Will the Real Asian American Female Please Stand Up?: Margaret Cho's Identity Problems
Debby Thompson

> I had a lot of identity problems.
> --Margaret Cho (quoted in Fraiberg 325)

In her stand-up performance piece Revolution, discussing the dearth of substantial roles in Hollywood for Asian American women, Margaret Cho comments:

> And I get offered movie roles all the time. And I say No, No. I don't wanna play a manicurist. I don't wanna play a really pissed off liquor store owner. I don't wanna go nowhere with a chicken under my arm. I don't wanna play an exceptionally good student. I do not want to get off a tour bus and take numerous photographs. I do not ever want to utter the phrase 'Welcome to Japan, Mr. Bond.' I do not wanta write down all my memoirs about being a geisha... All those, uh, those tragic heroines that I don't wanna play them, humm-umm, humm-umm, humm-umm. [singing in screeching, mock-soprano] '...My man did not come back. No, I still waiting for you, you went to America, you said you's gonna come back and I just still waiting for your ass. Where you at? You're my baby' daddy.' [back to her own voice] I do not wanna be in any musical where they're gonna be a helicopter.... No.

Among this list of stereotypical bit parts for Asian American female actors, the only lead role is that of Madame Butterfly. In Puccini's opera, Butterfly is a young Japanese woman who falls in love with a white American man (Pinkerton), gives birth to their son, is abandoned by him, and commits suicide. (The opera's updated, helicopter-accessorized musical version, Miss Saigon, takes place during the last days of the Vietnam War, with Kim as the Vietnamese woman who turns to suicide when she is abandoned by her with American lover.) The Madame Butterfly mythology has been a powerful one in the American cultural imaginary. Mocking the myth here, Cho de-romanticizes it by casting it into a Jerry Springer Show vernacular and recasting "tragic heroines" into the everyday characters of popular television. Although she refuses such tragic heroine roles and mythologies, though, they still exert a power over her, even in her rejection of them. As she looks for more authentic representations with which to counter the false ones, Cho finds rather that authentic representations are themselves structured by mythologies of race, ethnicity, and gender. These mythologies not only delimit culturally recognizable identities, but they also limit possibilities for other, more creative representations.

Mythologies, in Roland Barthes' sense, are not so much "true" or "false" as they are structures of reality. We come to expect and embody them, often without even knowing that we are doing so. Giving form or structure to a cultural unconscious, such mythologies can be embodied not only in overtly representational forms, such as Hollywood productions, but also in seemingly non-representational and non-theatrical forms, such as a body going about its everyday life. For Asian American women, the Madame Butterfly myth can reproduce itself not just on stage but in life, and can be lived out, often unconsciously, in the most personal of ways at the site of one's interior body.

> When I was a little girl I grow up on the rice patty. And we have no food. But even though we have no food I have a tendency to put on weight. Which is why I really hope I catch malaria. The pound fall away so quickly [pronounced 'kickly'] when you have malaria. Or dysentery. [*small embarrassed giggle*]

This mythical Butterfly-like figure has been re-invoked and re-embodied so often, and so visibly, in relation to any other U.S. representation of Asian women that it has been taken as authentic—even, Cho claims, by many Korean Americans.

I have never been a heavy person, but for some reason, my physique drives some Korean people insane. They feel I am too large for them to be comfortable, too large to be one of them…Why is this a collective obsession for so many Korean people? What do we feel about ourselves from the media, and about our image in the world? What do we believe is accomplished by regulating our young women this way? … Is it strictly out of a sort of national pride and love for ourselves as a people that we feel the need to control exactly how we are perceived? … (117-118)

This control of women's figures out of national or ethnic pride is a form of coercive authenticity. The constructed authenticity of the delicate Asian female figure is in itself an example of how mythologies authenticate a limited range of cultural figures while excluding other possibilities for cultural embodiment. At a press conference, Cho recounts, one critic nailed the issue with this pointed question: "Miss Cho, isn't it true that the network asked you to lose weight, to play the part of YOURSELF, on your own TV show?" (125).

Cho's willingness to sacrifice her health to please the network producers, and her naïve belief in their superior knowledge and authority, enables them to play the role of Pinkerton to her un-self-critically reproduced Butterfly. The network producers - in Cho's imagination a set of anonymous, omnipotent white men - are granted the power to control Cho's body, which she submits to their control, just as Butterfly submits her body to Pinkerton's control. Cho herself admits her own complicity in this submission; she's found herself naively and uncritically falling into the cultural narrative that grants whiteness and maleness inherent wisdom and power, though she only realizes this fall in retrospect. This subjugation of her body to the mandates of an image nearly ends in a kind of suicidal self-sacrifice (at least in Cho's retrospective depiction of it), echoing Butterfly's suicidal self-sacrifice. Cho not only continues to have kidney problems to this day, but the demands on her to lose weight resulted in an addiction to diet pills and sent her on a downward spiral of addiction to other drugs and alcohol abuse. Without a cultural narrative within which to recognize herself as a woman of size and appetite, Cho's two options, unacknowledged but powerfully felt, were either to conform to the subsuming cultural mythology of Asian femininity, or to not exist.

Cho's image as a young, single Korean American woman was also "butterflied," by the show's developers, not only around weight issues but also around sexuality. In both cases, Asian American women are mythologized in images of restraint. If they have appetites at all, they are expected to deny or control them. There has been no cultural narrative at all regarding Asian American women and substance abuse.[1] I wrote earlier that the TV show was very loosely based on Cho's life. Cho comments later that the show's writer, Gary:

ethnic/cultural differences, metonymizes this Asian essentialism.) The use of Asian "types" may have occurred against the best of intentions of many involved, including Cho, to resist stereotype.

As approval of the show waned, the producers attempted to make the show more "authentic" by hiring an "Asian consultant." In Cho's words:

> I was not wholeheartedly embraced by all of the Korean-American community. ... This really scared the network. "She's not Asian enough. She's not Asian enough. She's not testing Asian." So, for my benefit, they hired an Asian consultant. Oh yes. Because I was fucking it up so bad, they had to hire someone to help me be more Asian. And she would follow me around, "Margaret, use chopsticks. Use chopsticks. And when you're done eating, you can put them in your hair.

Dana Heller calls this "a logic stemming on the one hand from the culture's blind adherence to ethnic scripts, and on the other hand from cultural anxieties produced by the corporate state compulsion to manage, discipline, and limit the consumable, pre-fab immigrant identities that the film and television industries circumscribe in order to commodify concepts of legible race and citizenship, gender and sexuality."

Surprisingly (to Cho), the backlash against the show from Asian Americans also tended to adopt such a logic. Granted, the show itself was not good, and not funny. Cho herself says it "had all turned out like Saved By the Gong" (112). But the show was criticized by Asian Americans as being on the one hand stereotypical, and on the other hand not Asian American enough, or not authentically Asian American—when a more productive approach might have been to call for the array of ethnicities of the actors to actually be represented and differentiated on-screen. An even more productive approach might have been to call for more, many more, mainstream and mass culture representations of Asian Americans, and with greater specificity, rather than removing the one Asian American representation for not being correctly Asian American. As Cho comments in retrospect in her book:

> Since there had been such a backlash from the Asian-American community, an effort was made to make the show more "authentic." An Asian consultant was hired, mostly to help actors with their accents and to determine the Fen Shui on the set. It was all the more insulting because the actors didn't need any help, and "authenticity" was never the problem. It was insensitivity. The idea that there is one defining, "authentic" Asian-American experience ignores the vast diversity of which we are capable. It discounts the fact that there can be many truths, and holds us in a racial spiderweb. We were accused of being racist because we did not ring true as an "authentic" Asian-American family, when the real racism lies in the expectation of one. (140)

As Cho's comedy points out, "Asian American-ness" has never worked well in the more prevalent identity politics mode of "authenticity," which would necessitate the positing of an Asian "essence." This is not to discount the importance of Asian American alliances and political coalitions, which in many cases have worked very well—or even to denounce the productive

> comedy because I still had to try to make money somehow, and I would be so drunk onstage I would have to hold the mic stand to keep the room from spinning around me. I was slowly turning into The Rose: [sings drunkenly] "Some say love, it is a ...What is it?"

