

## “Where’s My Parade?”

### Margaret Cho and the Asian American Body in Space

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*I almost married this Irish-American guy [...]. I even went down to meet his family, and they lived in Sarasota Florida [...]. Like I love his family but they were kinda too nice to me. So the whole time I felt really like “Oh, this is my host family [starts bowing]. I come from Asia [bows from the waist three times, slowly]. America is numbah one [bows again]. Sank you mistah Eddy’s faddah” [bows and stays low]. (Cho 2000)*

If one had to pantomime Oriental deference on the Western stage, one would be hard pressed to find a gesture better suited to this than the bow. A pose so iconically Asian, the bow appears only to enhance the yellowface persona that the comedienne, Margaret Cho, throws on with her other accessories—the affected accent, the mincing steps, and the reference to a “host family.” All these suggest that the domestic civility of Cho’s prospective in-laws—their being overly “nice”—casts her own relationship to them in a global light, one of international exchange following a particular model: white-ethnic families sponsoring Asian foreign students.<sup>2</sup>

Cho theatricalizes white civility—precisely what passes for whiteness everyday—by Orientalizing it, exaggerating the colored person’s response toward such civility, and finally holding that civility suspect. Prior to her actual visit to Sarasota, Cho anticipates another kind of social interaction that more transparently reveals the racial disjunctures, spatial segregation, and uneven power relations operating historically between people of color and whites in the U.S.—disjunctures that ghost their way into suburban America: “I asked [my boyfriend], ‘Are there gonna be any Asian people there [in Sarasota]?’ And he was like ‘No.’ And I said, ‘Okay... Could you just drop me off at the dry cleaner then? [Long beat.] ’Cause I don’t want to be the only one.’” Cho maps suburban America as pocketed by Asian spaces—in service and domestic industries, such as laundry work; and in white spaces, in country clubs and

klans—with liberal codes of civility maintained only when both groups stay in their places.

As Cho deploys it, the bow—a civil gesture—hides an aggression, or more accurately, it makes apparent an aggression, an uneven relation of racialized power between whites and yellows. To see Cho’s mimicry of Asian obedience as the mere staging of quaint cultural differences—bowing versus handshaking—rather than historical racial relations is to adopt a view that the artist would surely call “too nice,” made possible only through the repression of historical memory and a deliberate ignorance of prior performative references.

As Cho bends and holds her upper half parallel to the floor, one cannot help but see in this body position a citation of an earlier bit on the Chippendale dancers:

The Chippendale dancers are gay. [Beat.] They’re gay. You know why? Because there is no such thing as a straight man with a visible abdominal muscle. Doesn’t exist. You need to suck cock [Cho bends slowly over] to get that kind of muscle definition. (2000)

Cho speaks these last lines to the floor. Her body is engaged in a prostration, in a (homo)erotics, in a social ritual of bowing, and in a geopolitically inflected movement—all at once. The repositioning of the body occurs in both a visual register (the spectacle of the bow) and in a verbal register (the reference to traveling to Sarasota signifies a repositioning of the body, as does the reference to raised abdominals). I will be taking this repositioning of the body as a starting point to inquire how the Asian American performer, Margaret Cho, intervenes in public space through the stand-up comedy concert and how an intense public scrutiny of this performer’s body affects her own efforts to seize public space through her stagecraft and writing. Here, I am interested in the affective dimensions of stand-up comedy and its suggestive implications for the public sphere practiced through entertainment—that is, how the public rituals that make one weep, laugh, rage, or shiver in fear enact encounters that place one within the sensate body.

In her live performance, Cho tells of her disastrous experience starring in the first situation comedy that featured an all Asian American cast, and which aired on broadcast television (ABC) in 1994. The show, *All-American Girl*, was canceled quickly, but not before her producers attempted to salvage it by eliminating most of the Asian American actors. Five years later in 1999/2000, Cho toured the country with her live concert, *I’m the One That I Want*, in which she gives details of her experience on the sitcom. Subsequently Cho released a film of the live concert as well as a memoir, all sharing the same title.

In my examination of Cho’s comedy act and her memoir, I focus on the literal site of performance (the bare stage) as a space of assemblages, as a platform for revealing the body’s infirm boundaries and borders as well as its embeddedness in histories of migration. I use migration here to refer both to expulsions across national borders (for instance, Cho’s father is deported from America just three days after his wife gives birth) as well as to the more mundane vagrancy of stand-up performers who, with the rise of comedy chains in the 1980s, travel the national circuit as “road warriors.”<sup>3</sup> Relief from the life on the road prompts Cho to develop a situation comedy for television broadcast. While the show did sport the ubiquitous living room interior (carryover from naturalist theatre) it was incapable, ultimately, of simulating a homespace for “alien” Asians within the white world of television. My argument, however, is not that Cho is unable to find a home through Hollywood develop-

ment but that home itself has become unsettled, revealed as a spatial arrangement whose ideality rests on imprisonment.

In examining the comic artist's body on the stage (and as the stage), I draw from various discourses and histories: psychoanalysis, postcolonial mimicry, histories of racial formation through theatre practice (e.g., minstrelsy), and what Una Chaudhuri refers to as "a new methodology for drama and theatre studies, a 'geography' of theatre capable of replacing—or at least significantly supplementing—its familiar 'history'" (1995:xi). What positionings of the body, what architectures and ideologies of space, what valuations of home, exile, rootedness, and transience, boundary porousness and segregation, does this performer, and the theatrical art of which she is a part, make possible? And how does Cho's live performance draw attention not only to the specter of bodies migrating through space, but also to the breached borders of the body itself, ascertained through organ failure, medical probes, and demands of the knowledge-power nexus upon the pliable, racialized, and queer body?

### *Theorizing Stand-up Comedy*

*A strict, limiting definition of standup comedy would describe an encounter between a single, standing performer behaving comically and/or saying funny things directly to an audience, unsupported by very much in the way of costume, prop, setting, or dramatic vehicle. Yet standup comedy's roots are [...] entwined with rites, rituals, and dramatic experiences that are richer, more complex than this simple definition can embrace. (Mintz 1985:71, emphasis added)*

Contemporary standup comedy has various chronotopic antecedents, for instance, in the tradition of "fools, jesters, clowns and comics, which can be traced back at least as far as the Middle Ages," to that of popular minstrel theatre in 19th-century America, to that of the transatlantic lecture circuit supported by humorists such as Mark Twain and Artemus Ward (Mintz 1985:72; Bushman 1996; Watkins 1994; and Stebbins 1990).<sup>4</sup> In the early 20th century, standup comedy was the backbone of vaudeville, burlesque, and variety theatre (Mintz 1985:72); and, in the post-war period, nightclubs, resorts, coffeehouses (sites of the "new wave comedy" epitomized by Lenny Bruce and Mort Sahl), as well as contemporary comedy clubs all emerged as venues for the stand-alone comic, the sketch ensemble, and the two-person comedy team. Mel Watkins finds antecedents for African American standup in the figure of the African griot, a combination of musician, poet, and jester (1994:64), and in tactics of misdirection evident in slave humor and in the trickster tales of the ante- and postbellum periods (66–76; see also Boskin and Dorinson 1985; and Dundes 1973).<sup>5</sup> These several antecedents of the contemporary practice suggest that to try to speak of *the* root of standup comedy is to ignore the racial and class fractures that have shaped American entertainment, fractures that become the subject of Margaret Cho's comic acts.<sup>6</sup>

Significantly, Cho's performing career begins just after comedians in the late 1970s through the 1980s acquire a contemporary sense of their profession's codification, evident for instance in the comics' strike of 1979, and after stand-up performers begin to recognize their own status as post-Fordist labor (with the rise of comedy chains, comics are required to travel "the road").<sup>7</sup> Cho devotes a substantial part of both her memoir and stand-up performance to detailing the misery of traveling at "breakneck speed" from gig to gig:

1. *In a flaccid imitation of martial arts moves, Cho does "the Asian thing." From I'm the One That I Want, live concert at the Warfield Theater, San Francisco, 13 November 1999. (Photo by Alex Zaphiris; courtesy of Cho-Taussig Productions, Inc.)*



You know, I started out very young doing standup. I started when I was 16 years old. I don't have a high school diploma. I just kind of traveled all over the country in a rental car, going from gig to gig, and it wasn't easy. You know, you just don't want to drive through Tennessee, when you look like this [her hand sweeps down the length of her body]. It's fucking not fun. [...] I got to know the Ku Klux Klan way too well. And I don't mean to judge them, but they're assholes [...].

