the bed with her arm screaming and turning in circles looking for Duan. So I came in the room and I quickly oriented her and showed her where Duan was and she was OK. But for about twenty-four hours she would just fling her arm over and hit the side of the bed looking for Duan.

She further explains that the girls seemed to accept the separation within about two weeks: “Dao came to terms with it before Duan. Duan was still angry that Dao was around for a couple of weeks, but eventually ... we could put them ... in the same bed and let them touch and let them see each other. And then one day they just hugged each other.” In one scene where this is discussed, the girls are in separate beds on the opposite sides of how they would have been attached. It is impossible to understand the effect of having one’s body completely rearranged essentially by strangers who are cursorily teaching you to speak their language but not communicating in your own. This situation again recalls the situation of early sideshow “exotics” who were brought from other lands to the United States for exhibition and could not verbally communicate about their experiences, because they spoke different languages. Sometimes talkers would explain that the exotics were being cultured—taught American values for a better quality of life. If the training was not taking, the performances might indicate that certain races of people were beyond refinement. Though singleton ideologies are not central here, American exceptionalism is, and curing “exotics” of their ignorant or unseemly ways would have been framed as helping them. Similarly, separation surgeries allow singletons to “cure” the error of another’s body, as documented in medical narratives like

this one, finally helping Barbara to see the girls as two people for the first time: “Dao now has a personality and she has a separate self, which she never had before.” Dao, ever the weaker twin, is reborn as a real person in the eyes of her caretakers.

Aspects of what was once “wonder” may have turned into “error,” though the awe and amazement with which people both approach and try to contain non-normative bodies did not disappear with the development of science. Representations and readings of conjoined bodies simply continue changing to reflect other interests and concerns, even as conjoined twins theoretically start to have more control over these things, or their families take more ownership over representations of their loved ones. The tension between the seeming democratization of twins who stay connected and the desire for individuality as a means of achieving the American Dream is a paradox apparently unresolvable for conjoined twins, and the medicalized nonfiction narratives reflect these tensions. Most conjoined twins say they would prefer that their bodies not be symbols of anything; they simply want to live their lives. However, people like the Schappells advocate for staying conjoined because they do not see themselves as mistakes or as people who would be better off if separated. They are outspoken in their hope that people will start accepting conjoined twins as people first with bodies that do not need reassembling to be considered acceptable or appropriate. As can be seen with families like the Buckles (and the myriad daily news stories about separation surgeries in general), there is still a tendency to think first about separation, and only secondarily about allowing twins to stay conjoined *if* they cannot be separated. In cases where conjoinment is not life threatening, the idea of allowing children to stay conjoined until they are eighteen and then legally deciding for themselves is nearly unfathomable, in part because

singletons assume they will want to be separated and surgeries are not only more complex, but adult bodies heal more slowly. Only later in life might Dao and Duan, or any separated conjoined twin, be able to understand if the tradeoff was positive or negative, or possibly what was given up and what gained. In the meantime, obtaining a greater understanding of how bodies reflect singleton concerns, how contemporary nonfiction representations of conjoined twins dehumanize them through continued pathology, and how notions of individuality might be expanded for conjoined twins all help viewers consider what it might mean to get beyond seeing “freaks” as embodiments of “wonder” or “error,” as the following nonfiction narratives attempt to do.

### **Staying Conjoined and Talking Back**

As a corrective of sorts to the dominant representational patterns of conjoined twins in nonfiction narratives whereby twins are dehumanized in the service of highlighting technology or separation surgeries, some shows that feature conjoined twins attempt to play with narrative and the film form to disrupt viewer expectations and foreground the normalcy or uniqueness of conjoined lives. Since these shows are still the exception, they have not yet established representational patterns, though those about Abby and Brittany Hensel stress normality far more than *Face to Face: The Schappell Twins*, sometimes to the point of dullness. This may have to do with the Hensel’s age, as they are now in their early twenties and trying to find jobs outside the world of reality television. Born in 1990, Abby and Brittany Hensel are dicephalic parapagus twins, meaning that each has a separate head and their bodies are joined. They were born and raised in a small Minnesota town, where their family tried to give them a standard life by

keeping them out of the media spotlight, excepting a couple television specials when the twins were very young. The family adopted a strategic approach to the media and decided to make media appearances occasionally to show audiences how the twins are doing, but on their own terms. These appearances include the Discovery Channel's *Joined for Life*, made when the twins were twelve years old, and its follow-up *Joined for Life: Abby & Brittany Turn 16*, created for The Learning Channel. They also began starring in a reality television show, *Abby & Brittany*, in 2012; whether or not a second season is on the horizon remains unclear. Being from a family invested in keeping them out of the limelight, the twins agree to portrayals that are positive, not controversial, and not particularly titillating, or they rely on their accomplishment of day-to-day activities to be captivating enough to hold audience attention. This emphasis on normality obstructs traditional narrative standards like inciting incidences or narrative enigmas—tools that typically keep viewers engaged through the manipulation of “real” events to create conflict in nonfiction shows—thereby supplanting a dramatic arc with an even-keel narrative of normalcy. Their shows are much more “day in the life” than other reality television programs, and in some episodes, nothing happens outside of going to school, going grocery shopping, or driving a car. Nonfiction shows about the Schappells, on the other hand, run the gamut. Some try to challenge audiences, while those previously mentioned might use the twins as living “medical miracles” that science may or may not be able to help. The Schappells seem open to the media in general, and in this way, they reflect the patterns of Daisy and Violet Hilton, who acted as if the press were on their side throughout their careers. Later in life the press became more burdensome to the Hiltons than helpful, and they eventually eschewed journalists altogether. The



Schappells engage the press frequently and generally go along with media antics, though at times they deliberately oppose them. These variations have led to an interesting representational history for the Schappells that ranges from being mere human specimen in shows like “Human Mutants” to turning the gaze back on people who stare at them in *Face to Face: The Schappell Twins*. *Face to Face* unfortunately reinforces some of the representational patterns it tries to counter, but it is first step toward differently constructed or configured narratives that do not favor singleton ideals and ideas about conjoined twins or only discuss them in medical terms.

The original *Joined for Life* is a more standard nonfiction narrative about conjoined twins, as it balances scientific information, like how the Hensels are conjoined, what organs they share, and what medical professionals think of them, with interviews and footage of the twins’ daily lives. The show offers two unique moments. In the first, producers have given the twins a video camera, so the audience sees from their perspective. However, this footage looks like anyone’s home video footage and therefore does not really play with the viewer’s gaze. *Joined for Life* also shows Abby and Brittany reading a list of the top ten things they have been asked—and they attempt to address most of the questions, like where do they get their clothes. (They are tailored.) For other questions, like how do they coordinate their arms while playing sports, they admit they do not know. For the most part, however, *Joined for Life* treads comfortable territory for nonfiction television representations about conjoined twins, though it never turns Abby and Brittany into bodies that need to be corrected the way medical shows do.

The follow up, *Joined for Life: Abby & Brittany Turn 16*, and the reality series *Abby & Brittany* also introduce some scientific data about the twins to provide a base

understanding of how their bodies are connected and how they coordinate movements or share sensations. Their doctor since birth, Joy Westerdahl M.D., is featured in the show. However, she is never set up as an adversary to the Hensels; indeed, even when expressing dissent over some of their decisions, she is empathetic to their situation. She explains that the Hensels' conjoinment is rare to survive because of cardiac problems, but Abby and Brittany's two fully formed and protected hearts make them able to do so. Westerdahl notes that she is interested in how the twins clap without looking down, since each twin controls one arm, but mentions that the twins do not subject themselves to medical testing unless something is wrong. This means that certain aspects of their bodies remain a mystery. For example, when talking about reproduction, Westerdahl states that two brains will regulate their one reproductive set of organs, and although she suspects everything will work normally, she says she can only "guesstimate" and would prefer to be able to more accurately "predict." However, she does not suggest that the twins owe her anything and even admits her limitations as a singleton, saying that their twin "individuality" may be beyond single-bodied peoples' ways of understanding. Westerdahl further claims that they are "inspirational" just by being, and not only can they assist singletons in understanding cooperation, but they also might help others learn to accept all kinds of people, for example of various religious or ethnic backgrounds. In other words, although a doctor is brought into the show, she is not utilized in the same way that nonfiction narratives highlighting medical advancements would use her. She does not advocate for separation, reduce the Hensels to their body parts, or talk about their bodies needing repair.