But on the verge of killing herself the slow way, Cho has an awakening, at least as she represents it in I'm the One:

> So one night my boyfriend and I kept drinking, and we kept doing drugs, and we kept drinking, and we kept doing drugs, and I don't even know what happened ... All I know is we woke up in the morning and the bed was wet, but the stain was in the middle, so we couldn't figure out who wet the bed. And I said, 'What kind of fucked up, Motley Crue, Behind the Music bullshit is this?'
> I am not gonna die, I am not gonna die because my sitcom got cancelled. And I am not gonna die because some producer tried to take advantage of me. And I am not gonna die because some network executive thought I was fat. It's so wrong.
>
> It's so wrong that women are asked to live up to this skinny ideal that is totally unattainable. For me to be ten pounds thinner is a full-time job. And I am handing in my notice, and walking out the door!
>
> I am not gonna die because I failed as someone else. I'm gonna succeed as myself. And I'm gonna stay here, and rock the mic, until the next Korean-American, fag hag, shit-starter, girl comic, trash-talker, comes up and takes my place!

In this awakening, Cho comes to the realization that she's been following a cultural narrative or script without even realizing it. The pre-scripted narrative Cho names here is the formula of the "fucked up, Motley Crue, Behind the Music bullshit." In the VH1 series Behind the Music, a pop music star rises to quick fame, shines brightly for a moment, then inevitably falls, and falls quickly, into self-destructive despair. This well-known narrative, a contemporary cultural mythology, gives shape to a life; it makes the array of events and behaviors comprehensible, so that it becomes a recognizable through-line. It also makes a person recognizable to herself; without a solid, pre-existing "selfhood" to ground her, she may find herself turning to a well-known through-line as a template against which to frame the diverse minutae of her life. And again, like the instincts of a naturalistic actor, this throughline may "just feel right," feel "natural." It feels right and natural because it's been naturalized and culturally validated. An actor (or anyone creating a persona) may not realize that she has unconsciously constructed her narrative to fit into a pre-scribed cultural narrative, which it then fits. No wonder it feels like a perfect fit. The moment of awakening - though not necessarily of liberation - comes when the player recognizes this phenomenon - when she recognizes belatedly that she's constructed her self and her life's narrative arc to fit the cultural mythology. Recognition of the phenomenon may result in the ability to disengage oneself from it - though that disengagement will prove to be difficult. Cho's recognition that she's following a Madame Butterfly-like role/narrative - "I am not gonna die because some producer tried to take advantage of me...I am not gonna die because I failed as someone else" - results in her decision to throw off these and other cultural narratives that work to prescribe authenticity.

> a ghost and scaring the shit out of everyone, or, alternately, committing suicide because my white lover did not come back to Japan after the war, or having him come back for me and fooling him successfully for years and years into thinking I am a woman when really I'm a dude, as if my race castrates me so much that this deception is completely feasible… (I Have Chosen 44-5)

The repetition of references to Madame Butterfly ("committing suicide because my white lover did not come back to Japan after the war" and even David Henry Hwang's M. Butterfly ("…fooling him successfully for years and years into thinking I am a woman when really I'm a dude…") suggests the compelling presence of these mythologies even in their denial. Even as they're dismissed, along with other stock roles in the list, as inauthentic, they become fundamental structures in opposition to which Cho's counter-narratives of authenticity are constructed.

Many of these images are clearly false - that is, they are never occupied by real Asians or Asian Americans in real life. Others are inauthentic but not necessarily false - that is, they may be roles created from outside of Asian American cultures (assuming, for the moment, that Asian American cultures have their own autonomous identities), but which Asian Americans find themselves coerced into occupying, even in real life. But finding "authentic" identities with which to replace the "inauthentic" and "false" roles proves more difficult. Indeed the "authentic"/"inauthentic" binary construction bears more inspection, as do each of the terms within it. As Cho herself says of her TV show (and as I quoted earlier), "[w]e were accused of being racist because we did not ring true as an 'authentic' Asian-American family, when the real racism lies in the expectation of one" (I'm the One 140). (I myself am not so sure that "the real racism" is any more identifiable - though just as real - as Asian American authenticity.)

Further complicating the ideal of authenticity, Cho reproduces as real some of the very stereotypes and simplifications that she elsewhere condemns as inauthentic. She may protest the reduction of Asians to a very limited number of types, and then say in her act (in explaining her surprise at her father's sobbing at his mother's funeral) that "Korean people basically have two emotions: stony silence, and GET OUT OF MY STORE!" (Revolution). Cho may object to mass media caricatures of Asians, and then imitate her mother in a mode that is often perceived as caricature (though I see it differently, as I will discuss below.) She may make a statement such as the following from I'm the One:

> But I was so tied up in the idea of that acceptance. You know, that was so important to me that when the show was over I fell apart. And I didn't know who I was at all. I was this Frankenstein monster made up of bits and pieces of my old stand-up act, mixed with focus groups' opinions about what Asian Americans should be, mixed with the Asian consultant. I didn't know who I was. All I know is that I had failed, and I had failed as somebody else. It was painful.
>
> And I did what's really hard for Asian people to do. I became an alcoholic, and that's not easy because we can't drink.

> I didn't get it. I was like, "But I'm a size four." The first thing you lose on a diet is brain mass. (I'm the One (video)

One of the dangers of such a visibility, speaking-in-your-own-voice identity politics, dependent on an assumption of an authentic identity in need of being seen, heard, acknowledged, and known, is that, Peggy Phelan suggests, "[i]n framing more and more images of the hitherto under-represented other, contemporary culture finds a way to name, and thus to arrest and fix, the image of that other" (Phelan 2). That is, as images of authenticity become visible, they necessarily become simultaneously under cultural surveillance (in the Foucauldian sense). A"post-identity" politics position, by contrast, suggests that "authenticity" may itself be inauthentic, or at least an essence constructed belatedly, after the ideology it appears to precede. Authenticity may itself be constructed. Asian American cultures may not, after all, possess autonomous identities, as I temporarily assumed above. Images deemed to be authentic might be symbols of authenticity rather than authenticity itself. That is, the sense of a true essence underlying false representations may itself be a construct, and one constructed within and by its ideological context to be experienced as something prior to ideology. In this model, identity is always belated; always already preceded by a "post-."

These models of cultural/racial/ethnic identity roughly parallel models of individual identity. Cho sees herself, in the years she fell into Madame Butterfly roles, as being untrue not only to Asian American identity but also to her own personal identity. When she says "I am not gonna die because I failed as someone else. I'm gonna succeed as myself," she assumes there is a true "myself" prior to the false "someone elses." But is there? The cult-of-the-self discourse that Cho's statement calls to mind here - "Be yourself," "March to the beat of your own drummer" - may create the very "self," one seemingly independent of culture, that it purports to be re-presenting. The process of self-recognition that occurs on the cultural level of Asian American identity may also occur on the individual level of personal identity.