And I've been following the Ku Klux Klan because I've had this [...] run-in with them, and they've changed a lot, especially recently. They've become very Y2K. [An extended bit on the KKK ensues.] So I was trying to get off the road, and I got a deal to do a sitcom. (2000)

Cho's anecdote about the KKK recalls an earlier version of the "road" embarked upon by African American entertainers. In the 1910s and '20s, African American performers traveled a network of theatres called TOBA (Theater Owners Booking Association). While they provided greater opportunities for black performers to tour their acts, they also left travel expenses to the performers themselves and often routed these entertainers through the South where they were not welcome (Watkins 1994:365–67). Notably, the Ku Klux Klan becomes one of the primary reasons Cho, more than five decades after TOBA's demise, desires work on a Hollywood-based sitcom. To avoid the topography of racial segregation in America, a topography that doesn't end with either the Civil War or civil rights, Cho sits down with writers who try to produce her a family.

Before elaborating on how Cho herself migrates through the social spaces of the family home, stand-up stage, and the Hollywood sitcom, I would briefly recount John Limon's alternative geometry of stand-up comedy. Providing less a social history of this "brash new theatre art" than a formalist analysis of the structure of the comedic performance itself, Limon attends to the vertical and horizontal (rather than geopolitical) dimensions of stand-up: "what is stood up in stand-up comedy is abjection. Stand-up makes vertical (or ventral) what should be horizontal (or dorsal)" (2000:4). His thesis turns on a double meaning of abjection (see Shimakawa 2002),<sup>8</sup> as well as a double meaning of "stand-up":

By abjection [...] I mean [first...] what everybody means: abasement, groveling prostration. Second, I mean by it what Julia Kristeva means: a psychic worrying of those aspects of oneself that one cannot be rid of, that seem, but are not quite, alienable—for example, blood, urine, feces, nails, and the corpse. The "abject," in Kristeva's term of art, indicates what cannot be subject or object to you [...].

To "standup" abjection is simultaneously to erect it and miss one's date with it: comedy is a way of avowing and disavowing abjection, as fetishism is a way of avowing and disavowing castration. Fetishism is a way of standing up the inevitability of loss; standup is a way of standing up the inevitability of return. (2000:4–5)

To clarify the geometry that Limon offers, standup comedy both makes erect what is abased and, by doing so, staves off a kind of boundary—or category—crisis between subject and object, embodied in the liminal category of the "abject" that threatens always to undo the alienation one intends for it. The erection of the abased is, in a sense, a spatial tactic of verticality that allows one (through its geometric distractions) to miss one's (temporal) date with blood, urine, feces, nails, and the corpse, precisely the elements much of

stand-up performance employs to comic effect. But how can something be simultaneously held erect and staved off? Here, Limon's evocation of the analogy to fetishism is important. The fetish actively disavows the loss of what it substitutes for: it both holds erect that loss and staves it off. Stand-up employs an identical mechanism, holding up and staving off not loss, but return (presumably of something unwanted). I would note that the vertical axis is often overlooked in spatial analysis. This vertical movement is, in fact, not only how stand-up operates but a principal of architecture that Cho maps as the bourgeois home.

### *The Parlor, the Airplane, and the Prison*

In her memoir, Cho portrays the writer of her short-lived television show, *All-American Girl*, as a "really nice [...] man" who nevertheless fails to transform her stand-up routine into an amusing, family sitcom:

Gary [...] cranked out a pilot from five minutes of my standup, a sunny exposé on what it was like to grow up a rebellious daughter in a conservative Korean household. I spared him the real story. The truth was that I lived in my parents' basement when I was twenty because my father couldn't stand the sight of me, and therefore banned me from the rest of the house. [...] I was unemployed and trying to kick a sick crystal meth habit by smoking huge bags of paraquat-laced marijuana and watching Nick at Nite for six hours at a time. Now that's a sitcom. (2001a:105)

Though it is unclear whether the Chos's house in San Francisco is a Victorian by builder's design, certainly its segregation of spaces establishes its resemblance to the Victorian household publicized in fiction of the mid-19th century, a "partitioned and hierarchical space," whose governing principle of division is designed to contain aberrant desires in prison-like spaces—e.g., the basement (Armstrong 1987:185).<sup>9</sup> The efficiency of the well-ordered household turns gothic, with the illusion of the pristine parlor requiring the secreted prison, i.e., the seclusion of the aberrant.

Interestingly, these vertical levels of the Victorian household do not appear as the earliest memories the comedienne holds toward something called "home." For Una Chaudhuri, home encompasses the sensibilities of both belonging and exile:

The spatiality of modern drama involves a complex figuration of its favorite setting, the domestic interior. The idea of home [...] can be imagined as a semantic spectrum whose two poles are occupied by the tropes of belonging and exile [...]. In whatever quests, revolts, contest, and ambitions the heroes of this drama get involved, they invariably encounter and engage the issue of home, that is, of belonging and exile. (1995:27)

In the opening pages of her memoir, Cho offers a portrait of exile, which, while seemingly the antithesis of home, actually constitutes one of Chaudhuri's "poles" of home:

My parents had a talent for leaving me places when I was very young. This had to do with immigration difficulties [...]. My father didn't know how to break it to my mother that he was to be deported three days after I was born, so he conveniently avoided the subject [...].

In my parents' colorfully woven mythology, that was the one corner

of the tapestry they carefully concealed. Knowing I probably wouldn't remember, they kept it to themselves. But I did remember, perhaps not actual events but colors and shapes and feelings. The insides of planes, the smell of fuel, unfamiliar arms, crying and crying. (2001a:2)

One doesn't normally construe the airplane as a home space. Cho, nevertheless, brings our attention to her primary attachments formed through this confusing space, experienced as a series of sensations, "the insides of planes, the smell of fuel, unfamiliar arms, crying and crying." These objects outside of the mother and father, as well as spaces outside of both the parlor and the cellar, populate the landscape of home—defined now as the vehicle of transit. Paradoxically, geopolitical divisions on a global scale and the policing of the nation's borders by immigration authorities—those strenuous commitments to an idealized notion of pure space achieved through segregation—result in the odd combinations and mix-ups found on the vehicle of transit. In short, the Cold War was an effort to sequester the nation's proper citizens from alien influences (or the subcultural elements the state would lock up in its basement—communists, Leftists, homosexuals).

Neither a fully private nor fully public space, the airplane features elements of domesticity—the stewardesses as substitute wives and mothers who provide the comforts of the hearth (blankets, pillows, meals) but who are also paid for doing so: their domestic labor has been rationalized and placed on the market. That the young Margaret's earliest home space is an airplane—a traveling space—is remarkable not only because it defies the usual portrait of the domestic hearth, but also because it immediately historicizes the comic's subject formation. To put it another way, it is not possible to refer merely to the narrator's subject formation in some triangular familial relation that is cordoned off from history.

Cold War politics as much as the intervention of the Law of the Father, then, leads to the young Margaret's sense of maternal theft. Cho tells her audience, "I [...] feared that if I took my eyes off my mother, she would leave me. And she did" (2001a:2). If the Cold War hysteria to protect the nation's boundaries (and ideological integrity) is at least partly responsible for the sense of fragility the young Margaret feels in her relation to her primal (erotic) attachments, it also leads to a kind of promiscuous, excessive, and indiscriminate attachment: "[I]n the spirit of my birthplace, I learned that if I couldn't be with the one I loved, I would love the one I was with. I was one [year old], and already somewhat of a slut. I loved lots of stewardesses, and lots of old people" (2). In short, this airplane space—that space which carries one across borders and territories—forms a shadow home to that other site of the Victorian household, each radically distinct with respect to their partitions and segregated spaces. Moreover, while I have presented the home in San Francisco first and the airplane second, it may be the case that the segregated space of the household is not prior to the bleeding sensations of airline love, but that the house is a shadow of the airplane.