The show also does not begin with a doctor as the voice of authority. *Joined for Life: Abby & Brittany Turn 16* opens instead with an interview with the twins, in which they are asked why they are making the documentary. They say, “So people [will not] have to always stare and take pictures, cause we don't like when they take pictures, so they just [know] who we are.” Opening the program this way allows the twins some agency over the narrative and control of their representation. This immediately diverges not just from other nonfiction narratives about conjoined twins, but it also strays from traditional sideshow setups. It would be highly unorthodox to start a medical documentary or sideshow by asking the subject or performer, “Why are you doing this?” as the answer could lead to a discussion of what David Gerber says is a spectrum of consent based on one’s ability to make meaningful choices weighed against various other professional options (42). Not only are the twins explaining why they agreed to the show, but they also express displeasure at the way people stare or take photos of them. From here, the documentary establishes the twins’ daily routines: they dislike waking up in the morning (the camera, notably, remains outside of their bedroom when their mother wakes them up), they live in a nice house with a large front yard, they go to school and take separate tests in some subjects but only one test in others, they like manicures and pedicures, and they are learning to drive. Footage of these activities is shown, but its intrigue subsides quickly, as the viewer becomes accustomed to how Abby and Brittany look, which normalizes them, their bodies, and how they accomplish tasks. Allowing the viewer ample time to look at the twins as they engage in everyday behaviors lessens the sensationalism of their bodies so that they might be more accepted, and considered less remarkable, in public spaces, thereby lessening the chances that strangers will stare, take

photos, or make untoward comments. This is reinforced by the reuse of some footage: for example, a shot of the twins walking across a parking lot is shown twice, as is footage of them driving. Presumably the editors did not have enough usable footage of the twins, so they needed to reuse portions of it (this is common with low-budget reality television shows), but the effect is one of a dulled sense of exceptionalism. By the time the twins drive again, the viewer is accustomed to how it looks, and how they handle it, so the act becomes less captivating.

That is not to say that the twins do not have some extraordinary elements of their daily lives. For example, they talk of themselves as different people, with different interests, and they often have clothing made with two neck holes to differentiate themselves from one another. (Throughout the first part of *Joined for Life: Abby & Brittany Turn 16*, they wear a T-shirt that says, “Trust Me I’m Perfect.”) They, like Millie-Christine, also refer to themselves in a number of ways. While they use the “I” pronoun frequently, they also refer to themselves in the third person. For example, Abby will say, “Abby likes this,” and Brittany will respond, “Brittany likes that.” When they do this in the context of a television narrative, it seems as if they have been trained to step outside of themselves and talk about themselves as a viewer. They seem to understand that people see them from the outside and confuse them, thus they take on the role of narrator in their own story. For example, they explain: “One day, Brittany will pick the outfit, and the next day Abby will pick the outfit.” This actually can lead to viewer confusion, because viewers expect people to speak of others in the third person, not of themselves. When a scene opens with “Abby likes” and an explanation of what that is, if the twins have not already been introduced, the viewer assumes Abby is the other twin

and they are speaking about each other, which is often not the case. This play with pronouns and narrative point of view confuses the viewer but also speaks to the twins' fluid identities as both one and two people. Their mother reinforces this fluidity, at times calling them Ab-Brit. Abby and Brittany do something similar in writing: they use the "I" pronoun when composing emails. They explain that when typing, they say aloud what they want to type, and then they type it as one voice. However, if they disagree on how to respond, they reply in the third person: "Abby says this and Brittany says that." This closely mirrors how they speak, since their connection allows them to speak independently but also to finish each other's sentences and speak in unison. Not only do they know each other well enough to do this effectively, but also something about their conjoined bodies (that neither their doctors nor they can explain) allows them to continue the other twin's thought faultlessly or even speak in unison. This does not bother either of them. In other words, they do not act territorial or as if someone is speaking over them, as is seen in many singleton couples who have been together for years. Instead, the twins seem to accept this ability for what it is—a byproduct of not only their bodies but also how well they know one another.

In the television show *Abby & Brittany*, the twins' ability to speak in unison becomes the most jarring aspect of their connection and ends up competing with the narrative aims of the show. Since *Abby & Brittany* so homogenizes their lives, and the lack of conflict within them, that the sound becomes more pronounced in the viewer's experience of the show. For example, major scenes in their birthday party episode include them talking through a grocery list and then going to the store to buy ingredients to make the snack "puppy chow." The effect of this is that although the day-to-day

footage normalizes how the twins experience the world, and what they look like in it, the stereo quality of the twin's voices constantly reminds viewers that two anomalous people are present on screen—that they are different. It is much more difficult to get used to, because the viewer has no frame of reference for it. The result of the show's aims to normalize the twins, and the undercurrent of their speaking, may additionally depend on the viewing frequency and platform. For example, someone watching one episode on television may or may not become accustomed to how the twins look by the end of the episode. If the viewer returns a second time, chances are good that the twins' bodies will look increasingly routine. The BBC broadcast the show as a mini-series in three hour-long episodes, as opposed to the six thirty-minute episodes that aired in the United States. The show also was available online. Watching *Abby & Brittany* online in one sitting would further desensitize the viewer to how they look and the lack of conflict in the show, potentially in positive ways because their bodies and the show may become boring quickly, thus removing the sensationalism from them. However, the twins' speaking becomes overwhelming, not only because they talk in unison, but also because they talk quickly, and with a common affect of twenty-something middle-American women. Their synchronized speaking ends up emphasizing the lack of content in what they are speaking about while accentuating their vocal patterns. For a show about nothing but the main characters' bodies and how they achieve "normality," the sound starts to interfere, foregrounding its uniqueness to the point of undoing the show's narrative aims or ordinariness. However, this might be a place where Joy Westerdahl's notion that certain modes of comprehension limit singleton's grasp of conjoined twins applies: hearing two distinct voices at once, both singular and duplicate, upends standardized ways of hearing.

Like the sideshow visitor, the singleton viewer is doubled-up on as the conjoined twins talk back through the screen.

Nonfiction narratives about the Hensels do address issues of sexuality and reproduction, but they barely scrape the surface and do not manipulate situations in which the twins are forced to be sexual for the titillation of the audience, as do some of the Schappells. The Hensels' desires for marriage and possibly motherhood are put into the context of "normal" American teen girls who become twenty-year-olds along the way. In *Joined for Life: Abby & Brittany Turn 16*, voiceover initially poses the question of whether or not the girls can become mothers and follows up by asking, "How will they date?"<sup>105</sup> Their mother answers initially, noting that the twins are teenagers and would not share those thoughts with her at their age regardless. Abby is more protective, stating that the whole world does not need to know who they like or if they are dating anyone. Their father says if they want to get married, fine, and if they do not want to, that is okay too. He makes clear that these decisions are theirs to make, not his. Regarding pregnancy, their mother says the twins have expressed interest in being mothers (this is accompanied by an image of the twins holding a baby girl) but notes that ultimately, "It isn't an issue right now." The twins say basically the same thing—that they hope to be mothers someday, but "We're just sixteen. We don't need to think about that right now." In general, less weight is put on marriage and reproduction with the Hensels than with other female conjoined twins. Reproductive capabilities often are talked of as defining factors in whether or not female conjoined twins are "normal," especially in medical documentaries. However, putting reproductive capabilities in their place—as something

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<sup>105</sup> This question is never asked of male conjoined twins, whose ability to reproduce is always assumed as long as long as they have functioning penises.

to consider down the road and not when twins are twelve or sixteen or even necessarily twenty—helps reframe the Hensels. In this show “normal” is defined by culture and society rather than just by their bodies, which sets their representations apart from medical documentaries and helps ideas about normality and conjoined twins exist outside merely being seen as anomalous bodies to be studied and explained.