Counter-intuitively, "false" or "inauthentic" images may actually precede "true" ones. For example, Cho represents her authentic self as "slutty," a "shit-starter, a "trash-talker" (etc.). This may indeed be her authentic self - her self-representations in her performances make it hard for a spectator to deny such authenticity - but does this authentic self exist independently of the "false" mythologies Cho is trying to throw off? The slutty trash-talker is not just different from, but the exact opposite of, the Butterfly image of purity, innocence, modesty, humility, virginity, and shame. In search of a true self as opposed to a false myth, Cho may indeed have opposed herself to the myth by recognizing herself as the image of its opposite. If this is the case, then Cho's authenticity is a manufactured authenticity, and manufactured in relation to a prior inauthentic representation. In other words, "authenticity" is inherently impure, fundamentally divided, duplicitous: it's theatrical or (in Judith Butler's term) "performative." "Authenticity" is based on an inherent contradiction: the authentic depends on the inauthentic for self-definition. Cho herself appears at times to be clearly and delightedly aware of this contradiction, and to play up its ironies. At other times it's unclear how aware she is of the contradictions and ironies in her claims to authenticity. But how aware she is of her own self-contradictions is not the important question; the more compelling question, rather, is how she embodies contradiction so as to transform it into humor. How does she represent, rather than repress, contradiction? How does

The kind of stand-up acting (or performing) approach I've been describing aligns with the acting approach of the mid-20th-century theater innovator Bertolt Brecht. In Brechtian theater, the point of the performance is to alienate the dominant ideology – to render it strange, alien, bizarre, so that it can then be examined and analyzed. Brecht stresses the need to make familiar ideology unfamiliar so that audiences can see it as ideology rather than "just the way things are." More importantly, audiences will recognize the possibility for things-as-they-are to be different. "When something seems 'the most obvious thing in the world,'" Brecht writes, "it means that any attempt to understand the world has been given up" (Brecht 71). Instead, we need a theater in which "[w]hat is 'natural' must have the force of what is startling," and in which "[p]eople's activity must simultaneously be so and be capable of being different" (71). Such an effect in theater is known as the "Alienation Effect" or A-effect (in German, *Verfremdungseffekt* or *V-effekt*): "A representation that alienates in one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar" (Brecht 192). Such alienation effects are designed "to free socially-conditioned phenomena from that stamp of familiarity which protects them against our grasp today" (192). Brechtain theater can alienate such cultural mythologies as the Madame Butterfly story. It can make this familiar narrative un-familiar and strange through ironic, historicizing, and startling presentations.

One way to achieve an audience awareness of the character's ideology is to disrupt the audience's identificatory empathy with the character so that the audience isn't sucked into the seeming "naturalness" and "universality" of the character's emotions, but can instead see the character's acts and reactions as crystallizations of a strange ideology to be analyzed with "scientific" (i.e. analytical) curiosity. This disruption of audience identification might in turn, Brecht hypothesizes, be achieved by disrupting the actor's identification with character. The actor comments on the character. If the audience must identify and empathize, they can identify with the actor in her compassionate but critical examination of her character. Brecht contrasts the "dramatic theater" - the bourgeois theater of humanist, universalizing, and empathetic approaches to character - with his "epic theater" - the populist theater of A-effects, historicization of ideology, and critical observation. In a famous and perhaps startling formulation, Brecht writes:

> The dramatic theatre's spectator says: Yes, I have felt like that too - Just like me - It's only natural - It'll never change - The sufferings of this man appal me, because they are inescapable - That's great art; it all seems the most obvious thing in the world - I weep when they weep, I laugh when they laugh.
>
> The epic theatre's spectator says: I'd never have thought it - That's not the way - That's extraordinary, hardly believable - It's got to stop - The sufferings of this man appall me, because they are unnecessary - That's great art: nothing obvious in it - I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh. (Brecht 71)

Brechtian acting has been notoriously difficult to achieve in practice, as is effective ideological alienation. Even when it is achieved, it is often received by an audience accustomed to the realist standard as bad acting, as a failure on the actor's part to properly "become" her character through identification. Stand-up is just the opposite - and perhaps stand-up and its cousin, camp, may be the potential Brechtian theater of contemporary culture. Stand-up's audience laughs when the

> façade of whatever social set-up we found ourselves in - we couldn't afford to stand out in any way, for it might give the game away about our gayness. So we have developed an eye and an ear for surfaces, appearances, forms - style. Small wonder then that when we came to develop our own culture, the habit of style should have remained so dominant in it. (144)

Camp is a detailed reproduction - with a critical difference - of the styles that create "naturalness." Camp's thorough demonstration of gender construction suggests that gender (and sexual and racial) identity categories available to us in our culture are not inevitable, not fixed, but highly fabricated and hence manipulable, contingent, provisional. Camp shows us that gender identity can, in Brecht's words, "simultaneously be so and be capable of being different." Camp often takes the form of drag, particularly of men impersonating women to show femininity as both a performative construction and curiosity. Brecht, too, saw the potential of cross-gender casting to demystify gender identity:

> ... it is also good for the actors when they see their characters copied or portrayed in another form. If the part is played by somebody of the opposite sex the sex of the character will be more clearly brought out; if it is played by a comedian, whether comically or tragically, it will gain fresh aspects. (Brecht 197)

Dyer notes that "camping about" can be both "good and bad, progressive and reactionary" (Dyer 136) - a caution similar to one made by Brecht about alienation effects. (Brecht notes that in classic "Oriental" theater alienation effects are employed without effecting the alienation of ideology.) Drag too may in practice reactively conserve gender roles - but it always has the *potential* to deconstruct these roles.

In both camp and Brechtian theater - they may at times be the same thing - form/structure is wedged from content to reveal how content may be the (mutually constituted) effect of form rather than form's predecessor. That is, gender identity, rather than preceding and determining its manifestations, may instead be what Judith Butler calls "performative." In a performative model of identity gender is by no means a transcultural or transhistorical identity, or even an identity stable within a given culture, climate, or even body, but rather "an identity tenuously constituted in time -- an identity instituted through a <u>stylized repetition of acts</u>" ("Performative" 519). Through repetition, the performance of gender is legitimated, The ideal of an innate, coherent identity, indeed, is an effect of performance that erases its own performativity: "acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this <u>on the surface</u> of the body .[. . .] That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality" (<u>Gender</u> 136). More simply, "[g]ender reality is performative which means [. . .] that it is real only to the extent that it is performed" "Performative" 527).

The discovery of the artificiality or inauthenticity of identity construction, and particularly of gender identity, could be crushing. But for audiences of Brechtian theater and of camp, such a discovery is made highly pleasurable. As Jonathan Dollimore suggests in his book <u>Sexual Dissidence</u>, camp:

of a consistent character, stand-up self-representation has instead allowed Cho to perform, without becoming, other roles — roles which may be contradictory, fragmented, and fundamentally different from Cho. That is, Cho exploits the Brechtian potential of stand-up to alienate ideological tropes, including our currently culturally recognized identity categories and the cultural mythologies maintaining them, rather than simply re-embody them and play them straight. When Cho deromanticizes the Madame Butterfly mythology by playing the tragic heroine as a comic foil, she engages the aesthetics of camp to alienate a powerful cultural mythology. (Using different terminology, Rachel Lee reads Margaret Cho's acts of bowing in performance - "Cho's mimicry of Asian obedience" - as what Brecht would call social gestus, alienating "the repression of historical memory regarding race relations" (Lee 109).) The campy alienation of ideological tropes both entices and frustrates audiences. Allison Fraiberg astutely describes Cho's process:

> Once she cauterizes some of the initial assumptions about her identity at the beginning of her routine, Cho's strategy centers on isolating a moment with the greatest potential for identification. She takes that moment of connection as a starting point and then fragments it based on cultural expectations. And the process continues with each fragment reshaped into a new moment of identification, then shattered once again. Cho uses moments of generalized identification and forecloses on their potential to act as universal images. Her process of fragmentation doesn't just deconstruct universalizing impulses, but fragments the generalization to offer more localized nodes of connection. Each final image, in its temporary manifestation, offers a limited space for identification, a space accessible only to some. This strategy relies on drawing people into a moment of identification and then systematically restricting that space of connection. (Fraiberg 325)

Because identification (of audience, and of Cho, with her various personae) is both encouraged and disrupted, the process of identification itself, along with its underlying assumption of a prior identity to be identified with, becomes the true subject of performance. Prior identity morphs into post-identity.