Through the explicit conveyance of historical traces such as her father's deportation, Cho delivers in her act a lesson on transnational subjectivity: the formation of the immigrant, whose historical situation brings to crisis the contradictions between America's political and economic imperatives.<sup>10</sup> Through such lessons delivered, Cho adopts a practice that Lauren Berlant dubs "diva-citizenship," whereby subordinated persons perform an act of national pedagogy. Berlant uses Anita Hill's testimony before Congress as exemplary of diva citizenship, in which "a member of a stigmatized population testifies reluctantly to a hostile public the muted and anxious history of her

imperiled citizenship” (1997:222), thereby implicitly challenging that public “to change the social and institutional practices of citizenship to which they currently consent” (223). Or as Wayne Koestenbaum puts it, “divas offer lessons in the art of anger: how to fight an oppressive order by inventing a resilient self” (2001:113).<sup>11</sup> The pedagogical function of these diva enactments distinguish them from the mere stylizations of camp, which Susan Sontag famously defined as refraining from a moralizing or adjudicating function—as “wholly aesthetic”: “[camp is] above all, a mode of enjoyment, of appreciation—not judgment. Camp is generous. [...] What it does is to find the success in certain passionate failures [...]. Camp is a tender feeling” (1999:65).

By claiming that Cho’s stand-up comedy enacts a diva political intervention, I am not disclaiming its participation simultaneously in camp. In fact, in her memoir, Cho comments directly on her own attempts to turn her spiraling alcoholism into camp: “if I was going to be a failure in life, then I was going to do it in style. [...] I was going to be a gorgeous disaster” (2001a:152). Camp may not have a pedagogic function or participate in the critical orientation of political art. If this is so, then, for Berlant, camp can only go so far toward a “national pedagogy”—the work of countering the paramnesias of U.S. history as well as its sexual genealogies, which disallow black and third-world women from counting their sensations as legitimate (or as sensations for which the nation should answer).<sup>12</sup> Cho’s stand-up comedy, I would argue, both participates in the “tender” feeling of camp as it also forwards a distinct political message. In this respect, Cho performs a practice that renders racial pedagogy somewhat campy (or queer) at the same time it renders camp more available to colored politics. Disputing camp as primarily a “fetishized white queer sensibility,” José Muñoz redefines camp as:

a practice [...] of reanimating [...] a lost country or moment that is relished and loved. Although not innately politically valenced, it is a strategy that can do positive identity- and community-affirming work [for queer and ethnically marked subjects]. (1999:128)

Precisely through a practice that cannot be decided ultimately as either fully pedagogic or fully aesthetic, Cho discoordinates (she queerly mixes and matches) the colors of both straight diva citizenship and white queer camp.

The episode in which Cho refers to her segregated life in the basement occurs in both the written memoir and in the live performance. In comparison, the written memory of “jet fuel,” “crying and crying,” and “lov[ing] the one I was with” does not appear in the stageact. Arguably, however, the lack of a literal transcription of these latter events in the live concert underestimates the gestural and affective translation of them. The promiscuous attachments of the sort spurred on by the deportation episode color the rest of the stand-up act and are amply *staged* in gesture and movement. On stage, Cho doesn’t verbally refer to her experience of being sent to Korea before the age of one; and yet, the theatricalizing of her “slutty” desires, her proliferating erotic objects, might be construed as the trace of historical memory. The comedienne, therefore, imports her peripatetic sensibility to the stage in an *indirect* fashion in order to negotiate between the medium of denotative language and that of bodily pantomime.

Cho uses the stage to hold forth on her own monstrous body, a body whose leakiness (recalling a pants-wetting incident as a child)<sup>13</sup> is made monstrous by bourgeois codes of respectability that view combination as a horror and relegate such a body to the basement. What this segregation of the body tries to do is quite literal: it sends the abased body downward, lowering it. But while

the household spatially forges those subjects and body parts nominated as abased or abjected, standup reverses the spatial relation. “Standup makes vertical (or ventral) what should be horizontal (or dorsal)” (Limon 2000:4) or, to use the metaphors provided by Cho’s text, the basement takes up the space of the aerial, the airplane.

### *Staging Another Stage*

*I’m the One That I Want*, the live concert at the Warfield Theatre, begins with Margaret Cho running out onto the stage to thunderous applause, taking a deep bow, and thanking San Francisco for such a profuse welcome. She shouts, “It’s so good to be home!” Cho, no doubt, refers to San Francisco, but one might also take the stage itself to be her “home.” Tellingly, that stage is bare but for a stool and water. My puns here are deliberate, for no convention mandates the reading of the stage scenery realistically; one can interpret them symbolically and punningly, a kind of set joke. Stool and water, then, are framed by deep red, velvet curtains in the background, and another, more down-stage set of gold meshlike curtains tied back as lavish window-dressing for the performance space, a space that has been set with objects collectively signaling the abject.

After bowing and thanking the audience for coming, Cho begins her act by talking about another performance on her tour, a benefit for PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), where fashion designer, Karl Lagerfeld, was being protested for including fur in his last show:

I love Karl Lagerfeld and they hate him [...]. They protested his last show. People were chanting, “Karl Lagerfeld is a murderer! [...]” And I thought, wouldn’t it be fabulous if Karl Lagerfeld actually was a murderer? [...] He would have to go to jail, and they would make him wear the orange jumpsuit. I would call Amnesty International myself if that happened.

The performance, in short, begins with the staging of another stage, more specifically the street spectacle outside the couture show. Here, and throughout her written memoir, Cho tells stories about the spillage of theatre into spaces outside of itself, taking place in rituals of antagonism (cf Turner 1982) and even in disciplinary spaces through which the knowledge–power nexus of the state exercises its capillary power (cf Foucault 1979).

For instance, as the routine progresses, Cho imagines, via the fashionista’s presence in jail, the prison itself as theatre space:

[The jailers] would take away his fan. He would be on the pay phone to André Leon Talley, “André, could you send me a fan? Could you bake it in a cake? Or stick it up your ass or something?” [Cho purses her lips and fans herself frenetically].

To those devoted to prison reform, Cho’s scandalous theatricalizing of jail behavior may seem frivolous; however, dismissing it on such grounds risks missing the confrontation with this spatial-disciplinary tactic that her routine also stages. By putting Karl Lagerfeld preposterously in jail, Cho dramatizes what happens legally through anti-sodomy laws, and makes the law ludicrous for its criminalizing of a minority identity, that of the homosexual. Moreover, her “faggot” in jail foreshadows her own imprisonment in the family’s basement, with Cho making explicit the cross-identification between her self and

the profanity: “fag.” She mimics him, “I am fanning the flames of my faggotry,” but then qualifies her terminology: “I love the word faggot, because it describes *my kind of guy*. I [beat] am a fag hag. Fag hags [beat] are the backbone of the gay community.” Her prison shtick establishes another claim of interdependence: fags and fag hags are the backbone of the straight community. Their abasement, the punishment and sequestering of these subjectivities, elevates heteronormativity to the parlor.

As this opening section on Karl Lagerfeld reveals, what I will be calling Part 1 of *I’m the One That I Want* is comprised of crowd-pleasing spectacles on the broad subject of sexual foibles and sexual identity.<sup>14</sup> In Parts 1 and 3—the framing sections of the show (alternatively, the warm-up and cool-down sections)—Cho relies heavily upon physical comedy and the humor is more “universal”—that is, it could be a part of anybody’s show. In contrast, Part 2 or the middle section of the show veers notably toward exposition and narration (verbal jokes, punch line set ups). The tipping of the routine toward “talk,” significantly, corresponds to the raising of explicit “racial issues,” as it also uniquely recounts a devastating period in the comic’s life, in which she enjoyed meteoric success, culminating in the sitcom deal, followed by an equally pyrotechnic collapse. I am not saying that the physical dimension of Cho’s humor is lacking in Part 2. However, it is striking that Cho appears to talk more, to engage stand-up as a series of jokes and punch lines, rather than visual gags, beginning with the long set-up to the narration of her failed show, *All-American Girl*.