If nonfiction television narratives about the Hensel sisters break stereotypes by redefining normality in terms of culture rather than body types while subtly subverting expectations of presumed narrative conflicts in conjoined lives, *Face to Face* overtly attempts to turn the gaze back onto singletons, thus taking the focus off the conjoined twins who are central to the narrative. This experiment is not entirely successful, as it ends up reinforcing exploitation of the twins in some instances, but it does unsettle the standard medical narrative and makes the twins’ bodies but one of several focuses of the documentary. This plot structure decontextualizes their story so that viewers must piece together who and what the documentary is about. For example, the show opens with extreme close-ups of black and white photographs of George and Lori. These photographs distort their faces while separating them, which could be said to dehumanize them. However, the photographs are beautiful and strange. The camera gets closer to their faces than most photographs do, which encourages the viewer to focus on the lovely and unexpected angles and shadows in their connection. The camera placement also allows the photographs only to show one sister at a time, thus foregrounding their individuality. When the title *Face to Face* emerges, it is placed between two different photos, one of each twin, creating a singular image of the twins both facing the same direction. Since the Schappells’ heads face different directions and they must continually



revolve to speak to one person, this is physically impossible outside of manipulated photography. Many conjoined twin fiction and nonfiction films play with angles to strategically create one singular face for the twins to reinforce certain scenes. However, most conjoined twins can face the same direction, so for the Schappells, this is a more extreme move, and one that attempts to put the sisters on equal footing as individuals while playing with the title of the documentary and, obviously, the fact that they are connected face to face.

The documentary then begins with shots of an unidentified person showing footage of something to another anonymous person. The audience cannot see the footage, and there is no context given for who the people are or what is being watched. This is followed by images of people reacting to the footage, and eventually the viewer starts to infer only by context of the documentary and how the people respond, that they are watching footage of the Schappells. People seem confused at first, as if even they do not know what they are seeing. One woman says, “That must be so hard” and then wonders aloud what sex must be like as a “Siamese twin.” The shots of people on the street looking at the footage of the twins eventually are intercut with images of the Schappells jokingly saying a sideshow bally for themselves. The unidentified narrator, presumably filmmaker Ellen Weissbrod, also explains that she did not prime viewers for the footage she showed them: “You don't go and prepare people to watch a horror movie.” She similarly does not prepare people for the documentary. In other words, the juxtaposition of the black and white photographs and the footage of people responding to different images without context confuses the viewer, albeit in a way that is meant to be deliberately perplexing, thus unsettling the comfortable relationship between audience

and subject. The twins' joking bally also puts power in their hands, as they make fun of a system that historically would have used them as objects of the gaze. However, the strange comment about not preparing someone to see a horror film simultaneously connects the Schappells with horror movie subject matter, thus undermining the film's own work, and all within the first two minutes of the documentary. This continues throughout the documentary: it tries to subvert the gaze and offer the Schappells more agency in their own destiny and representation, yet it seems to accidentally undercut itself throughout.

The twins are given a camera, and they walk through the streets of New York. As people ask to take photos of them, they agree and ask if they can take photos as well. It is a strange exchange of photographic permissions as performance art (prior to the days of Facebook and Instagram). These scenes reinforce the twins' agency not only in the documentary but also over their lives—something that is stressed throughout. The film's message that the Schappells have made good choices, and that these choices are why they are successful people, regardless of whether or not they are conjoined, is clear. In the scene with the cameras, a photographer asks if he can take the twins' picture. They agree and frame him in their camera as well, stating that they "want him too." They say they want to film strangers' reactions to them so people can see what they see, which is how everyone looks at them. *Face to Face* begins by engaging in an unusual and contrived sort of tourism—a tourism of the gaze itself—wherein travelers do not travel to take photos of monuments but rather to take pictures of each other or look at footage of others. In this world, everyone is the sideshow attraction, though no one controls her or his own representation and no one gets paid.

*Face to Face* then becomes a more typical conjoined twin documentary minus medical figures who might point out why the Schappells should be separated, and how. It starts to introduce people in their lives, especially those who worked at the Hamburg Center in Pennsylvania at the time the Schappells lived there. However, it still does not incorporate traditional elements of a story's exposition. For example, it says the twins' ages but does not say what the Hamburg Center is, or why the twins were raised there until considerably later in the show. It does continue intercutting scenes of people responding to footage of the Schappells and incorporates interviews with people like Dr. Alice D. Dreger, PhD, a historian of anatomy and an author of books and articles about conjoined twins as well as the Schappells' friend Herman Sonon, who seems like a father figure to them. These interviews help viewers start to piece together the Schappells' story, and the narrative overall is one of achievement as the twins are credited with getting themselves out of the Hamburg Center, into college, and into a better life in general.

The Schappells were born in 1961, and their family did not know what to do with them. They lived near the Hamburg Center, a state home for mentally disabled children, so their family placed them in the Hamburg Center's care. When they were young, their family visited them on Sundays, and none of the doctors or nurses questioned why the twins were there even though they were not mentally challenged. George says he knew they were different from the other children when they learned to read. He also knew there was an "outside" by talking and listening to staff. Several staff members began bringing the twins books, but their IQs needed to be seventy or lower to stay at Hamburg, so George started to learn "under the table" because they did not want to get kicked out.

Herman Sonon's wife, June, was on staff at the time, and she began bringing the twins to their home. She also took them to the grocery store, and the twins credit her for their eventual freedom. They say these excursions helped them mentally "go outside" at Hamburg, as did reading. As they got older, the twins started helping the Hamburg aides by making beds and attending to other children. This made Lori feel like she was doing something other teenagers did, like volunteering in a hospital. June also tried to convince the Schappells' father to take the twins out of Hamburg, but he purportedly did not think they should be seen in public. Ultimately Ginny Thornburgh, the wife of the Governor of Pennsylvania at the time, went to facility and realized the twins did not have any limitations, and she helped them navigate the red tape to leave Hamburg. She also helped George take an IQ test, which George calls his own "rebirth."

Although *Face to Face* eventually covers the entirety of this story, it does not start to do so until twenty-six minutes into the show, when it in a roundabout way states that the twins grew up in Hamburg Center. Details are then revealed that contribute to the larger story. However, decontextualized interviews continue to be intercut with shots of people looking at footage of them, as if they can never escape that gaze for a cohesive life. Furthermore, during the discussion of how the twins eventually left Hamburg, and how they felt about it, footage of the Schappells visiting a zoo is intercut with their interviews. Visually this connects them and their former situation to that of caged animals on display. They were to some extent caged, but this juxtaposition also calls attention to the display of their own bodies in public spaces, especially since people also look at them at the zoo. This potentially undermines the interrogation of how the twins have been treated by inadvertently highlighting the idea that they, too, might be

considered attractions on display. Additionally, three cameras film the twins' interview about leaving Hamburg. Most of the interview cuts back and forth between two cameras, one on each twin's face, but occasionally a long shot reveals one of the cameras, one light, and other various gear sitting around the set. The only motivation for this shot is to reveal the apparatus and foreground the gaze. Doing so calls attention to the fact that even during this very personal story, the twins are being filmed. Later in the documentary, footage is utilized of the twins partaking in the photo shoot from which the opening black and white stills were produced. This technique is used several times including in their "music video" at the end. Weissbrod does not try to hide the camera but rather makes it part of their reality, and editing the documentary in this fragmented way removes cohesion from the twins' life story, illustrating that their history is consistently interrupted by people looking at them.

While certainly invested in interrogating the gaze and allowing the twins agency in their own representation, *Face to Face* also forces a narrative of achieving one's dreams onto the Schappells while simultaneously trying to open up discussions about whether or not conjoined twins who put themselves on display are feeding into a system of exploitation. This leads to another strange interplay of agency and exploitation that never gets resolved, though the documentary ends on a self-congratulatory note that suggests that the film thinks it has. For example, much is made of George/Reba's<sup>106</sup> singing career. Previously named Dori, Reba changed her name to be more unique and to create a country music persona. During the filming of *Face to Face*, Reba had just signed a recording contract, and Lori gave up her job so Reba would have the freedom to

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<sup>106</sup> Since George's musical career was with the name Reba Schappell, he will be called "Reba" in the context of this career.

travel for performances. The documentary features Reba's singing career prominently, mentioning that she had performed at the Grand Ole Opry and showing her during a recording session. Reba also shows Ginny Thornburgh her LA Music Award for Best New Artist and sings for her. Dreger explains in the film that:

Lori and Reba struggle with ... how to live in a culture that is a place of restriction ... but a place of restriction is also a place where privileged spots open up, and if you're lucky enough to actually be able to figure out how to take the restriction and turn it into a privilege, then you can do sort of wonderful things. ... Basically what they want to do is use the kinds of restriction that is imposed on them to retain some privilege for themselves and to speak from a privileged position and perhaps even to exhibit themselves in the way nineteenth century people did for their own profit.