The Birds and the Bees and the Butterflies

This post-identity performance mode is best exemplified and complicated in Cho's lovingly campy portrayals of her Korean American mother, which are the trademark of her act and her most popular routines. For example, Cho's encore, and hence the final words, to the show <u>I'm the One that I Want</u>, depicts her mother explaining gay porn to the young Cho:

> [*Cho in her "own" persona*] But I grew up here, on Polk Street, in the seventies, which was the gayest place in the world. And my parents owned a bookstore, and my mother was in charge of the gay porn. So every day she would unpack boxes of gay porn and try to talk to me about it.
>
> [*Here Cho switches into the persona of her mother: pulls chin into her neck, squints her eyes into slits, adopts a voice hat ranges from high questions to low gutteral emphatic pronouncements. She adopts an exaggerated Korean accent. Mimes looking at a book.*]

of butterflies undoes the certainty of birds and bees, of seemingly natural and nature-based identities. This kind of Butterfly, an alternative, deviant Butterfly, acts as a dangerous supplement to the birds and the bees. Not an identity as a way of being in the world, the butterfly of drag performance is resistant to definitive meaning or fixation, as her friend Forbes explains to the young Cho:

> Some do it to be funny. They aren't that cute or whatever, feel somewhat lacking, so they get attention that way. Some just like the way it looks. Some do it because they love women. Some because they hate women. They're all different. It's such a bother really. I couldn't imagine putting all those things on, makeup and binding up your naughty bits. You can see them do shows sometimes. It can be very entertaining. There are clever ones and pretty ones, ones so good you can't even tell they're men and ones so bad you're glad that they are because no woman should have to look like that. (I'm the One 31-2)

Based on men's identifying with women but not as women, drag may be the ultimate Brechtian performance mode, replete with all its rewards and dangers. Drag can be extremely offensive, because it always mocks the one that it wants, always ridicules what it also loves, lacks, and desires. But if it's good drag, the love is a little bit more powerful than the mockery, and the cross-identification more compelling than identity proper. Cho, in ethnic drag as her mother and others, is most authentic when she *both* embodies a caricatured stereotype *and* differentiates herself from it, rather than when she tries to present a truly authentic identity prior to stereotype. Perhaps Cho's depictions of her mother produce so much anxiety because they expose identity's own resemblance to stereotype, and expose identity politics' foundation in stereotypes of authenticity. Cho's approach to the Madame Butterfly mythology is similarly campy. Her energy goes not only into rejecting it as false and harmful, but also into playing it with tender irony. Part of the appeal of the Madame Butterfly myth for Westerners is that it allows them both to sympathize with her victimization and at the same time to pose her in opposition to the West. But another (related) part of the appeal is in the myth's promise of a stable racial/ethnic identity as metonymized in the figure of Butterfly. Cho's acts aggressively revoke such a promise even as they identify with the seductive draw of a metonymizable culture. Her representation of Asian American female identity, then, is ambivalent - if not duplicitous. Cho's stand-up acts campily alienate Madame Butterfly and other cultural mythologies structuring race and ethnicity. Such acts both assert her Asian identity and observe, with both outrage and amusement, the mechanisms of its production. Doing so, Cho embodies a post-identity politics of American-ness as an identity that both is and is not - an identity that can be very real, but (only) because we continually reproduce its reality in a naturalistic performance mode. In Cho's representations, Asian American female identity must, to borrow Brecht's phrase, "simultaneously be so and be capable of being different."

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performances and theater practices both participate in and interrogate U.S. American racial constructions in an era of post-identity politics.

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In her stand-up performance piece Revolution, discussing the dearth of substantial roles in Hollywood for Asian American women, Margaret Cho comments:

> And I get offered movie roles all the time. And I say No, No. I don't wanna play a manicurist. I don't wanna play a really pissed off liquor store owner. I don't wanna go nowhere with a chicken under my arm. I don't wanna play an exceptionally good student. I do not want to get off a tour bus and take numerous photographs. I do not ever want to utter the phrase 'Welcome to Japan, Mr. Bond.' I do not wanta write down all my memoirs about being a geisha... All those, uh, those tragic heroines that I don't wanna play them, humm-umm, humm-umm, humm-umm. [singing in screeching, mock-soprano] '...My man did not come back. No, I still waiting for you, you went to America, you said you's gonna come back and I just still waiting for your ass. Where you at? You're my baby' daddy.' [back to her own voice] I do not wanna be in any musical where they're gonna be a helicopter.... No.

Among this list of stereotypical bit parts for Asian American female actors, the only lead role is that of Madame Butterfly. In Puccini's opera, Butterfly is a young Japanese woman who falls in love with a white American man (Pinkerton), gives birth to their son, is abandoned by him, and commits suicide. (The opera's updated, helicopter-accessorized musical version, Miss Saigon, takes place during the last days of the Vietnam War, with Kim as the Vietnamese woman who turns to suicide when she is abandoned by her with American lover.) The Madame Butterfly mythology has been a powerful one in the American cultural imaginary. Mocking the myth here, Cho de-romanticizes it by casting it into a Jerry Springer Show vernacular and recasting "tragic heroines" into the everyday characters of popular television. Although she refuses such tragic heroine roles and mythologies, though, they still exert a power over her, even in her rejection of them. As she looks for more authentic representations with which to counter the false ones, Cho finds rather that authentic representations are themselves structured by mythologies of race, ethnicity, and gender. These mythologies not only delimit culturally recognizable identities, but they also limit possibilities for other, more creative representations.

Mythologies, in Roland Barthes' sense, are not so much "true" or "false" as they are structures of reality. We come to expect and embody them, often without even knowing that we are doing so. Giving form or structure to a cultural unconscious, such mythologies can be embodied not only in overtly representational forms, such as Hollywood productions, but also in seemingly non-representational and non-theatrical forms, such as a body going about its everyday life. For Asian American women, the Madame Butterfly myth can reproduce itself not just on stage but in life, and can be lived out, often unconsciously, in the most personal of ways at the site of one's interior body.

Early in her career, Margaret Cho found herself falling into Madame Butterfly roles both on-screen and off-. Wrestling with this cultural myth, she tried to find and assert more authentic representations of Asian and Asian American women. But while "inauthentic" representations are relatively easy to spot, "authentic" representations prove more elusive. Cho's search for authentic identity turns into its opposite: a politics of dis-identification. This shift in modes of identity and of identifying is embodied in her move from the self-based acting mode of psychological realism to the other-based performance mode of Brechtian alienation and camp. In this paper, I read Margaret Cho's shift in modes of identifying and modes of characterization as metonymic of a larger cultural shift from identity politics to post-identity politics.