Cho establishes the political significance of her sitcom precisely because of the historical record she conveys through “talk.” She delivers a brief sketch of the paltry and tokenist inclusion of Asians on the American popular screen as enemy soldiers, native villagers, and traveling mystics—most of whom aren’t even played by Asians:

[W]hen I was growing up I never saw Asian people on television. Oh except on *M\*A\*S\*H* sometimes. Like every once in awhile on *M\*A\*S\*H* you’d see an Asian person in the background unloading a truck. Then there was *Kung Fu*, but that doesn’t really count because David Carradine, the star of *Kung Fu*, was not Chinese. So that show should not have been called *Kung Fu*, it should have been called, “Hey [beat] that guy’s not Chinese.”

Cho delivers what might be considered a non-joke: the punchline is only funny because it isn’t funny. Or rather, the audience laughs because Cho tells them something they already know but have actively tried to disremember, namely that whites have played Asians onstage and screen, in an ignominious tradition of yellowface.

Cho’s line, “Hey, that guy’s not Chinese,” returns this disavowed knowledge to the audience, making cross-racial casting the very point of the show, as opposed to its supposed focus on the tradition and lifestyle of Chinese martial arts. Does the non-joke erect the abject defined corporeally (nails, urine, feces, the corpse)? Not quite, it begins with an observation on Asians’ relegation to the scenery (to a position not even abased as much as inconsequential) and, instead of bringing them to the foreground, Cho switches the scene of theatre, calling attention to the real show as the drama of casting decisions.

In a quintessential enactment of national pedagogy, a concealed history is returned to the spectators, a history in which they already have taken part. In Americans’ eager consumption of the television series *Kung Fu*, Cho sees not the fostering of cross-cultural connection as much as the policing of borders

within the nation, a strategy of keeping immigrant Asians comfortably distant (alien) from the adulation of mainstream audiences. The abject, here, does not narrowly bespeak the position of the Asian—as one might surmise—but refers as well to the status of knowledge regarding whiteness’s pleasure in yellowface. The non-joke, in other words, is a meta-joke, erecting not merely an abjected thing/race (that which is designated but never fully becomes “alien”) but *the abjection of the very mechanism of abjection*—the continual efforts to expunge or make alien from U.S. liberal culture the segregation tactics still operative in the industry.

By calling attention to yellowface, Cho reminds her audience both of segregation in casting and the fantasy-work regarding firm boundaries between self and other, subject and abject, white and yellow that are upheld by racial stereotyping. Time and again, members of the Hollywood infrastructure propose to Cho that her Asianness is, in fact, alienable—something she can excise and excrete, like bodily waste. One of the most overt voicings of this view comes from Cho’s manager:

[My former manager, Ched,] said some amazing shit to me. He said one time [adopts a bass pitch], “You know, Margaret, I think the Asian thing puts people off.” What the fuck is the “Asian thing”? Like it’s some gimmick I pull out of my ass every couple of years, to jazz up my career. It’s like hey, ho, ho, yihaaah!

[She raises her hand in a karate chop, strikes the air, starts kicking and spinning, then faces front in semi-squat, punching right and left fists forward, rapidly. Runs stage left and repeats.]

Doing the “Asian thing,” alright. Is that ice? Haayooow! [Chops the air with her hand.]

You know, you gots to chink it up sometimes, you know. You gotta get chinkay wid it.

In her memoir, Cho specifies the “Asian thing” as the martial arts mystique most visibly performed by non-Asians, namely Steven Seagal. What “puts people off,” to use Ched’s argot, is not the Asian as “gimmick”—in fact, audiences love it when Steven Seagal or for that matter Keanu Reeves plays the “instant” martial artist, with Asian moves virtually incorporated by way of micro-chip. Rather, the audience recoils from the gaze reversed: the Asian witness who watches and publicizes the audience’s pleasure in this gimmick. I will call this pleasure “whiteness”—the security of non-self-consciousness that seems like an innocence or ground state but which is, in fact, a back-formation garnered from the projection of difference (or lack) outward, onto a body other than the self. This pleasure proceeds not just from taking in (visually surveying) the other, but from the contrastive comfort of one’s own invisibility, a cultivated obliviousness to one’s own corpse and its racial marking (as well as its gender, fatness, sexuality, nationality and so forth). The Asian thing, in this respect, might be said to be a “turn on”—providing the white patron with the feeling of a salacious disengagement, a blind-eye to how satisfaction is accomplished by the Oriental bent low. Cho makes visible this whiteness as something less than innocence, as pornographic solicitation, and that is what “puts people off.”<sup>15</sup>

In her flaccid imitation of martial arts moves, Cho also deliberately performs badly the “live action” Asian body on display for the pleasure of whites. This live body has historical precedents, for instance, in the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in Saint Louis where scantily clad Igorot tribals displayed their fierceness for imperial onlookers.<sup>16</sup> By performatively citing this history

of ethnographic display, Cho spars with her manager's and, more broadly speaking, the American public's willed forgetfulness of the U.S.'s own history of imperial conquest and racial subjugation.<sup>17</sup> That is, Ched suggests that Americans are innocently color-blind, preferring their entertainment devoid of racial specificity. Cho fires back that, on the contrary, America's entertainment spheres, from world's fairs to television to film, have delighted in the display, abasement, and reification of the live Asian body.

If the pleasure of whiteness relies in part on the rendering of Asianness both low and alienable—as something that even the Korean American woman must execrate—Cho's performance troubles whiteness by dramatizing the ill effects of this execution.

Particularly in Cho's account of the network's struggle with her weight, one sees the effects of a covert demand that Cho make her Asianness a "thing." The producer, Gail, tells Cho, "The network is concerned with the fullness of your face. They think you're really overweight [...]. And do me a favor, do not wear a mini-skirt in public again" (Cho 2000). In her stand-up concert, Cho tells the audience of her response: "I didn't know what to say to that. I always thought I was okay looking. I had no idea I was this giant face that was taking over America. HERE COMES THE FACE!!!" The quip hyperbolizes the national crisis imagined to occur when a Korean face appears on-screen: the event is likened to an invasion or a deluge of too much immigrant/foreign body. Though the network eventually allowed Cho's face on the screen after she dieted ("I guess the network had decided that my face could now fit on the screen. And they wouldn't have to letterbox it"), the hysteria around a scarce staging ground merely transferred itself to the overall ensemble of the show: "So eventually it was decided that America's first Asian American family was too Asian. So they fired all the Asians, except for me and Amy Hill [...]. She and I would stare at each other like, 'One of us is going down.'"

In her written memoir, Cho makes an oblique reference to the relation between fears regarding Asian immigration and the network managing the yellow bodies, which were too abundant for the screen:

[T]he network felt that the Asian-American backlash to the show was so great that they lost their confidence in it. Either that or the North Korean conflict really had affected the pick-up of the back nine. *Too many Asians* was what I'd imagined was being thrown around the conference room. *We'll just keep the quality Asians. The ones with high TV Q.* (2001a:142)

The reference to the North Korean conflict alludes to an earlier event, in which, at a press conference to promote the sitcom, Cho is asked, "Margaret—what do you think about what is going on in North Korea? Do you think the famine will affect plotlines this season on *All-American Girl?*" (124). Though Cho never makes these connections explicit, the charge of her wide Korean face taking up too much space (on-screen) conjures up images of scarcity in the service of xenophobia. Too many hungry foreigners (immigrants) will crowd out national space, and there won't be enough room. Thus, at the same time that famished North Korean bodies are amply photographed and broadcast in North America, Cho is made to starve herself to fit the screen. "Fat" only names the body scapegoated by those with fantasies of scarcity. I say fantasy of scarcity to identify the context in which Cho is produced as "fat": a panicked American imaginary creates a notion of Korean excess out of extreme Korean hunger, due to a skewed sense of the scarce staging ground of America. The image of too many Asians crowded in one living room makes

2. *Imitating Gwen, the hospital worker, Cho hunches over to “waaaarsh her vagina.”* From *I’m the One That I Want*, live concert at the Warfield Theater, San Francisco, 13 November 1999. (Photo by Alex Zaphiris; courtesy of ChoTaussig Productions, Inc.)