This explanation is interesting, because it speaks to looking at twins like Millie-Christine McKoy, Chang and Eng Bunker, or possibly even Daisy and Violet Hilton, as models of successful conjoined twins who found their place of privilege within their place of restriction. It is unclear if Lori and George told Dreger that they would be interested in exhibiting themselves for profit, or if she is merely suggesting that as an option.

However, it does seem as if they are trying to capitalize on their privileged "place of restriction" through Reba's country music. The results seem to be mixed. The LA Music Award offers legitimacy, and Cindy Zerr, a former nurse at Hamburg who remained friends with the twins, explains that they are earning money but no one is earning money off of them. She also says that whether or not they are like circus or sideshow performers is not relevant, because they are happy. Obviously this gets complicated, because it

suggests that if people are happy they cannot also be exploited, which seems untrue and again returns to David Gerber's range of professional choices and one's understanding of his or her own quality of consent. In other words, the Schappells might not have the range of professional options they desire (indeed Lori expresses dissatisfaction with being underemployed in the documentary), so they might be choosing what is best from their spectrum of options and making the most of it. However, that does not preclude them from being exploited.

*Face to Face* utilizes a clip from *The Jerry Springer Show* to validate its claim that the twins are not being exploited, which undermines the documentary's good intentions, as the Schappells are arguably most exploited in these appearances. In setting up the clip in *Face to Face*, the twins say they have done all of the talk shows as a means of communicating about their bodies and lives. However, Reba mentions that she also wanted to get her singing career started, so she was going to "Kill two birds with one stone." Dreger reinforces the positive connotations by noting that people with anomalous bodies frequently say they receive validation for being who they are for the first time on talk shows. She also mentions that Jerry Springer is particularly subversive because he does not treat the twins with pity. Indeed he does not, though in the context of nonfictional television, few hosts do, but that does not imply admiration either. *Face to Face* is sincere in its efforts to portray the twins in humane ways that highlight their determination and fortitude in overcoming difficult obstacles, yet in doing so it contrives their success by ignoring, by way of attempting to redefine, their exploitation.

Television talk shows make up some of the most deleterious representations of non-normative people—often worse than traditional ten-in-one sideshows. Talk shows,

especially those like *The Jerry Springer Show*, encourage the base exploitation of conjoined twins by opening the up to the pleasures and projections of audiences potentially at the expense of the twins. Although the shows purport to give audiences expanded knowledge, they also stage (seemingly) outrageous occurrences involving the twins to shock and delight viewers. The Schappells appeared on *The Jerry Springer Show* at least four times, and the twins clearly are used for audience entertainment.

Andrea Stulman Dennett explains that the television talk show is:

undeniably a late-twentieth-century freak show that uses many of the conventions established more than a hundred and fifty years ago ... The freak show was—and is—about spectacle; it is a place where human deviance is enhanced, dressed, coifed, and propped up for the entertainment of a paying audience. The freak show is about relationships: *us* versus *them*, the normal versus the freaks. (325)

These statements can be extended to reality television and many forms of nonfiction “news” programs that have come to dominate television since Dennett’s piece was published in 1996. However, this kind of “freakery” for mass amusement at the expense of non-normative bodied people remains most apparent in talk shows like *The Jerry Springer Show*, which aim to titillate audiences, delve into forbidden territory, and contrive situations. At best, hosts like Jerry Springer let the people onstage fend for themselves against the whims of the audience. At worst, they manipulate situations that break the fourth wall and indulge viewers at the expense of the “freaks.”

In the episode featured in *Face to Face*, the only portion of *The Jerry Springer Show* used is when a man in the audience offers Reba a recording contract. Reba breaks



down crying, completely beside herself. Assuming Lori and Reba told the show's producers about Reba's country music career, the offer would have been staged and most certainly was engineered to maximize audience reaction. (Notably, if she recorded a full album, it was never widely released, a fact not mentioned in *Face to Face*.) Their initial return to *The Jerry Springer Show* after being offered the recording contract, which also occurred after filming *Face to Face*, was promoted as the world premiere of Reba's music video for "Fear of Being Alone," the video made as part of the *Face to Face* shoot.<sup>107</sup> The episode "The Return of Lori and Reba" aired on May 15, 2002, and nothing about this appearance empowers the twins. Jerry cannot remember Reba's name; he calls her "Dori" and also refers to her as "the one" as if going to say "the one on the right" before catching himself. He also awkwardly asks them about sex (Reba stresses that she is not interested in dating) and arranges for Lori to go on a date with Jason, who purportedly wrote to *The Jerry Springer Show* after seeing the twins on a previous show. Notably, Jason also was a repeat guest.

When Jason enters, he greets Lori with a too-long kiss. The audience cheers, and Jason continues touching Lori's back and kissing her while onstage. She giggles. Footage is shown of their date: they go bowling and feed each other dinner. They kiss several times on the date, at least one of which is instigated by Lori. Jason calls it the best time of his life. On the show, then, he gets onto one knee while the audience cheers, asks her out again, and adds, "I just want it to be you and me alone, without Reba." Lori agrees, and he kisses her some more. Obviously kneeling momentarily tricks both Lori and audiences into believing he might propose. Another contrivance follows when he

<sup>107</sup> These dates are confusing. *Face to Face: The Schappell Twins* aired in 2000, and this episode of *The Jerry Springer Show* aired in 2002, so it would not have been the world premiere of the music video. However, the producers of *The Jerry Springer Show* may have promoted it as such regardless.

asks that they go out “alone.” In most of their interviews the Schappells explain that they feel “alone” on dates, because the other twin checks out and reads a book or something to be “not there.” This is in concert with what most conjoined twins say, so when Lori answers “okay” to Jason’s request, she likely means it, potentially confusing what he is asking with the fact that Reba played an active role in their date by bowling with them and partaking in conversations. Playing this staged romance for audience amusement, however, reinforces discriminatory ideas that singletons would not date a conjoined twin, when in fact many conjoined twins have been romantically involved with singletons.

When the shock of Lori and Jason’s romance starts to diminish, a member of the audience, Eric, expresses interest in Reba and says she can call him if she is lonely. Springer invites Eric onstage and introduces him to Reba. Eric kisses her on the cheek to much audience applause. Reba has stressed not only earlier in the show but throughout her interviews that she is not interested in dating men (a fact underscored by her later transition to becoming George Schappell), so Eric’s presence onstage becomes not only a violation of personal space, but also an indication that the twins are there for the audience’s taking. In instances such as this, talk shows become more exploitative than sideshows. In most cases, talkers in sideshows stuck to well-tread scripts and often let the people on display set their own boundaries between themselves and audiences. Springer, however, encourages audiences to use the Schappells for their own enjoyment. In discussing Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the “comic monster” and how people laugh at terror to defeat it, a sort of mastery through degradation, Paul Semonin explains, “the monster represents the essence of popular culture, the master metaphor for the debasing power of the people’s laughter, which lies beneath the placid surface of official culture,

only to rear its ugly head from time to time, to remind the world of its humanity” (80). For Bakhtin, this represents an egalitarian move—a way for the “low” to thwart oppression. However, making fun of conjoined twins who appear on something like *The Jerry Springer Show* turns them into “comic monsters” for the sake of neutralizing the threat their bodies represent to human individualism as singletons understand it. Lori does date in real life, so it should not be shocking to suggest that she does, but the idea is played for outrageousness, implying that it is unthinkable. Furthermore, Springer offers up Reba momentarily for a cheap audience thrill. As Dreger states, Springer does not treat the Schappells with pity: he treats them as a joke. For *Face to Face* to not only promote the Schappells’ appearances on *The Jerry Springer Show*, but also to suggest that he is potentially an advocate for them, undermines the earnestness with which the documentary endeavors to subvert the gaze as a means of reflecting back on society what society projects onto the twins.