Standing Up to Madame Butterfly

In her break-through stand-up comedy concert I'm the One That I Want, Margaret Cho realizes retrospectively that earlier in her career, and particularly in the production of her television show, she wasn't in control of her own narrative, and that she was being made into a Madame Butterfly figure caught within a Madame Butterfly narrative. Cho recounts that, after paying her dues traveling on the road as a stand-up comedian for many years, she was offered an ABC sitcom in 1994. Teasingly called "All-American Girl," the show featured the first Asian American family on a network TV sitcom in the U.S. It was loosely - very loosely - based on Cho's life as a stand-up comic from a Korean American family. From the show's very creation, questions of Asian American authenticity, legitimacy, and representationality emerged. Tellingly, these questions gathered particularly at the locus of Cho's body size. After her initial pilot test, Cho was told that the network was "concerned" with the "fullness" of her face, as well as with her weight. She was pushed to lose 30 pounds in two weeks—causing her kidneys to collapse. Criticisms about Cho's size are deeply intertwined with racial role expectations. Cho says that she "didn't have the delicate quality and fragile birdlike body with which Asian women are normally associated" (Cho 118), and was seen not just as overweight (which she wasn't) but as inauthentically Asian/Asian American due to her size. While all actresses are under pressure to be thin, for Cho this demand was particularly acute, given the "Butterfly" mythology. The most visible positive images of Asian women in U.S. culture still continue to replicate some form of the "Madame Butterfly" figure, a delicate, nearly weightless, innocent-to-the-point-of -childish, selfless and self-sacrificing victim, with a "delicate quality and fragile birdlike body." If heavier-than-anorexic Asian women are represented, they are almost always figures of either derision or disdain. They are not figures with whom the audience is encouraged to identify.

In the show I'm the One That I Want, Cho creates a very funny routine out of the tabloids' concern with her weight, in which she demonstrates the conflation of orientalism and weight control. One tabloid creates a "Chow like Cho" article, in which it attributes fake quotes to Cho, such as "When I was young I was raised on rice and fish. So when I get heavy I go back to that natural Asian way of eating." Cho then switches to her own voice and says "That is so Mulan. You can almost hear the mandolin in the background." At this point Cho sings an imitation of a mandolin - "bong bong bong bong bong" - and then switches into the persona of the stereotypical starving Butterfly, moving across the stage in tiny steps on tiptoes in a generic, orientalist dance, while she tells the audience in a high, shy voice:

> When I was a little girl I grow up on the rice patty. And we have no food. But even though we have no food I have a tendency to put on weight. Which is why I really hope I catch malaria. The pound fall away so quickly [pronounced 'kickly'] when you have malaria. Or dysentery. [*small embarrassed giggle*]

This mythical Butterfly-like figure has been re-invoked and re-embodied so often, and so visibly, in relation to any other U.S. representation of Asian women that it has been taken as authentic—even, Cho claims, by many Korean Americans.

I have never been a heavy person, but for some reason, my physique drives some Korean people insane. They feel I am too large for them to be comfortable, too large to be one of them...Why is this a collective obsession for so many Korean people? What do we feel about ourselves from the media, and about our image in the world? What do we believe is accomplished by regulating our young women this way? ... Is it strictly out of a sort of national pride and love for ourselves as a people that we feel the need to control exactly how we are perceived? ... (117-118)

This control of women's figures out of national or ethnic pride is a form of coercive authenticity. The constructed authenticity of the delicate Asian female figure is in itself an example of how mythologies authenticate a limited range of cultural figures while excluding other possibilities for cultural embodiment. At a press conference, Cho recounts, one critic nailed the issue with this pointed question: "Miss Cho, isn't it true that the network asked you to lose weight, to play the part of YOURSELF, on your own TV show?" (125).

Cho's willingness to sacrifice her health to please the network producers, and her naïve belief in their superior knowledge and authority, enables them to play the role of Pinkerton to her un-self-critically reproduced Butterfly. The network producers - in Cho's imagination a set of anonymous, omnipotent white men - are granted the power to control Cho's body, which she submits to their control, just as Butterfly submits her body to Pinkerton's control. Cho herself admits her own complicity in this submission; she's found herself naively and uncritically falling into the cultural narrative that grants whiteness and maleness inherent wisdom and power, though she only realizes this fall in retrospect. This subjugation of her body to the mandates of an image nearly ends in a kind of suicidal self-sacrifice (at least in Cho's retrospective depiction of it), echoing Butterfly's suicidal self-sacrifice. Cho not only continues to have kidney problems to this day, but the demands on her to lose weight resulted in an addiction to diet pills and sent her on a downward spiral of addiction to other drugs and alcohol abuse. Without a cultural narrative within which to recognize herself as a woman of size and appetite, Cho's two options, unacknowledged but powerfully felt, were either to conform to the subsuming cultural mythology of Asian femininity, or to not exist.

Cho's image as a young, single Korean American woman was also "butterflied," by the show's developers, not only around weight issues but also around sexuality. In both cases, Asian American women are mythologized in images of restraint. If they have appetites at all, they are expected to deny or control them. There has been no cultural narrative at all regarding Asian American women and substance abuse.[1] I wrote earlier that the TV show was very loosely based on Cho's life. Cho comments later that the show's writer, Gary:

> … took five minutes of my stand-up comedy and stretched it out into a half-hour pilot about a rebellious daughter growing up in a conservative Korean household - when the real story was that I had moved back home after a brief stab at independence, and I couldn't even live in the house, I had to live in the basement, because my father didn't want to watch me come down off crystal meth. Now that would have been a great sitcom.

Sanitized largely to make the show appropriate (in the developers' opinions) for prime-time TV, Cho's "true story' was also seen as inauthentically Asian American. Without a cultural narrative to make Cho's indulgences recognizable, the "real story" cannot be seen. It is invisible. If Asian American women are only recognizable as pure and petite, then when one isn't, she is unknowable, unacknowledged, unspeakable - as Cho became in the moments she does manage to deviate from the cultural script. Cho comments in I'm the One:

> When you're on television you become a kind of community property, and people say whatever they want about you, and, and because I'm a woman a lot of people said that I was ugly, and that I was fat.

And then there was the Asian American aspect - that there had never been a star, an Asian American star of a sitcom before, and this was really discussed everywhere. I opened up my newspaper at home to the editorial section, and they had printed a letter from a little Korean girl named Karen Kim, 12 years old, who wrote in saying:

> When I see Margaret Cho on television, I feel deep shame. Why? Why? I guess it was because they'd never seen a Korean American role model like me before. You know? I didn't play violin. I didn't fuck Woody Allen. I was not wholeheartedly embraced by all of the Korean community…

Cho's image would be more acceptable - in the way that a dollar bill gets accepted in a dollar-changer slot - if it aligned with a prior template of disembodied, spiritual purity or of a Butterfly-like dependance on a Western male savior figure (as the American mass media has depicted Soon Yi Previn in relation to Woody Allen). Ironically, Cho is seen as the antithesis of a positive image when she's doing the positive work of expanding the cultural identity repertoire for Korean Americans (and other Asian Americans).[2]

Being a the first mainstream representation of any previously unrepresented group is, of course, an impossible position, so this first TV show representing an Asian American family was partly doomed from the start. It would inevitably be taken as a synecdoche for all Asian American families (no matter how much it may have tried to disavow this claim), and as representative of a "typical" Asian American family. Now, while there is no "typical" family of any ethnic or racial group, the notion of a "typical" Asian American family is especially problematic, given the vast differences in country/culture of origin, language, politics, religion, immigration status, generation, etc. among Asian Americans. Nevertheless, the show basically operated within a normativizing notion of Asian American-ness, rather than pulling off the much harder aesthetic strategy of frustrating and disrupting such essentialism. (The fact that the show was cast with Korean American, Chinese American, and Japanese American actors, without marking their

ethnic/cultural differences, metonymizes this Asian essentialism.) The use of Asian "types" may have occurred against the best of intentions of many involved, including Cho, to resist stereotype.