American domestic comedy too much like the space of North Korea broadcast on the news. Border trouble, indeed.

Through the details Cho provides on the studio’s reaction to her screen test, we marvel not at the excess of her body but at the machinery that has concocted the notion of her alienable Asian flesh. After construing her as “overweight,” the network executives implemented a Taylorized system—an assembly line of trainer, dietician, doctor, and food delivery person—to produce *ostensibly* a slimmed-down body. Yet, more significantly, the network producers incited a new, and quintessentially Hollywood, category of the abject, fat: flesh that is now coded as waste, either to be lifted or starved away. Impossibly, Cho’s body, itself, becomes a terrain of segregation.

One of the most popular routines in *I’m the One That I Want* stages the incessant onslaught of the nation’s demand that Asianness be made a thing. “Gwen” enters Cho’s stand-up act, the embodiment of the nation’s obsessive-compulsive desire to cleanse itself of foreign, dirty matter:<sup>18</sup>

So I went to the hospital, I’m laying in the hospital waiting, I’m just laying there waiting. Finally, a woman comes in. [Cho hunches over as if talking to someone lying on the ground.] “Hello, my name is Gwen, I’m here to waaaarsh your vagina.”

[Beat] I don’t want to hear that ever. That is like the worst thing you can hear. And I’m already having a bad day. I don’t need, “Hello, my name is Gwen, I’m here to waaaarsh your vagina.” It’s not “wash.” It’s “waaaaarshhhhh.” You can just hear the hose, and the buckets, and the suds. “I’m here to waaaarsh your vagina.” Like she’s going to beat my vagina against a rock.

[Starts stage right, moving across the stage half bent over.] “Hello, my name is Gwen, I’m here to waaaarsh your vagina.” [Runs two-three steps forward.] “Hello, my name is Gwen, I’m here to waaaarsh your vagina.” [Runs two-three steps.] “Hello, my name is Gwen, I’m here to

waaaarsh your vagina.” [Runs two–three steps.] “Hello, my name is Gwen, I’m here to waaaarsh your vagina.” [Runs back to stage right and repeats three more times.]

In the incessant repetition of Gwen (the creeping forward bit by bit and then running stage right and repeating), Cho literalizes the return of something that she is trying to alienate but can’t—and that something is not the dirty vagina or fat, but the law; the intrusive discourse that decides the body is *too much*.

Cho ends her pantomime of Gwen by breaking out of character and asking, “Why do I need to know her name? Like I’m going to ask her for her number after or something? ‘Hey, yeah, Gwen, you really rocked me. I cannot get it that clean at home. Oh fuck yeah, come on, you can eat off that shit, seriously.’” Avatar of the public’s plying of Cho’s body, Gwen tries to scrub Margaret clean, while doing so under the pretext of civility (“Hello, my name is...”). As in the imagined hysteria of Gwen toward the dirty vagina, American national history finds itself trying to scrub itself clean. How can you eat off this history and not choke on its excesses—its fantastic “fat” (alienable flesh) projected onto racialized bodies?

To be sure, the “Gwen” routine is not without its problems. The working-class orderly—only a functionary in the public management of Cho’s body—bears the brunt of the comedienne’s own attempts to jettison the medical procedures that return her body to bits and pieces.<sup>19</sup> Despite the comic’s belated wish to resurrect a boundary, the cameras have already started and continue to roll, this time while inserted inside her body: “[Gwen] cleaned me out and the doctor catheterized me. He then filled my bladder with water and inserted a tiny camera” (Cho 2001a:1111). Possessor of the marked racial body that services whiteness’s comfortable nonconsciousness, Cho in the Gwen routine doesn’t so much make the white body aware of itself as much as she further marks her own body, targets it as the camera already has, and intensifies scopic regimes to mark not just the size of her face but the fastidiousness of her waste and reproductive systems (which allow her to alienate/eliminate). According a further publicity to her body, however, is not akin to elective surgery for Cho. Instead, it initiates a camp response to ways in which the body is already plied with technologies of race, gender, and sexuality. As the stylization of failure, camp transforms adrenal collapse into a dance, a jeté in mimicry of the predatory disciplining of Cho’s dirty vagina.

By restaging the way that her body is marked “by something racial everyday,” Cho puts whiteness on the map—so to speak—not just in the figure of rabid KKK members, but in the figure of Hollywood producers servicing an anxious public that fantasizes about firm boundaries of racial difference. By displacing excessive sexual desire onto the racial body—or onto the dirty vagina, as it were—white spectators both pursue and indulge in sexual salaciousness (now projected outward onto the racial other) and, at the same time, enjoy a contrastive sense of disembodiment. In essence, Cho performatively magnifies for her audience how whiteness (alongside heteronormativity) becomes elevated to the parlor—the space of corporeal oblivion—by abasing the colored body, attributing to it an excessive fleshly desire.

Moreover, Cho stages the space of corporeal oblivion—the space of whiteness—as part of the theatrical space that includes not just actors and stage, but the audience as well. Midway through her show, Cho remarks, “I deal with something racial everyday. [...] Something, everyday.” She starts walking casually toward stage right. “I was walking down the street, and I walk past this guy and he goes, ‘Me So Horny!’” Cho performs this “something racial” as

literally arresting. The comment stops her dead in her tracks. She turns her head slowly to stare in amazement at the offending party—that is, in the direction of the audience. Maintaining silence throughout the rest of this routine, the comedienne furrows her brow and resumes walking, but not as casually as before. Her back stiff and straight, she repeatedly swivels her head toward the offending party (the audience), as she walks forward.

“Me So Horny” is both the title and lyric of a song by 2 Live Crew that assigns this pidginized “yellow English” to an Asian woman.<sup>20</sup> For those unfamiliar with the song, the “guy” in the scene depicted by Cho appears to be referring to himself with the phrase, “Me So Horny.” However, if one takes the popular cultural history of this phrase into account, then it becomes clear that the guy who hails Cho in this fashion, names *her* as the one voicing the crudity, “Me So Horny.” In other words, he intends to describe not *his own* desire but *her* desire, her promiscuous “turned on” sexuality that supposedly elicits his comment. The interaction both interpellates her (in the Althusserian sense) and, moreover, disavows his own body and desire. Finally, Cho performs “this guy”—this hailing—as both a disembodied voice and as the bodies of the audience. These latter bodies are half-hunched over, certainly in laughter, but more significantly, in a pose that veils or disavows the state of being “turned on”—of having a body.

This staging of the (not-so-disembodied) audience, I would argue, dovetails with a staging of whiteness and straightness. In her routine on the Chippendale dancers, the comedienne delivers the punch line (quoted earlier), “you have to suck cock to get that kind of [muscle] definition” and then offers the tag line: “I love telling that joke because all of the straight men in the audience pooch out their bellies.” With cheeks puffed out and arms encircled in front of her as if around a protruding stomach, Cho gives a forced staccato laugh, “Hah! hah!” The comic looks like a huge blowfish. This type of overblown depiction of panicked male heterosexuality continues in Cho’s second imitation of the swollen white person, in which she impersonates Asians mocking a Godjira<sup>21</sup> in their midst: “Your eye is too big! [...] Why your eye like this?” Cho bugs out her eyes and leans forward, her nose and cheeks pulled down in a frown of mock horror. “Your eyes is like this!” Cho points at her own strained and bulging eyes. “Is like this! Is like this! Is like this!” she shouts urgently, craning her neck forward to exaggerate the bulbous eyes wide enough to “catch a fly.” She finishes up, “Also you are too tall [...H]e look like Godjira, Godjira!!!” She backs away from the gargantuan white person imagined before her.

The generic white body—the “Godjira”—evoked in Cho’s performance is a body that takes up a lot of space either to quell homosexual panic or to further an imperialist invasion. That taking up and over of space becomes literalized in terms of the stage set. A sitcom featuring straight white male comic, Drew Carey, a former military man with a buzz cut that accentuates his ample form, displaces *All-American Girl*. Cho tells her audience, “[My] show was canceled and replaced by Drew Carey, because he’s so skinny [beat]. I actually love Drew Carey but I can’t watch his show, because they have all of our old furniture.” Cho directs her political anger not toward the particular white body, Drew Carey, whom she admires, but toward the structure of whiteness that racializes the Asian American female (but not white male) body as too “fat.” Whiteness emerges as a corporeality costumed—its hiddenness *is* its stage presence.