The contrivance of success dominates the second half of *Face to Face*, and it even tries to fulfill Reba’s dreams of country music stardom by creating a music video for her cover of Reba McEntire’s “Fear of Being Alone.” This is done in the service of legitimizing Reba’s career, but it ends up forcing an illegitimate narrative of success onto her through its use of *The Jerry Springer Show* as a breakthrough moment, followed by a music video that feels more like a home video shot at a family picnic. The dancers are all people interviewed for the documentary: they dance in a circle around the twins, and many clap off beat. The multiple cameras are again present in the video, as three cameras can be seen in one shot, suggesting that at least four are used. (Herman Sonon’s friend comments on this, saying, “Always the cameras...”) Additionally, as mentioned

elsewhere in the context of songs performed by conjoined twins Millie-Christine McKoy and Daisy and Violet Hilton, this love song takes on new significance for the twins. Reba and Lori hold each other as Reba sings, “Like a child in the night / With no one to hold you / And tell you everything's gonna be all right,” while a stuffed Winnie the Pooh bear sits on a teeter-totter behind her. Reba, with her small stature, looks like a child here being held by an adult, an idea emphasized by the fact that earlier in the documentary, Reba says she calls Lori “mom” as a joke, but regularly. Lori sings along with Reba during the video, as she does onstage—not as a backup singer, but as a participating fan. The audio does not pick up her singing. However, the dancers’ clapping (offbeat and on), along with laughing and other ambient noises, are included in the final version of the video, which adds to its home-video quality. It is unclear if this choice also was made to highlight the notion of a film’s construction, but it undermines the authenticity of the music video by seeming unprofessional while foregrounding the fact that it was staged for an A&E documentary. This has the unintended consequence of delegitimizing Reba’s accomplishments as a singer, as the music video becomes another contrived element of her musical “career.” The documentary again undercuts itself potentially through its desire to reveal the gaze; in doing so it starts to feel cheap rather than deliberate.

Despite its confusion in its own attempts to play with the documentary form while highlighting the accomplishments of the twins, *Face to Face: The Schappell Twins* at least tries something different. In her book *One of Us*, Dreger calls *Face to Face* “a new breed of documentary ... indicating progress” because it follows the twins’ “day-to-day lives” without “medicalized rhetoric” (130). It accomplishes this and yet in doing so, it dislodges the twins from their own story, which is so decontextualized that it gets lost in

reactions to the gaze. While this could create an interesting (and odd) parallel between the histories of sideshow performers and the fictional narratives that usually end up defining their lives, that does not seem to be its intent. Instead, it “seeks to dissolve the glass wall separating viewer and subject” culminating in the music video, which Dreger explains “[dissolves] the line between the typically disempowered subject and [in Dreger’s case] the typically empowered medical expert” (132). Certainly Dreger is disempowered in the music video, yet the use of exploitative moments as key factors in the Schappells’ purported success thwarts the documentary’s attempts to deviate from narratives of weakness. It falls victim to its desire to disrupt and, like other nonfiction narratives about conjoined twins, projects the interests of the singletons (in this case the director of the film, if not the medical experts involved, like Dreger) onto the twins. However, *Face to Face*’s idea that the gaze is the subject, not the twins, could be developed into something intriguing and meaningful. The documentary wants to address the difficulties and successes of the Schappells as people first, and conjoined twins second, yet in doing so, instead of highlighting their genuine accomplishments, it forces a different kind of success onto the twins that they have not necessarily achieved. Nevertheless, the form echoes ideas in the Hensels’ shows, which represent them encountering cultural difficulties rather than scientific ones—a good first step. This starts to get nonfiction narratives beyond both medical documentaries and traditional sideshow representations, both of which can serve to dehumanize conjoined twins. Continuing to push at the boundaries of the film form when representing conjoined twins may continue helping twins move into the “place of restriction” that Dreger mentions to create a privileged niche for themselves among that place.

### **Conclusion: Dual Individuality within Conjoined Lives**

Studying conjoined twins both in relationship to other sets of conjoined twins and in the context of their own lives, ethnicities, and genders to look for patterns and inconsistencies in treatment and representation opens up discussions about how they are afforded legal rights differently than singleton people, both positively and negatively, how singletons seem to be using and understanding conjoined bodies, and what the relationship is between representations of non-normative bodied people and their lived realities. Since conjoined twins are a minority group, representations often have an increased affect on their lives and how they are treated by any number of people, including strangers, family members, and legal and medical professionals. While it seems simple, if not short sighted, to argue that things like sideshows, reality television, and exploitation films contribute to legal and medical decisions about actual conjoined twins, when certain patterns in representation are reiterated continuously, and when the group that they represent is so small, if nothing else the narrative patterns reinforce limited ways of understanding joined bodies and the people that inhabit them and become increasingly difficult to challenge as a means of broadening the conversation. Looking at representations of conjoined twins is one of the only current ways we have of understanding how singletons think about conjoined twins and the thought processes by which conjoined bodies are judged or allowed and disallowed freedoms. Repeated representations of conjoined twins that privilege separation or suggest untenable discordance between conjoined twins' personalities (for example, the "good" and "bad" twin topos) limit the ability of audiences to reconsider the dual-individuality that conjoined twins possess. Furthermore, a narrative of individuality at all costs remains

dominant even if at the expense of actual conjoined twins and their bodies. Too often in real life, conjoined twins are seen as being in need of immediate repair (separation) without consideration of the consequences. Doctors and parents alike put conjoined twins through surgeries that may not positively affect their quality of life seeming for the sake of creating an individuality singletons can better comprehend, which is privileged above all else. Reframing these conversations may help parents making difficult choices as well as conjoined twins who continue living as connected people. Parents might be able to envision alternatives to one strict notion of individuality and consider the possibility that being conjoined does not have to be the nightmare scenario horror movies or singleton biases encourage us to believe. Furthermore, expanding these conversations may have broader consequences, in that other people with bodies that diverge from the mainstream might see new connections between conjoined twins and theories about a multiplicity of identities being forced into something more coherent and mainstream despite the individual's choice.

Understanding representations of conjoined twins allows scholars to further probe how marginalized people are portrayed in popular culture, what influences those portrayals, and how they might be expanded to create more inclusive depictions of various kinds of humans. Throughout this study, conjoined twins have been in conversation with numerous other groups of people: because of the myriad ways in which twins may be conjoined, they have a multifaceted identification that may relate to other disabilities. However, their bodies also correspond with issues of race and gender equality. Conjoined twins like Millie-Christine McKoy were very much like singleton women of African descent during the time period in which they lived except that their

connection made them extraordinary and afforded them additional opportunities and freedoms. Their struggles with their legal rights as well as their interactions internationally with people of various classes and races provide insight not just into their lives as performing conjoined twins but also into the lives of American slaves, or recently freed slaves, and the obstacles incurred during that period or what was and was not deemed appropriate. Their histories also elucidate how the relationship between publicity, performance, and education can be used not just to one's advantage, but also to the advantage of a larger group. They were able to reframe conversations about educational abilities of Black people by simply speaking with white people within a completely different context. Gender also affected their lives, as they were discouraged from even considering romance—a marked difference from Chang and Eng Bunker who married interracially during the same time period. The ways in which Millie-Christine's lives intersect with and diverge from other people who share their relative categories create points of understanding about all of these elements, as evidenced in their existing promotional materials. The fairly recent discovery of the document wherein Millie-Christine's parents claim the twins' managers were not paying them suggests that more digging into historical records should lead to increased insight about their careers and rights. Additionally, medical documents and other archival materials unseen for decades consistently are becoming electronically available, so an enhanced understanding of their relationships with doctors and other professional situations should come to fruition soon.