As approval of the show waned, the producers attempted to make the show more "authentic" by hiring an "Asian consultant." In Cho's words:

> I was not wholeheartedly embraced by all of the Korean-American community. ... This really scared the network. "She's not Asian enough. She's not Asian enough. She's not testing Asian." So, for my benefit, they hired an Asian consultant. Oh yes. Because I was fucking it up so bad, they had to hire someone to help me be more Asian. And she would follow me around, "Margaret, use chopsticks. Use chopsticks. And when you're done eating, you can put them in your hair.

Dana Heller calls this "a logic stemming on the one hand from the culture's blind adherence to ethnic scripts, and on the other hand from cultural anxieties produced by the corporate state compulsion to manage, discipline, and limit the consumable, pre-fab immigrant identities that the film and television industries circumscribe in order to commodify concepts of legible race and citizenship, gender and sexuality."

Surprisingly (to Cho), the backlash against the show from Asian Americans also tended to adopt such a logic. Granted, the show itself was not good, and not funny. Cho herself says it "had all turned out like Saved By the Gong" (112). But the show was criticized by Asian Americans as being on the one hand stereotypical, and on the other hand not Asian American enough, or not authentically Asian American—when a more productive approach might have been to call for the array of ethnicities of the actors to actually be represented and differentiated on-screen. An even more productive approach might have been to call for more, many more, mainstream and mass culture representations of Asian Americans, and with greater specificity, rather than removing the one Asian American representation for not being correctly Asian American. As Cho comments in retrospect in her book:

> Since there had been such a backlash from the Asian-American community, an effort was made to make the show more "authentic." An Asian consultant was hired, mostly to help actors with their accents and to determine the Fen Shui on the set. It was all the more insulting because the actors didn't need any help, and "authenticity" was never the problem. It was insensitivity. The idea that there is one defining, "authentic" Asian-American experience ignores the vast diversity of which we are capable. It discounts the fact that there can be many truths, and holds us in a racial spiderweb. We were accused of being racist because we did not ring true as an "authentic" Asian-American family, when the real racism lies in the expectation of one. (140)

As Cho's comedy points out, "Asian American-ness" has never worked well in the more prevalent identity politics mode of "authenticity," which would necessitate the positing of an Asian "essence." This is not to discount the importance of Asian American alliances and political coalitions, which in many cases have worked very well—or even to denounce the productive

capacities of essentialism. But essentialist identity politics are a bad fit for Asian Americans. The notion of an "Asian American identity" - one which is identifiable for Korean Americans, Chinese Americans, Indian Americans, Vietnamese Americans, and Filipino Americans (to name just a few) - is difficult at best. At least as difficult is the posing of a shared identity among multiple generations of Asian Americans, including recently "naturalized" Asian immigrants to the U.S., first generation U.S. Americans of Asian descent, U.S. Americans of Asian descent whose descendants have been in the U.S. for many generations, Asian adoptees, and biracial (Asian) Americans (to name a few). Yet the show tried to show "Asian-American-ness" along this identity politics model.

When All-American Girl was eventually cancelled after one season Cho fell into despair. In retrospect, in I'm the One that I Want, Cho formulates this as unwittingly falling into the Madame Butterfly metanarrative (though she doesn't name it as such).[3] She had been seduced by the Western white man (the symbolic form of the network executives) when she was young and innocent - and then abandoned, caught like a butterfly in that "racial spiderweb." ("I didn't know better, I was 23 years old, I didn't know who I was. This network seemed so huge, and so smart, and they had money and everything. And I was so insecure," she says in her I'm the One video.) Cho put her trust in the symbolic white man to control her image and narrative as an Asian American woman, and was betrayed by him. She finds herself, both in her All-American Girl persona and in her "real" persona, internalizing the Butterfly role. Like a naturalistic actor, Cho has "become" her character. In her TV work, there's a blurring of her "true" self with her character - resulting, paradoxically, in her character's taking priority over her "real life" self.

Of course the Madame Butterfly narrative ends in the suicide of an Asian woman in response to her betrayal and abandonment by the white man who had seduced her. Cho's despair likewise led her into increasingly self-destructive behaviors. In a final effort to stay afloat in Hollywood, Cho wrote a screenplay, which:

> ... was really good. And I thought, "Here, this is my ticket out. This will get me acceptance again. This will make my manager take my calls again. I'll have a career. I'll have a reason to live. I'll do this. This is perfect. What a great story for the magazines, too, you know: failed sitcom, successful screenwriter. I was meant to be in movies. This was totally meant to be." And I really needed this to happen. I really wanted to make this movie. I really wanted to live. I wanted to live! And, and I found a producer who loved the script, and he wanted to make it into a movie...as long as I slept with him.

Once again Cho finds herself unwillingly repeating the cycle of the Madame Butterfly narrative, in which an older callous white man gains the trust of and then exploits a more innocent Asian woman, propitiating her suicide. Cho's response to the producer aligns with this narrative:

> I was really disappointed about the screenplay. I was really disappointed about my life, you know. I felt like every time I tried to do anything, it was just a failure, and I should just stop, you know, I just should just stop. And I, I started to drink myself to death, because I thought, I will be successful at that. And I really wanted to commit suicide but I was afraid to actually do it, so I would just be drinking all the time. And, and I still had to do stand-up

> comedy because I still had to try to make money somehow, and I would be so drunk onstage I would have to hold the mic stand to keep the room from spinning around me. I was slowly turning into The Rose: [sings drunkenly] "Some say love, it is a ...What is it?"

But on the verge of killing herself the slow way, Cho has an awakening, at least as she represents it in I'm the One:

> So one night my boyfriend and I kept drinking, and we kept doing drugs, and we kept drinking, and we kept doing drugs, and I don't even know what happened ... All I know is we woke up in the morning and the bed was wet, but the stain was in the middle, so we couldn't figure out who wet the bed. And I said, 'What kind of fucked up, Motley Crue, Behind the Music bullshit is this?'
> I am not gonna die, I am not gonna die because my sitcom got cancelled. And I am not gonna die because some producer tried to take advantage of me. And I am not gonna die because some network executive thought I was fat. It's so wrong.
>
> It's so wrong that women are asked to live up to this skinny ideal that is totally unattainable. For me to be ten pounds thinner is a full-time job. And I am handing in my notice, and walking out the door!
>
> I am not gonna die because I failed as someone else. I'm gonna succeed as myself. And I'm gonna stay here, and rock the mic, until the next Korean-American, fag hag, shit-starter, girl comic, trash-talker, comes up and takes my place!

In this awakening, Cho comes to the realization that she's been following a cultural narrative or script without even realizing it. The pre-scripted narrative Cho names here is the formula of the "fucked up, Motley Crue, Behind the Music bullshit." In the VH1 series Behind the Music, a pop music star rises to quick fame, shines brightly for a moment, then inevitably falls, and falls quickly, into self-destructive despair. This well-known narrative, a contemporary cultural mythology, gives shape to a life; it makes the array of events and behaviors comprehensible, so that it becomes a recognizable through-line. It also makes a person recognizable to herself; without a solid, pre-existing "selfhood" to ground her, she may find herself turning to a well-known through-line as a template against which to frame the diverse minutae of her life. And again, like the instincts of a naturalistic actor, this throughline may "just feel right," feel "natural." It feels right and natural because it's been naturalized and culturally validated. An actor (or anyone creating a persona) may not realize that she has unconsciously constructed her narrative to fit into a pre-scribed cultural narrative, which it then fits. No wonder it feels like a perfect fit. The moment of awakening - though not necessarily of liberation - comes when the player recognizes this phenomenon - when she recognizes belatedly that she's constructed her self and her life's narrative arc to fit the cultural mythology. Recognition of the phenomenon may result in the ability to disengage oneself from it - though that disengagement will prove to be difficult. Cho's recognition that she's following a Madame Butterfly-like role/narrative - "I am not gonna die because some producer tried to take advantage of me...I am not gonna die because I failed as someone else" - results in her decision to throw off these and other cultural narratives that work to prescribe authenticity.