Cho simultaneously gestures toward whiteness as both a fantasy of disembodiment (a back-formation from the hypersurveillance of marked racial, queer bodies) *and* a practice of spatial expansion, a blowing up and engorge-



3. The sequence on “Unnecessary Head” ends in pursed lips and hand gestures. From *I’m the One that I Want*, live concert at the Warfield Theater, San Francisco, 13 November 1999. (Photo by Alex Zaphiris; courtesy of Cho-Taussig Productions, Inc.)

ment justified by hallucinations of scarcity. If whiteness (and the law) are achieved through both a sensibility of being disembodied and a practice of surrounding the marked body, then whiteness/the law may very well resemble the experience of being an audience member, sitting in that section of the theatre supposedly not the stage. Cho’s stand-up act hypothetically asks her spectators to wonder after how engorged they are, or how diminutive she must perform herself to be, to support the fantasy of audience disembodiment.

By implicating her audience in these replayed racial theatres of cruelty, Cho both retards her own collision with their degrading force (by simultaneously erecting and missing them [cf Limon 2000]) and reverses the directionality of (the cross-racial) spectatorial relation. The dark body placed on display looks back at whiteness and also apes its monstrous proportions—its monstrous optical apparatus—“the eye wide enough to catch a fly.” By focusing on portnotroping as it occurs in both the theatre (i.e., the Hollywood set) and the street, Cho further suggests that these spaces double each other, and that the trace of racial negotiations pervades all sites, especially those attempting colorblindness.

Earlier I suggested that Part 2 of *I’m the One That I Want* is where the racial specificity and political topicality of Cho’s performance emerges. However, this is not all that I am suggesting. Precisely because of the racial testimony delivered in the middle of her act, Cho’s return to, or second use of, her bodily style and sex topics in Part 3 functions as a citation of “universality,” so that she can show such universality, itself, as a joke. To reiterate the broad structure of the live performance, the last part of Cho’s one-woman show appears to drift away from verbal commentary on race and back to the sight gags on the topics of gender and sexuality. The most memorable bits from this last section capitalize upon Cho’s mastery of iconic poses and hand gestures, with the sequences on “Sexy Drunks” and “Unnecessary Head” exemplary of this gestural comedy.<sup>22</sup> These hand-jobs, as it were, might work in anyone’s show. They are modular and easily imported elsewhere.

Part 3 begins with Cho elaborating on her dubious “achievement” in transcending her racial body—she accomplished something “really hard for Asian people to do,” namely becoming an alcoholic. She then segues to a nonpolitical observation on dogs:

The animal shelter is a great place to get a pet because the dogs in there need homes so badly. And you walk in the kennel and every dog knows exactly why you’re there. And they know that if they play their cards right, one of them can leave with you. So you walk by the cages and they’re all doing the one thing they can do to impress you.

They’re trying to shake hands. [Cho mimics the puppies, her tongue lolling out of her mouth, paw up; then, she furrows her brow with worry.]

Or roll over. [She twists her wrist around]

Or bark like they’re talking. [Cho moves her fingers to make a talking hand puppet to stress the following lines:] “Heyyy! Heyyy! I can convert Windows to Mac.”

This third part of Cho’s show, though appearing superficially to be a return to the more universal appeal of Part 1, must be read differently precisely because of its placement *after* racial explicitness, after the vocabulary of racial formation has been introduced, and after Cho insistently establishes the primacy of this vocabulary in any form of social communion.

When Cho concludes her show by recalling her life with her new pooch, we see how she makes the avoidance of race ludicrous:

I stopped drinking and I got better. And as I got better, my dog got better. He’s the greatest and we walk everywhere together. And people talk to you a lot more if you have a dog. Because I was walking the dog, and this homeless guy jumped out and said, “That dawg gonna wind up in a pot o’ rice.” [Long beat, as Cho mugs an Emily Post–like shock at the impropriety.] And he probably wouldn’t have said that if I was by myself.

This final joke turns on the pathetic nature of liberal ignorance—its pretense of naïveté. The disavowal of race—the return to color-blindness after the moment of racial awareness—is only possible for “infantile” (or inebriated) spectators, those so outside the boundaries of intelligence and sobriety (or mature, noninnocent knowledge) that they cannot “get” the joke.<sup>23</sup> Racial oppression slyly punctuates this final section of the show, performed in/as the avoidance of race.

### *Conclusion*

If one were to look for the “heroic pedagogy” in Cho’s live concert, one might see it in her staging of the struggle over borders, a geopolitical struggle manifested in nativist hostility toward immigrants that affects how public the Asian American female body can be (must it be concealed in the basement?), or to put it another way, how publicized it already has become (the camera close-ups of Cho’s dirty vagina). This border trouble becomes a monstrosity written on the performer’s body, as weird appendages are evoked in order to stress the especially acute position of the woman of color in the anxious erection of walls to keep foreign bodies out.<sup>24</sup> Cho makes monstrous this profligate currency in Asian American female flesh, even as she insists that a counterinvestment in prudishness (in the clamping down of “the compulsory order of

sex/gender/desire” [Butler 1999]) is not the answer. She wonders, in effect, where might be the space of political belonging in which to perform the full citizenship of the Asian American woman.

Cho stages her own liminal position between sexual identity categories: “Am I gay? Am I straight? I’m just slutty. [Beat.] Where’s my parade?” These lines query not only where to locate the space of Asian American queer citizenship, but in what registers and styles—through what performative rituals, carnivalesque spectacles, and collective walks through town—will the full citizenship of a “Korean American, fag hag, shit starter, girl comic, trash talker” be entertained?

Using the brashness of her theatre art, Cho disrupts (race-blind) civility and heterosexual coupling at the same time. Following Henri Bergson (1956), we might see this humor as delivering a shock to the automatism of politeness, the latter which oils the reproductive (and capitalist productive) machine. Civility erects a wall and requires the alienation of anger, passion, and erotics. Laughter releases or works a revenge against that alienation of sensation, a revenge that is not necessarily obverse to historical and political understanding. Through the sensate body and its leakiness—its inadequate partitioning according to geopolitical, gendered, or domestic(ating) principles of space—Cho both



4. Cho reacts to her body made monstrous by a Hollywood producer. From *I’m the One That I Want*, live concert at the Warfield Theater, San Francisco, 13 November 1999. (Photo by Alex Zaphiris, courtesy of ChoTaussig Productions, Inc.)

stages her own ambiguous body and comments on the political compulsion to disavow the erotics and slippage of the body in order to speak publicly, rationally, and abstractly. In essence, Cho returns this fully sensate body to the audience, rendering political knowledge through affect, critiquing the boundaries that set apart historical knowledge from bodily pleasure, and mocking not just the alienation of racially and sexually marked subjects from the proper (civilized) representational field, but also the mechanism of this alienation itself.

In crafting a stage act, publishing a memoir, *and* releasing a film (all with the same title), Cho establishes that the spaces and modes of her parade are indeed multiple, and ultimately not decidable in any one form. Her performance work leaks across genre categories, effecting spontaneous—if ephemeral—bonds between spectators and herself, at the same time that her written memoir and film attempt to archive that ephemerality, and in that inscription partially overwrite communities established via the environment of the theatre with communities of reading and cinematic spectatorship. Earlier I claimed that Cho discoordinates the colors of both straight diva citizenship and white queer camp by engaging in an art practice that is neither fully pedagogic nor fully aesthetic, to which I would add, now, nor fully determinable in any single generic form. What makes “I’m the One That I Want” such an effective piece, to my mind, is precisely its multiple sitings, that is, both its staging of the comedienne’s mobile body (parts) and its placement in the context of both the stand-up comedy concert and the female, ethnic, and queer memoir.