Daisy and Violet Hilton, in contrast, engaged in numerous love affairs and dated freely, thus seemingly making advancements in that area from Millie-Christine, although Daisy and Violet were white and therefore less stigmatized by sexuality than Millie-



Christine likely would have been. However, Daisy and Violet encountered legal issues with marriage that Chang and Eng had not, which indicates a gendered opposition to female conjoined-twin marriage. This idea is played out in both of the Hilton sisters' film appearances—*Freaks* and *Chained for Life*. Looking at these discrepancies allows for an understanding of how “disability” was foregrounded for Millie-Christine and Chang and Eng, therefore allowing them to encounter the world as an anomaly first, prove themselves worthwhile in numerous ways from business savvy and general intellect and grace. By exhibiting their abilities, they altered perceptions of Black or Asian people during the time, thereby expanding opportunities for themselves when compared with others of their respective races. By utilizing the aggrandized mode of representation, all three sets of twins ascended to the heights of popularity during certain points of their careers. Millie-Christine and Chang and Eng both stuck with a coherent version of these personas throughout their lives. Daisy and Violet, in contrast, eventually began playing the press for sympathy, which backfired by eventually making them look simply pitiful. However, their visibility nevertheless meant that people were forced to think about sexually active conjoined twins, something that has not occurred in the same way since. This behavior opened up negative conversations about women, and although Daisy and Violet seemingly had fewer obstacles to overcome, they were relegated to tabloid sensations and taken less seriously. Comparing the three sets of twins indicates that creating an identity outside of celebrity scandal was imperative for these conjoined twins. Although Chang and Eng's many biracial children theoretically should have been concerning for other citizens during the mid-1800s, the fact that they were industrious farmers and business owners contributed to their ability to be perceived as valuable

members of a small town. Daisy and Violet, however, continued being portrayed as aging celebrities—has-beens relying on their anomalous bodies and extreme love affairs to grasp at the limelight.

Although performance venues for conjoined twins have changed since the periods in which these three sets of twins lived, conjoined bodies nevertheless continue to be used by American popular culture to play out narratives that give insight into how singletons make meaning of them. They also remain bodies onto which normative-bodied people project their own fears or fantasies, effectively removing some of the “humanity” from conjoined people by limiting available notions of “identity.” This is seen in both fictional representations of doubled bodies, including conjoined twins and two-headed monsters, and nonfictional representations of conjoined twins in things like reality shows, made-for-television documentaries, and news-magazine stories. These film and television representations assign meaning to the bodies by playing out singleton fears within one body. For example, often good twins must resolve their relationship with their evil half. In other stories, twins must be separated in order to achieve romantic or emotional harmony. In the cases of real conjoined twins, most of the time attaining individuality is seen as the goal, and separation is privileged regardless of whether or not still-conjoined twins suggest they can possess individuality while remaining conjoined. Seeing solely through the lens of singletons and projecting meanings that make the easiest sense to those with normative bodies limits not only what conjoined twins might be able to impart to the world about things like cooperation and acceptance but they also restrict definitions of “humanity” and remove some of it from people with conjoined bodies by suggesting that they are not yet fully human, certainly not ideal.

While much can be learned from conjoined twins about partnership, cooperation, and egalitarian living and applied to singleton lives, it is important to start considering conjoined twins as humans outside of notions of singleness. This may mean redefining “individuality” for conjoined twins, and certainly reexamining what that means when considering doubled individuals. At minimum, it requires opening up a spectrum of definitions and accepting a fluidity of usages that will allow conjoined twins to respond to others and talk of themselves as both one and two. This is important not because conjoined twins are expected to become more common in society, but because the ways in which they continue to be represented in popular culture influence decisions people make about their lives. Like all people, it is important that they are considered humans first rather than bodies others can control for their own comfort or attach meaning to based on limited understandings of humanity. Conjoined twins do not need to be seen as flawed bodies, monsters, or performing attractions innately in need of correction, or bound because they cannot be corrected, as they have been historically represented. Instead, being conjoined can open up possibilities for humans—conjoined and singleton alike; when approached differently, untethered from their singleton counterparts, they can broaden notions of individuality, humanity, partnership, cooperation, and normality. Comparing sets of conjoined twins and their representations elucidates the similarities and differences in perception and treatment they receive, especially against singleton bodies perceived not just as the norm, but also as the only comprehensive goal. Conjoined twins are seen as unable to fully actualize unless separated and therefore relegated to being bodies in process. Instead, we might differently conceptualize the relationship between bodies and self in conjoined twins for a greater understanding of a

multiplicity of identities in general. Rather than seeing two identities in need of segregation from one another or two people possessing conflicting individualities and identities, one might consider that there is no struggle between singularity and duality in conjoined personalities—that this is a singleton invention created because singletons cannot fully comprehend what it might mean or how it works. Instead of prescribing methods for attaining a potentially more normative humanity like separation surgeries at all costs, redefining ideas about individuality broadens notions of humanity and individualism and allows for the ability to see conjoined twins as one person and two simultaneously and conjoined.

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Browning’s *Freaks* and *The Devil Doll*.” (The Shows of Violence.) *Journal of*  
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Clark, David L. and Catherine Myser. "Being Humaned: Medical Documentaries and the Hyperrealization of Conjoined Twins." Thomson 338-55.

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Cook, James W., Jr. "Of Men, Missing Links, and Nondescripts: The Strange Career of P. T. Barnum's 'What is It?' Exhibition." Thomson 139-57.

Cullen, Frank. *Vaudeville, Old & New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America*. New York: Routledge, 2007. Print.

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Dennett, Andrea Stulman. "The Dime Museum Freak Show Reconfigured as Talk Show." Thomson 315-26.

Dreger, Alice Domurat. *One of Us: Conjoined Twins and the Future of Normal*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2004. Print.

*Face to Face: The Schappell Twins*. Dir. Ellen Weissbrod. Perf. Lori Schappell, Reba Schappell, Alice Dreger. A&E Television Networks, 1999. DVD.

*Freaks*. Dir. Tod Browning. Perf. Harry Earles, Wallace Ford, Olga Baclanova, Daisy Earles, Daisy Hilton, Violet Hilton. MGM, 1932. DVD.

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- Gold, Sarah. "Millie-Christine McKoy & the American Freak Show: Race, Gender, and Freedom in the Postbellum Era, 1851-1912." *Berkeley Undergraduate Journal* 23.1 (2010): 1-16. Print.
- Gonder, Patrick. "Like a Monstrous Jigsaw Puzzle—Genetics and Race in Horror Films of the 1950s." *Velvet Light Trap* 52 (2003): 33-44. Print.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. "Intolerable Ambiguity: Freaks as/at the Limit." Thomson 55-66.
- Hawkins, Joan. "'One of Us': Tod Browning's *Freaks*." Thomson 265-76.
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- . "Private Life of the Siamese Twins: Chapter III." Ed. Ethelda Bedford. *The American Weekly* 24 Sept 1944: 18–19. Print.
- . "Private Life of the Siamese Twins: Chapter IV." Ed. Ethelda Bedford. *The American Weekly* 1 Oct 1944: 18–19. Print.
- . "Private Life of the Siamese Twins: Chapter V." Ed. Ethelda Bedford. *The American Weekly* 8 Oct 1944: 20–21. Print.
- . "Private Life of the Siamese Twins: Chapter VI." Ed. Ethelda Bedford. *The*

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*Incredible Two-Headed Transplant, The*. Dir. Anthony M. Lanza. Perf. Bruce Dern, Pat Priest, Albert Cole, John Bloom, Casey Kasem. American International Pictures: 1971. DVD.

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*Manster, The*. Dir. George P. Breakston and Kenneth G. Crane. Perf. Peter Dyneley, Terri Zimmern, Tetsu Nakamura. Alpha Video, 1959. DVD.

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McKoy, Christine and Millie McKoy. “The History of the Carolina Twins Told in ‘Their



- Own Peculiar Way' by 'One of Them.'" Sideshow Pamphlet. Buffalo: Buffalo Courier Printing House. 1869. Print.
- "Misses Millie and Christine." *The Lancet*. 27 May 1871: 725-26. Print.
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- Pancoast, Wm. H., M.D. "The Carolina Twins." *Photographic Review of Medicine and Surgery*. Ed. F. F. Maury, M.D. and L. A. Duhring, M.D. J. B. Lippincott & Co.: Philadelphia, 1871. 42-57. Print.
- Pingree, Allison. "The 'Exceptions that Prove the Rule': Daisy and Violet Hilton, the 'New Woman,' and the Bonds of Marriage." Thomson 173-84.
- Quigley, Christine. *Conjoined Twins: An Historical, Biological and Ethical Issues Encyclopedia*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc, 2003. Print.
- "Return of Lori and Reba, The." *The Jerry Springer Show*. Universal. 2002. Web.
- "Rose and Raven Rosenberg." *Nip/Tuck*. Created by Ryan Murphy. Perf. Dylan Walsh, Julian McMahon, Lori Schappell, Reba Schappell, Joely Richardson, and Roma Maffia. FX. 2004. DVD.
- Samuels, Ellen. "Examining Millie and Christine McKoy: Where Enslavement and Enfreakment Meet." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 37. 1 (2011): 53-81. Print.