Just as I'm the One That I Want was a turning point in Cho's career, this moment of I'm the One is a turning point of the piece. For much of the performance piece Cho has talked about false images of Asian American women that she was expected to fill, and shows us how ridiculous some of these images are. Here, in contradistinction, she proclaims her new intent to "succeed as [her]self." That "self," she declares, is a "Korean American, fag hag, shit starter, girl comic, trash-talker;" and it is through this truer self that Cho will oppose politically regressive forces - including, prominently, false and harmful images and narratives of Asian American women.

Will the Real Asian American Please Stand Up?

Cho's examples of "inauthentic" cultural roles and myths of Asian Americans - roles and myths that we need to throw off--can be quite humorous. (Unfortunately, much of the humor of her superb physical comedy is lost on the page.) Many such examples of inauthentic roles go hand-in-hand with the dearth of any roles at all for Asian Americans (as was discussed in Chapter One). In Notorious C.H.O., Cho comments:

> I do enjoy being a comedian; I've been doing this for a very long time, um, ever since I was a kid. But I never, I never saw Asian people on television or in the movies, so my dreams were somewhat limited. I would dream [voice change to high, little girl voice] "Maybe someday I could be an extra on M*A*S*H. Maybe someday I could play Arnold's girlfriend on Happy Days. Maybe I could play a hooker in something.' I'd be looking in the mirror, "Suckie fuckie two dollar. Me love you long time."
>
> So I moved to Hollywood, and I met with an agent, who told me that Asian people would never be successful in entertainment, and that I should just quit, and stop wasting my life…

In the essay "I Got this Part…" in her book I Have Chosen to Stay and Fight, Cho offers a four-page list of the kind of parts she gets offered, in phone calls that begin, "I have this script that you're gonna love. There's this part for an ASIAN WOMAN - it's really not the lead, but it's such a great part. Call me" (I Have Chosen 44). A partial list of such parts, which "don't speak for" Cho (I Have Chosen 47), includes:

> … a maid, a liquor store owner kicking a black person out of my store, a rude and harried waitress, a worldly-wise acupuncturist, an early-rising, loose black cotton pants-wearing elderly woman practicing tai chi in the park, a manicurist, a prostitute, a student in an English as a Second language course, a purveyor of exotic mushrooms and ginseng, and exchange student, a newscaster covering gang warfare in Chinatown, a woman drowning my newborn baby in a bowl, a daughter crying with my mom over our constant battle between East and West yet finally coming together over a particularly intense game of mah-jongg, a queen sitting on her throne in the Forbidden City being served a bowl of turtle soup by a eunuch, a peasant carrying a yoke on my shoulders like a yak trudging up Gold Mountain delivering precious water to my village, a young girl being raped and killed by GIs in the Killing Fields, a woman balancing a basket of any kind on my head, being the second wife and committing suicide to avenge the first wife by coming back as

> a ghost and scaring the shit out of everyone, or, alternately, committing suicide because my white lover did not come back to Japan after the war, or having him come back for me and fooling him successfully for years and years into thinking I am a woman when really I'm a dude, as if my race castrates me so much that this deception is completely feasible… (I Have Chosen 44-5)

The repetition of references to Madame Butterfly ("committing suicide because my white lover did not come back to Japan after the war" and even David Henry Hwang's M. Butterfly ("…fooling him successfully for years and years into thinking I am a woman when really I'm a dude…") suggests the compelling presence of these mythologies even in their denial. Even as they're dismissed, along with other stock roles in the list, as inauthentic, they become fundamental structures in opposition to which Cho's counter-narratives of authenticity are constructed.

Many of these images are clearly false - that is, they are never occupied by real Asians or Asian Americans in real life. Others are inauthentic but not necessarily false - that is, they may be roles created from outside of Asian American cultures (assuming, for the moment, that Asian American cultures have their own autonomous identities), but which Asian Americans find themselves coerced into occupying, even in real life. But finding "authentic" identities with which to replace the "inauthentic" and "false" roles proves more difficult. Indeed the "authentic"/"inauthentic" binary construction bears more inspection, as do each of the terms within it. As Cho herself says of her TV show (and as I quoted earlier), "[w]e were accused of being racist because we did not ring true as an 'authentic' Asian-American family, when the real racism lies in the expectation of one" (I'm the One 140). (I myself am not so sure that "the real racism" is any more identifiable - though just as real - as Asian American authenticity.)

Further complicating the ideal of authenticity, Cho reproduces as real some of the very stereotypes and simplifications that she elsewhere condemns as inauthentic. She may protest the reduction of Asians to a very limited number of types, and then say in her act (in explaining her surprise at her father's sobbing at his mother's funeral) that "Korean people basically have two emotions: stony silence, and GET OUT OF MY STORE!" (Revolution). Cho may object to mass media caricatures of Asians, and then imitate her mother in a mode that is often perceived as caricature (though I see it differently, as I will discuss below.) She may make a statement such as the following from I'm the One:

> But I was so tied up in the idea of that acceptance. You know, that was so important to me that when the show was over I fell apart. And I didn't know who I was at all. I was this Frankenstein monster made up of bits and pieces of my old stand-up act, mixed with focus groups' opinions about what Asian Americans should be, mixed with the Asian consultant. I didn't know who I was. All I know is that I had failed, and I had failed as somebody else. It was painful.
>
> And I did what's really hard for Asian people to do. I became an alcoholic, and that's not easy because we can't drink.

First Cho is condemning the idea of a "true Asianness" that can be gotten at through focus groups and "Asian consultants." In the next breath she's asserting an essential truth of Asianness. Trivial and jocular as the "Asian people…can't drink" comment is, it illustrates the essentializing of Asian identity that Cho performs with as much regularity as she condemns essentializing. One way to read such contradictions is as symptoms of hypocrisy: Cho says she condemns stereotypes while actually indulging in them rather than giving true representations. But I think the contradictions are more inevitable and integral to cultural identity than a charge of hypocrisy would accommodate. They're symptoms of the inauthenticity at the core - at the very origins--of authenticity.

The model of authenticity that aligns it with "true images" or "true roles" and opposes it to "inauthentic" or "false images" is an essentialist one. That is, it expresses a belief in an Asian or Asian American essence: true Asianness (or American-ness) exists, and exists prior to cultural representations of it. Such essentialism can be seen in Cho's condemnation of racism and homophobia at the end of Revolution:

> Racism and homophobia are the exact same thing, in that when somebody insults me and they say that I'm fat or ugly or not funny or stupid or whatever, I can argue that. But when somebody says something about my race, I feel it, because that's who I am. When somebody attacks your sexuality it hurts, because that's you. You, you, can't change that. Sexuality and race are the essential parts of ourselves we cannot remove or destroy. They are the you of you, the me of me.

Such a view of race and sexuality as "the essential parts of ourselves," as "the you of you, the me of me," aligns with a visibility politics, one which asserts that this essential nature needs to be granted visibility and a voice.

> I think my favorite activist group was from the eighties, and they were ACT UP. And they had a great slogan, which was 'Silence = Death.' It meant if we don't talk about AIDS, we will die of AIDS. And, um, I adopt a similar slogan, and for me, Silence = Nonexistence. If I don't give 'too much information,' if I 'don't go there,' it's like I was never there in the first place.