The theatre of the body that Cho’s live show campily stages also ghosts the abstract public sphere and its modes of ratiocination and political rectitude. For Cho, the abstract public sphere is best apprehended not in the courtroom, nor in the halls of government, nor in the refinement of (both political and artistic) representation, but on the snowy white mountaintop of a ski slope, where a certain positioning of the body is itself abjected:

I was skiing in Deer Valley and there’s no people of color up there, and I’m up there, skiing, trying to fit in like an asshole, and I have an instructor and he goes [lowers her voice an octave] “Heyyy, don’t take this the wrong way, but you have a tendency to boooowww [her mouth opens hugely, her lips contorting over the word] into your skis.”

Notably, Cho does not bow in this routine. Aside from one exception, she delivers this anecdote verbally not bodily, even as this vocal reference to the bow conjures up the many bodily postures she has inhabited throughout the performance. Here, the bow is both glaringly absent and present. But what’s the nature of the “something racial” here?

For a brief moment on that mountaintop, the Asian American performer appears to be enjoying the liberal promise of an abstract body. The bit seems to be offered as a critique of the way in which the recognition of race bars Cho from sharing in an entitled investment in whiteness. However, it is important to note that the ski instructor doesn’t merely mark Cho by telling her that she bows, but marks the white space of the mountaintop as segregated, as a space sealed off from minorities’—but not white persons’—discourse on race (the raising of race as informal or formal selection criteria). Only Cho’s “pedagogy of the oppressed,” her sensitization to historical relations of racial unevenness, is not allowed, or is framed as the noise in *this* communicative exchange between the white instructor and colored (exchange) student. In order to ski down and among snowy white surfaces, then, Cho will have to partition this knowledge off. She will have to laugh more universally.

Still dramatizing the scene on the mountaintop, Cho switches to a humor-

less face—brow furrowed, face pulled in close to the chin, lips pressed together firmly—holds this face, reminiscent of the one she mugs while impersonating her mother, and says, “Fuck you.” Loud applause and whistles come for the audience. The tag line is delivered, “And then I fell,” as Cho lifts one leg and arm up, gesturing her fall backward onto the powder.

Prone flat on her back, rather than bowed forward, is where Cho leaves her body in this routine. This is the same position of Cho’s body in the hospital with Gwen hovering to waaarsh her vagina. In the contest of funny, Cho wins not by bowing more deeply, but by talking back in ire, and risking that subsequent ignoble position of specular (di)splay. This act of heroic pedagogy operates through the juxtaposition of moral outrage and slippage into camp, with Cho showing us that not only angry, testimonial pedagogy deserves our wonder but that in the camp of funny—in an anger that falls, but reveals historical and political knowledge in that splayed pratfall—there are many lessons to mine.

### Notes

1. All quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from Cho’s concert, *I’m the One That I Want*, at the Warfield Theater, San Francisco, 13 November 1999, recorded on film as *Margaret Cho, Filmed Live in Concert: I’m the One That I Want* (Cho 2000).
2. This essay was first drafted at the Humanities Research Institute Seminar on Transnational Asian American Performance, convened by Karen Shimakawa in Spring 2002, and then workshopped in the LA Women’s Group for the Collaborative Study of Race and Gender in Culture, whose members include Gabrielle Foreman, Alexandra Juhasz, Laura Hyun Yi Kang, Eve Oishi, and Cynthia Young. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Women, Theater, and Performance conference at UC-Irvine; at the Performance Studies department at NYU; the Asian American Studies Center of the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign; the Center for Feminist Research at the University of Southern California; the Asian-Pacific American Center at Loyola Marymount; the New Trends in Feminist Art and Scholarship Series at California State University, Long Beach; and the Center for the Study of Women at UCLA.
3. Betsy Borns gives this account of the origin of “the road”:

[U]ntil about 1978, the road, as we know it today, didn’t exist. In that year, a comic named Ron Richards began booking comedians from Manhattan’s showcase clubs into several Ground Round restaurants in New Jersey. Six months later, he helped out an ex-comedian friend, Jerry Stanley, to set up similar shows in other New Jersey restaurants. By 1979, Ron Richards was out of the business, and Jerry Stanley was getting very rich very fast. (1987:57)

In terms of the pace of such road travel, Cho toured *I’m the One That I Want* to 40 American and Canadian cities over an 11-month period (24 July 1999 to 17 June 2000). Most of those appearances were in theatres on the East and West coasts, with over a dozen performances in mid-Western cities such as Denver, Detroit, Minneapolis, Cleveland, Cincinnati, and Chicago; and Southern and Southwestern cities such as Atlanta, Phoenix, Las Vegas, San Antonio, Dallas, and Austin. The *Notorious C.H.O.* tour was a more hectic 39-city tour in less than six months (4 August 2001 to 16 January 2002), and took her to Scotland for the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. The comedienne’s current show *Cho Revolution* has toured in 31 cities in the past 10 months (1 March 2003 to 8 December 2003), with another 22 cities scheduled in the next six months of 2004 (10 January 2004 to 26 June 2004).

4. Another antecedent, suggested by one critic, are the prologues to the Greek dramas, which though not traditionally in the mode of jest, anticipate the stand-up comedians role as an entertainer who “speaks to and for the common people” (Stebbins 1990:6).
5. For an account of contemporary African American stand-up comics in Los Angeles, see Lanita Jacobs-Huey’s “The Arab Is the New Nigger,” addressing African American comics in the post-9/11 period.
6. There is still no single, definitive history of stand-up comedy in the U.S. The exhibition

and book on *Standup Comedians on Television* (1996) curated by David Bushman attempts a synthetic view, but the rapid coverage befitting a museum display prevents the book from deep historical coverage. Mel Watkins's *On the Real Side* (1994) offers rich historical detail, but focuses primarily on African American humor; the Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies exhibit, *Let There Be Laughter!* (1997), curated by Esther Romeyn and Jack Kugelmass, focuses on Jewish humor (see review by Victor Greene 1999). Susan Horowitz's *Queens of Comedy* (1997) focuses on female comedienne. Betsy Borns's *Comic Lives* (1987) offers a (now somewhat dated) social history of contemporary stand-up culled mostly from commentary by the comics themselves. And Laurie Stone's *Laughing in the Dark* (1997) provides a rich exploration of the blurred boundary between comedy and performance art, by bringing together her reviews first published in the *Village Voice* during the decade 1987 to 1997. That there are no monographs that synthesize the distinct genealogies of, for instance, the black stand-up comedian with the Jewish tumbler, or the strains of Irish humor with the female comedienne/performance artist, and so forth may be a reflection of the way in which social histories of comedy are social histories of ethnic and gendered groups, each deserving their own book-length analysis.

7. According to Betsy Borns:

“The road” is the term used by today’s standup comics to describe any paying gig outside of the showcase clubs in New York City or Los Angeles [...]. For the most part, standup comics and business people make no artistic bones about it: the road has one purpose as far as they’re concerned—to make a buck and get the hell out.” (1987:57)