- Semonin, Paul. "Monsters in the Marketplace: The Exhibition of Human Oddities in Early Modern England." Thomson 69-81.
- "Siamese Twins." *NOVA*. Public Broadcasting Service. 1995. VHS.
- Skal, David J. and Elias Savada. *Dark Carnival: The Secret World of Tod Browning*. New York: Anchor, 1995. Print.
- "Souvenir and Life Story of San Antonio's Siamese Twins Daisy and Violet Hilton." Sideshow Pamphlet. San Antonio: Naylor Printing Co., 1925. Print.
- Stuck on You*. Dir. Bobby Farrelly and Peter Farrelly. Perf. Matt Damon, Greg Kinnear, Eva Mendes, Cher. Twentieth Century Fox, 2003. DVD.
- Thing with Two Heads, The*. Dir. Lee Frost. Perf. Roosevelt Grier, Ray Milland, Don Marshall. American International Pictures, 1972. DVD.
- Thomas, Kevin. "Symbolic Impact in *Two Heads*." Rev. of *The Thing with Two Heads*, dir. Lee Frost. *Los Angeles Times* 5 Dec. 1972. Web. 24 Nov. 2013.
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- . "Introduction: From Wonder to Error—a Genealogy of Freak Discourse in Modernity." Thomson 1-19.
- Twin Falls Idaho*. Dir. Michael Polish. Perf. Mark Polish, Michael Polish, Michele Hicks. Columbia TriStar, 1999. DVD.
- "Two Lives, One Kidney." Aka "Conjoined Twins." *20/20*. ABC. 2007. DVD.
- Wallace, Irving and Amy Wallace. *The Two: The Story of the Original Siamese Twins*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978. Print.

## Susan Santha Kerns

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### EDUCATION

**Ph.D.**, English (Modern Studies), University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee 2013  
 Dissertation Title: *Propagating Monsters: Conjoined Twins and Popular Culture*  
 Director: Dr. Tasha Oren

**M.A.**, English Literature, University of Northern Iowa 2002  
 Thesis Title: *The Makeover of the American Teen Movie*  
 Director: Dr. Grant Tracey

**Summer Graduate Seminar**, Cinema Studies  
 Tisch School of the Arts at New York University 2001  
 Instructor: J. Hoberman

**B.A.**, Journalism, University of Texas—Austin 1998

### SELECT MEDIA PRODUCTION

#### Producer

*Last of the Lawsonomists*. Dir. Ryan Sarnowski. Feature Documentary. HD. In production. **Trailer:** <http://vimeo.com/59344361>

“Love You Still.” Dir. Michael Viers. Short Film. HD (RED Epic). 2013.

“The Vampire Formerly Known as Dracula.” Dir. Nathaniel Schardin. Short film. HD (RED Epic). 2012.  
**Winner:** Best Student Film (Beloit International Film Festival)

“Memento Mori.” Dir. Karen Erbach. Short film. HD (RED One). 2011.  
**Winner:** Audience Award Best Wisconsin Film (Green Bay Film Festival)

“Spare Change.” Dir. Aaron Greer. Short film. HD (RED). 2010.  
**Winner:** Best Wisconsin Film (Beloit International Film Festival)  
 Audience Choice Award (Central Wisconsin Film Festival)

“Starring Mickey Burgermeister.” Dir. Tate Bunker. Short film. HD. 2010.  
**Winner:** Filmmaker-in-Residence Award (Milwaukee Film Festival)

#### Co-Director and Screenwriter.

“Missed Connections.” Co-Dir. Kara Mulrooney. Short film. HD. 2011.  
**Winner:** Best Wisconsin Film (Milwaukee Short Film Festival)

#### Screenwriter.

*Little Red*. Dir. Tate Bunker. Feature film. HD (RED One). 2012.

**Winner:** Audience Award: Best Feature (Berlin Independent Film Festival)  
 Best Feature Film (Canada International Film Festival)  
 Best Narrative Feature (Great Lakes International Film Festival)  
 Audience Award Best Dramatic Film (Driftless Film Festival)  
 Special Jury Prize for Acting—Mark Metcalf (Driftless Film Festival)  
 Excellence in Cinematography Award—Carlo Besasie (Driftless Film Festival)  
 Best Director—Tate Bunker (Rainier Independent Film Festival)

**Asst. Director.**

“Ward Three.” Dir. Jason Satterfield. Short film. HD (RED). 2009.

“Clean.” Dir. Michael Kubaszak. Short film. 35mm. 2009.

**Production Manager.**

“The Funeral.” Dir. Iverson White. Short film. 16mm and HD (Red One). 2009.

**Screenwriting and Filmmaking Mentor.**

My Milwaukee documentary shorts program. 2007-2008.

**SELECT COURSES DESIGNED AND TAUGHT**

**Columbia College Chicago**, Assistant Professor Cinema Art + Science      2013-Present

Moving Image Arts

Moving Image Production I

**University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, WI**, Associate Lecturer      2002-2011

Eng 111: *Film, Television, and the Entertainment Arts* (online)

FS 212 (Special Topics in Film Studies): *Film and the Internet*

FS 212 (Special Topics in Film Studies): *90s Cinema: Alternative Dimensions*

FS 212 (Special Topics in Film Studies): *Sideshows and Popular Culture*

FS 212 (Special Topics in Film Studies): *U.S. Independent Cinema*

Eng 286: *Writing about Film and Television* (online)

Eng 290: *Introduction to Film*

Eng 291: *Introduction to Television Studies*

Eng 293: *Literature and Media: Carnivals and Sideshows in Popular Culture*

Eng 295: *Women and Film: Contemporary Female Directors*

**PUBLICATIONS**

**Articles and Book Chapters**

“A Double Concerto: Sean and Christian as Single-Bodied Conjoined Twins.” *Nip/Tuck: Television that Gets Under Your Skin*. Ed. Roz Kaveney and Jennifer Stoy. I.B. Tauris: London, 2011.

“O Homer, Where Art Thou?: A Greek Classic Becomes an American Original.” *Xchanges: An Electronic Journal*. Ed. Julianne Newmark. 1.2 (2002)  
[www.american.studies.wayne.edu/xchanges/intro.html](http://www.american.studies.wayne.edu/xchanges/intro.html)

### Reviews and Other Publications

*The Martini Shot*. MilwaukeeMagazine.com Ed. Cristina Daglas. Weekly blog, 2010-2011.

“The Everyday Fabulist.” Artist Profile: Tate Bunker. *Mary L. Nohl Fund Fellowships for Individual Artists Catalog*. Ed. Polly Morris. 2009.

“I Was a Teenage Con Artist: Peter Fenton’s *Eyeing the Flash*.” *The Cream City Review*. Ed. Phong Nguyen. 30.2 (2006): 210-213.

“Collaboration Through Cohabitation: A Review of Jane Gallop’s *Living With His Camera*.” *The Cream City Review*. Ed. Erica Wiest. 28.1 (2004): 151-154.

“Morning Cup.” Poem. *Matchbook*. Ed. Friedrich Kerksieck. 1.1 (2004): 19-21.

“Sex, Sloth, and Savage Acts: A Review of Dan Savage’s *Skipping Towards Gomorrah*.” *The Cream City Review*. Ed. Erica Wiest. 27. 2 (2003): 125-127.

Research Assistant and Copyeditor. *Shelley’s Textual Seductions: Plotting Utopia in the Erotic and Political Works*. Dr. Samuel Lyndon Gladden. Routledge, 2002.

### CONFERENCE PAPERS

Panel Chair and Participant. “Returning the American Dream: The Beales as Anti-Consumerist Models.” Screening Decadence: The Legacies of the Maysles’ *Grey Gardens*. *Society for Cinema and Media Studies*. Los Angeles, CA, 2010.

“*Freaks*, Conjoined Twins, and Public Space.” Panel: On Sibling Incest, Conjoined Twins, and Kinks in the Queer Historical Narrative. Center for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Studies. Milwaukee, WI, 2009.

“The Dual Nature of Change: Conjoined Twins, Gender, Race, and Social Ability.” *Women’s and Gender History*. Urbana-Champaign, IL, 2009.

Panel Chair and Participant. “Merging Church and State Fair through Deviant Bodies in HBO’s *Carnivale*.” Excessive Designs: Melodrama and Contemporary Television. *Society for Cinema and Media Studies*. Philadelphia, PA, 2008.

“Sideshowes in the 1990s: Reincarnating the Remains of Aberrant Amusements.” *Midwest Interdisciplinary Graduate Conference*. Milwaukee, WI, 2008.

Panel Chair and Participant. “Sculpting Spectators and Rewriting History: The *Freaks* DVD and What (not) to See.” Media, Instruction, and the Creation of “Free” Bodies in Public Spaces. *Society for Cinema and Media Studies*. Chicago, IL, 2007.

“Alive on the Inside! (and Talking Back): Conjoined Twins Resisting the Gaze while on Display.” *Midwest Interdisciplinary Graduate Conference*. Milwaukee, WI, 2007.

“Compos(t)ing Non-FYC Courses: Regenerating Film Studies Curriculum Out of Composition Theory.” *Conference on College Composition and Communication*. Chicago, IL, 2006.

“Paul and Emily Should Both be Run out of Town!!!: Fan E-mail and *As the World Turns*.” *Console-ing Passions Conference*. Milwaukee, WI, 2006.

Panel Chair and Participant. “Roaming Discourses and Underlying Illuminations: Gossip and Rumor in *Lucia*.” *Narration in Exile: Female Memory and Voice in Third Cinema* *Midwest Modern Language Association*. Milwaukee, WI, 2005.

“Rhetorical Listening, Transculturation, and Border Thinking.” *Feminism(s) and Rhetoric(s) Conference*. Houghton, MI, 2005.

“(De)Forming Film Studies: Composition Curriculum in the Film Classroom.” *Conference on College Composition and Communication*. San Francisco, CA, 2005.

“No Ordinary Truck Stop Special: Mothers, Daughters, and Desire in *Gas Food Lodging*.” *Midwest Modern Language Association*. Chicago, IL, 2003.

“O Homer, Where Art Thou?: Searching for *The Odyssey* in the Coen Brothers’ Filmic Reinvention of the Classical Myth.” *Southwest/Texas Popular Culture Association*. Albuquerque, NM, 2002.

“Penetrating Emma: Female Agency in Jane Austen’s Nineteenth-Century Matchmaker.” *Women Writers, Specula/tions*. Cedar Falls, IA, 2001.

## **FILM FESTIVAL EMPLOYMENT AND VOLUNTEERISM**

**Chicago International Film Festival *Education Committee*.** 2013-Present

**Milwaukee Film *Education Director*.** 2011 – 2013  
Programmed and operated the Milwaukee Children’s Film Festival. Expanded and ran filmmaking and screenwriting programs for youth and adults. Developed the Milwaukee Film Festival’s Panels and Conversations series and programmed the 2012 J. Hoberman Tribute.

**Green Bay Film Festival *Future Filmmakers Judge*.** 2012

**UWM Student Film Festival *Judge*.** Winter 2009 and 2011

**Milwaukee Film *Features Programming Committee Member and Education Board Member*.** 2009-2010

**Geneva Film Festival *Screenplay Competition Judge.*** 2010

**Milwaukee International Film Festival *Midwest Features Committee.*** 2005-2007

**Hearst Center for the Arts (Cedar Falls, IA) *Creator and Programmer:***  
“First Fridays” Film Series. 2001-2002

**South by Southwest Film Festival. *Panelist Liaison.*** 1996-1998

#### **ADMINISTRATIVE and RELATED WORK EXPERIENCE**

***Film Archivist.*** Letters and Sciences Media Collection, UWM. 2003-2009

***Grant Writer.*** Found the Ribbon Films, LLC. 2007

***Conference Co-Chair.*** Midwest Interdisciplinary Graduate Conference. 2004-2007

***Reporter and Copyeditor.*** Dow Jones Newswire. 1999-2002

***Film Critic.*** CitySearch.com. 1997-1998

#### **SELECT MEDIA and PUBLIC APPEARANCES**

Panelist. “Filmmakers Meet Entrepreneurs.” Milwaukee Film Festival. Oct. 6, 2013.

“The Last of the Lawsonomists Lives On.” By Matthew Mueller. OnMilwaukee.com.  
August 23, 2013.  
<http://onmilwaukee.com/movies/articles/lastofthelawsonomists.html>

“Last of the Lawsonomists.” *The Pictures Get Smaller.* Host Adam Ochonicky.  
Riverwest Radio. August 14, 2013.  
<https://soundcloud.com/riverwestradio/19-00-00-the-pictures-get-2>

Presentation. “Easy Film Projects.” Milwaukee Public Schools Summer Training. May 18, 2013.

Panelist. Media and Creative Arts Industry Forum. Milwaukee Area Technical College.  
Chair: Maggie Kuhn Jacobus. May 16, 2013.

“Women Filmmakers.” *The Pictures Get Smaller.* Host Adam Ochonicky. Riverwest  
Radio. January 9, 2013.  
<http://riverwestradio.com/the-pictures-get-smaller-january-9th-2013/>

“Kara Mulrooney & Susan Kerns Talk about Their Film, Missed Connections.” MKE  
Short Fest Blog. October 15, 2012.  
<http://mkeshortfest.blogspot.com/2012/10/kara-mulrooney-susan-kerns-talk-about.html>



“Milwaukee Film Festival Preview.” *The Pictures Get Smaller*. Host Adam Ochonicky. Riverwest Radio. September 26, 2012.  
<http://riverwestradio.com/the-pictures-get-smaller-september-26th-2012/>

Panelist. *Screenwriting Seminar* and *Filmmaking Seminar*. Green Bay Film Festival. March 24, 2012.

*Dirty Girl* Roundtable Discussion with Dr. Heather Warren-Crow. UWM Union Art Gallery. Curator: Andrea Avery. March 15, 2012.

“*Louder than a Bomb* at the Milwaukee Film Festival.” By Lisa Goldman. 88.9RadioMilwaukee. October 25, 2011.  
<http://www.radiomilwaukee.org/initiatives/make-difference/louder-bomb-milwaukee-film-festivalmake-difference-week-7>

“Women Writers: Finding a Voice, Finding a Theme.” Norman Gill Lecture Series. North Shore Public Library. Curator: Martin Hintz. April 14, 2011.

“Make Milwaukee”: Gal Friday and Missed Connections! By Adam Carr. 88.9RadioMilwaukee. January 20, 2011.  
<http://www.radiomilwaukee.org/initiatives/make-milwaukee/make-milwaukee-gal-friday-and-missed-connections>

“Girls on Film.” By Martin Hintz. *M Magazine*. Eds. Janet Raasch, Jordan Dechambre, and Amy Siewert. November 2010: 22.  
[http://www.gmtoday.com/content/m\\_magazine/2010/November/m\\_1110\\_22.asp](http://www.gmtoday.com/content/m_magazine/2010/November/m_1110_22.asp)

“Not your Average Gal Friday.” By Danielle Romo. Third Coast Digest. TCD.com July 15, 2010. <http://thirdcoastdigest.com/2010/07/not-your-average-gal-friday/>

Presentation. “Conjoined Twins.” Pecha Kucha Milwaukee. May 11, 2010.

Panelist. Milwaukee Artist Resource Network Film Review Panel. Dec. 2, 2009.

WMSE 91.7 Radio Interview for *Resurrection Ferns*. Sept. 14, 2009.

“Road Movie Covers a lot of Ground.” By Neill Kleven. *Citigal Magazine*. Eds. Derek Jacobs and Melanie Beres. 3.1 (2008): 32-33.

“My Milwaukee Film Screening.” *Fox 6 WakeUp News*. Feb. 19, 2008.

“Feminist Media Conference: UWM Panel Examines Modern Soap Opera-Watching.” By Laura L. Hunt. UWM.edu/News May 22, 2006.

## HONORS and AWARDS

Pace-Setter Award, Milwaukee Short Film Festival

2013



Tennessee Graduate Research Fellowship, Center for 21 <sup>st</sup> Century Studies, UWM	2010
Graduate School Dissertation Fellowship, UWM	2008-2009
Graduate Travel Award, UWM	2005
Graduate Tuition Scholarship Recipient, UNI	2001-2002
Graduate Travel Award, UNI	2002

**PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS**

Society for Cinema and Media Studies