8. Karen Shimakawa, in *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage*, also introduces Kristeva’s schema of abjection as a particularly apt metaphor for describing the delimiting role that Asian Americans have played (oftentimes unwillingly) in establishing a “frontier” of Americanness: “the conceptualization of ‘U.S. citizen’ has been supported through the periodic systematic exclusion of nonwhites through immigration regulation and the differential allocation of material and social privileges along racialized lines” (2002:5). Shimakawa particularly tracks the way in which “the conceptual U.S. citizen-subject comes into being [...] through the expulsion of Asianness in the figure of Asian immigrants” (5). Moreover, her point is not merely that an alien Asianness is that which must be expelled from Americanness but that in a theatre of abjection, such alien elements must be repeatedly envisioned as breaching into and contaminating Americanness, hence requiring constant expulsion: “because the process [of abjection] is never fully successful or complete, the ‘deject’ (‘one by whom the abject exists’) must repeatedly reinforce those boundaries [...]. It is this dynamic and unstable aspect of abjection that makes it a peculiarly apt model for charting Asian Americanness” (2002:10).
9. The child sequestered in the attic or cellar is a tried-and-true convention of founding fiction, where typically the orphan, who often doesn’t know he’s an orphan, eventually discovers that the cruel guardians looking after him are not his parents after all. The usual trajectory of this fiction moves from the rejection of the false, unloving caretaker(s)—false because overrun by “aberrant forms of desire” (Armstrong 1987:184), whether excessive appetite, greed, prejudice, or political aspiration—to the restoration or adoption of a new family coincident with the recovery of a well-ordered household (cf. Dickens’s *Oliver Twist*). Cho alludes to this restoration narrative even as she takes it in a different direction, especially in her stand-up performance. Cho’s spatial maneuvering, contesting the well-ordered familial home, thus continues the work of interrogating heteronormative genealogical systems that David Roman credits to “freaks” or artists of color who stand outside the norm, specifically Latino performer, John Leguizamo (2002).
10. The U.S. nation’s political imperative and rhetoric offers an abstract equality to all, while the state’s commitment to capitalist accumulation requires inequality. Lisa Lowe argues that culture remains the site where the contradictions between the political imperative of equivalence and capitalist imperative of inequivalence become resolved (as in the bildungsroman) or irresolved (in decolonizing fiction) (see Lowe 1996). Cho’s performance offers a theatricalizing of irresolution as a bodily leakage, spillage, or inversion in which, as Judith Halberstam puts it, “things that are supposed to be inside are outside, or things that are supposed to be below are on high” (Halberstam 2002).

11. Koestenbaum is more circumspect in attributing a sure-fire political (pedagogical) effect to diva enactments: “no political program motivates the crowd that follows [opera diva] Henriette Sontag home to her hotel and serenades her” (2001:111). Divas shed light on the constraints and possibilities open to:

the performer, who builds an identity from the experience of being watched, and who must learn to police herself. Powerful social institutions roost in our bodies; the normative category—man, woman, straight—rakes one’s body, inspects it for error [...]. Diva is a specific female role [...] but it is also a pliant social institution, a framework for emotion, a kind of conduct, expectation, or desire, that can move through a body that has nothing to do with opera, that can flush the cheeks of a non-singing, non-performing body a body called “private” because it does not depend on being seen or heard. (111)

Here Koestenbaum extends his diva insights to those who are not the actual stage performers but who become infected by their song; so while the diva herself is the epitome of ungovernability, the diva scenario is another kind of cultural sphere for the dissemination or invagination of the larger public with the diva’s excessive flamboyance.

12. Diva citizenship, according to Berlant, disrupts “the fantasy norms of democratic abstraction” in which a mass or abstract nationality is enjoyed by way of the fantasy of supposedly equally sovereign subjects all rationally represented. The exemplary divas, Anita Hill, Harriet Jacobs, and Harper’s Iola Leroy, Berlant characterizes as quite reluctant to “speak in public about the national scandal of their private shame” (244). “Their deployment of publicity [is] an act made under duress” (Berlant 1997: 246). These divas’ duress—as well as their inability to garner a response to this duress from political elites—Berlant casts as the failure of the nation. In effect, the failure of these women to persuade the public to their own view becomes the failure of the nation, that which would challenge present-day “Americans to take up politically what the strongest divas were unable, individually, to achieve” (Berlant 1997: 246).
13. With regard to this leakiness, the written memoir offers an account of a childhood incident that results in Cho’s being taunted as the “Pee Girl” (2001a:13). The astonishing part of this story is that the young Margaret feels simply a lack of horror at wetting her pants. She is not bothered by this leakage, though terribly bothered by her classmates’ reaction: they shun her in an act of urinary segregation. Leakiness, as I am using it, refers not simply to this pants-wetting episode but to the boundary crisis or inadequate partitioning engendered by Cho’s racial difference, her migration across segregated spaces, and the breaching of her private parts by technologies of spectatorship.
14. One of the funnier moments in Part I might be a big pun or literalization of the idea of being “a slave to fashion,” with Cho imagining fashionista fags and divas negotiating their way through the underground railroad.
15. Which people, we might ask. Just white people? In the context of the original quote, “people” likely does refer to white people. However, I would argue that such specification understates the scope of investments in whiteness, investments that have repercussions for the ways we are both “put off” or “turned on”—for how, in short, desire is articulated. For it is not just whites who have an investment in whiteness as innocence. Rather people of color, lesbians, and gays also have a stake in this innocence, have fantasies and desires to obtain or assume this ground-state, this place before shame, marking, before the Fall into racial, gendered, or queer specificity.
16. Other peoples from the Philippines, Visayans, and Negritos for instance, were on display in the Philippine Village as well. Filipinos were on display also in the 1898 Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition in Omaha, and the 1901 Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo. Rydell claims that “the immediate impetus to see the Igorot exhibit stemmed less from preindustrial longings [for a simpler way of life] than from a powerful mixture of white supremacist sexual stereotypes and voyeurism” (Rydell 1984:172; see also Vaughn 1996).
17. The American military presence in South Korea (ostensibly at the behest of South Korea) certainly speaks to an ongoing (neo)colonial occupation that is actively misrecognized and forgotten.
18. Drawing on Mary Douglas’s definition of dirt as “matter out of place,” Kathleen McHugh first establishes housework (that which sweeps away the dirt) as a structuring absence in classic Hollywood melodrama and, second, examines feminist alternative

- films that make dirt, labor, and the boundary between nature (dirt, the raw) and culture (orderly domestic space) the very subject of their films. My parallel argument construes Cho's feminist, queer, and (off-)color(ed) performances not as a means of dwelling in the basement of dirty jokes, but a similar troubling of cultural and spatial boundaries—a way of bringing to the surface the normative (sanitary, white) and laborious efforts to render Cho's bodily matter as dirty, "out of place," and alienable.
19. Interestingly, the historical specificity of bodies becomes apparent not only in relation to Cho's fully prone body, but also in relation to the hunched over, or half-bowed, body of the medical technician, Gwen, who simultaneously services and disciplines the Asian American. In a vocal register, Cho performs Gwen as from the South or, more probably, part of a migration to Los Angeles from the South (for example, African American migration in the early and mid-20th century [see Griffin 1995]). Bodily, "Gwen's" half-bowed position recalls, even as it is not identical to, the queer Asian/Asian American body that continually returns throughout Cho's stand-up performance, as reminder of racial particularity—of "something racial [happening] everyday" (2000).
  20. On yellow English, see Kim (1975).
  21. Cho alludes to the title character of Toho Productions' famous movies. In Ishiro Honda's original 1954 film *Godzilla* (subsequently remade in Hollywood with the American spelling "Godzilla"), an American nuclear bomb test unleashes the giant creature, Godzilla, who destroys Tokyo with his radioactive breath.
  22. The primacy of visual comedy in Part 3 is best conveyed in the sequence on "Sexy Drunks." For a good 30 to 40 seconds, Cho's limp hand slips on top of, off, and around the microphone, ending in a two-handed (magic show) citation of impotence, as Cho's index finger stabs desperately, missing the hole in the center of her other hand, folded loosely into a fist. Wordless during much of this routine, Cho's demonstration also visually punctuates the irrelevance of voice to this comic beat, with the microphone an impediment to the two-fisted requirements of the scene.
  23. In her chapter on "Infantile Citizenship," Berlant elaborates on the function of national fantasy in constructing a notion of infantile citizenship, i.e., a childlike subjectivity forged through a willful forgetting of critical knowledge about the state (see Berlant 1997). In her examination of *The Simpsons*, Berlant teases out the way in which this infantile citizenship gets sold to the viewer, made to appear as a desirable state of mind. Here, I am suggesting that Cho's joke recalls the "infantile" race-blind subject as neither innocent nor commendable, but strictly ludicrous.
  24. Weirdly placed appendages, growths, and priapses—indicated through her finger tricks—become the iconography through which Cho alludes back to the Frankensteinian mutation that her on-screen persona has become: "I was this Frankenstein monster made up of bits and pieces of my old stand-up act, mixed with focus groups' opinions on what Asian Americans should be, mixed with the Asian consultant." Most memorably, Cho visualizes the monstrous body in her pantomime of a Hollywood producer's sexual harassment. The comic dangles three fingers from her breast, reducing the producer—who has lunged at her—to two short legs and one long penis.

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