Identity politics based on the need for visibility and for making one's voice heard also occurs on the personal level - we each have our own individual voice, individually metonymizing a collective voice, whose integrity needs to be respected. This mode of identity politics, assuming an authentic self and cultural identity, resonates in Cho's description of Quentin Tarrantino's reaction to All-American Girl (as Cho recounts in I'm the One):

> The first episode was about my character, and I do stand-up comedy, and publicly embarrass my family. So at the end of the episode, I learn my lesson, I go back onstage, and I vow never to publicly embarrass my family again. Quentin Tarrantino, who I was dating at the time, called me up straight away: "What the fuck was that? That is so fucking wrong. I can't believe you. You fucking live to publicly embarrass your family. What's wrong with you? They took away your voice. Don't let them do that. Don't let them take away your voice."

> I didn't get it. I was like, "But I'm a size four." The first thing you lose on a diet is brain mass. (I'm the One (video)

One of the dangers of such a visibility, speaking-in-your-own-voice identity politics, dependent on an assumption of an authentic identity in need of being seen, heard, acknowledged, and known, is that, Peggy Phelan suggests, "[i]n framing more and more images of the hitherto under-represented other, contemporary culture finds a way to name, and thus to arrest and fix, the image of that other" (Phelan 2). That is, as images of authenticity become visible, they necessarily become simultaneously under cultural surveillance (in the Foucauldian sense). A"post-identity" politics position, by contrast, suggests that "authenticity" may itself be inauthentic, or at least an essence constructed belatedly, after the ideology it appears to precede. Authenticity may itself be constructed. Asian American cultures may not, after all, possess autonomous identities, as I temporarily assumed above. Images deemed to be authentic might be symbols of authenticity rather than authenticity itself. That is, the sense of a true essence underlying false representations may itself be a construct, and one constructed within and by its ideological context to be experienced as something prior to ideology. In this model, identity is always belated; always already preceded by a "post-."

These models of cultural/racial/ethnic identity roughly parallel models of individual identity. Cho sees herself, in the years she fell into Madame Butterfly roles, as being untrue not only to Asian American identity but also to her own personal identity. When she says "I am not gonna die because I failed as someone else. I'm gonna succeed as myself," she assumes there is a true "myself" prior to the false "someone elses." But is there? The cult-of-the-self discourse that Cho's statement calls to mind here - "Be yourself," "March to the beat of your own drummer" - may create the very "self," one seemingly independent of culture, that it purports to be re-presenting. The process of self-recognition that occurs on the cultural level of Asian American identity may also occur on the individual level of personal identity.

Counter-intuitively, "false" or "inauthentic" images may actually precede "true" ones. For example, Cho represents her authentic self as "slutty," a "shit-starter, a "trash-talker" (etc.). This may indeed be her authentic self - her self-representations in her performances make it hard for a spectator to deny such authenticity - but does this authentic self exist independently of the "false" mythologies Cho is trying to throw off? The slutty trash-talker is not just different from, but the exact opposite of, the Butterfly image of purity, innocence, modesty, humility, virginity, and shame. In search of a true self as opposed to a false myth, Cho may indeed have opposed herself to the myth by recognizing herself as the image of its opposite. If this is the case, then Cho's authenticity is a manufactured authenticity, and manufactured in relation to a prior inauthentic representation. In other words, "authenticity" is inherently impure, fundamentally divided, duplicitous: it's theatrical or (in Judith Butler's term) "performative." "Authenticity" is based on an inherent contradiction: the authentic depends on the inauthentic for self-definition. Cho herself appears at times to be clearly and delightedly aware of this contradiction, and to play up its ironies. At other times it's unclear how aware she is of the contradictions and ironies in her claims to authenticity. But how aware she is of her own self-contradictions is not the important question; the more compelling question, rather, is how she embodies contradiction so as to transform it into humor. How does she represent, rather than repress, contradiction? How does

she - in opposition to a naturalistic actor - perform her own performativity? How does her inevitably self-contradictory racial representation spotlight the inherent duplicity in all identity? How does she perform post-identity - an identity aware of its own belated production?

Genre Trouble

The answers to these questions can be approached, in part, through genre and its attendant performance style. I want to argue that stand-up comedy is the appropriate genre for Cho's identificatory mode, rather than TV sitcom or drama proper. Television acting comes from a tradition that grew out of the naturalistic acting approaches developed by late 19th- and early 20th-century Russian director Konstantin Stanislavsky. In this approach, sometimes called "psychological realism," the character is assumed to have an integrity and a core self - or, in other words, to have a unique and singular identity. The naturalistic actor identifies not just <u>with</u> but <u>as</u> her character. The majority of actor's training programs in North America continue to operate in variations of psychological realism, which views human nature as transcultural and transhistorical, and views a character's identity as having an essential core of interior objectives, and the character's (or actor's) bodily acts as the outward manifestations of the character's interior identity. Because of the belief that all human beings share a common nature or soul, and that this commonality matters more than individual differences, actor and character can and should, in Naturalistic acting, connect through a shared human nature. Hence the distinguishability between the actor and the character, in Naturalistic acting, should disappear for the audience and become minimized (to varying degrees) for the actor. This model of identity shares the philosophy of the "color-blind" approach to casting. It's also the philosophy leading to the belief that an Asian American female's cultural context is far less important than her commonality with all other human beings - who, in an American-centric context, tend to look a lot like normative (white) American identity. (Hence the title "All-American Girl" and not "Asian American Girl.") What matters is the unique, individual expression of a common human nature, not a person(a)'s conflicting cultural contexts and her provisional, improvisatory negotiations amidst them.

While sitcom acting doesn't always live up to the ideals of method acting, it still comes, in part, from the same general tradition of realist acting, in which the actor relates and represents <u>as</u> her character. (Even though sitcoms themselves are generally not realist in style, the acting is still usually a variation of realist acting, or at least shares realism's assumptions about character and identity.) In stand-up the approach to character is different. Ironically, while the stand-up performer presumably <u>is</u> her character, or a version of her character (and hence we call it a "persona" rather than a "character," and refer to "performing" rather than "acting"), there is more difference and distinction than in realist acting between performer and character. The stand-up character is unabashedly <u>playing</u> herself, even pointing to herself playing herself. She doesn't relate <u>as</u> her performance persona so much as relate <u>to</u> and <u>with</u> (and <u>through</u>) this persona. Being and having an identity is not a given but a gimmick, a highly ironic and productive vehicle that formulates identity not as being but as becoming. While in her TV work, there was a blurring of Cho's "true" self and her television character - with her character paradoxically taking priority - the opposite is the case in stand-up comedy, where the comic distances herself from the persona she only partially embodies.

The kind of stand-up acting (or performing) approach I've been describing aligns with the acting approach of the mid-20th-century theater innovator Bertolt Brecht. In Brechtian theater, the point of the performance is to alienate the dominant ideology – to render it strange, alien, bizarre, so that it can then be examined and analyzed. Brecht stresses the need to make familiar ideology unfamiliar so that audiences can see it as ideology rather than "just the way things are." More importantly, audiences will recognize the possibility for things-as-they-are to be different. "When something seems 'the most obvious thing in the world,'" Brecht writes, "it means that any attempt to understand the world has been given up" (Brecht 71). Instead, we need a theater in which "[w]hat is 'natural' must have the force of what is startling," and in which "[p]eople's activity must simultaneously be so and be capable of being different" (71). Such an effect in theater is known as the "Alienation Effect" or A-effect (in German, *Verfremdungseffekt* or *V-effekt*): "A representation that alienates in one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar" (Brecht 192). Such alienation effects are designed "to free socially-conditioned phenomena from that stamp of familiarity which protects them against our grasp today" (192). Brechtain theater can alienate such cultural mythologies as the Madame Butterfly story. It can make this familiar narrative un-familiar and strange through ironic, historicizing, and startling presentations.

One way to achieve an audience awareness of the character's ideology is to disrupt the audience's identificatory empathy with the character so that the audience isn't sucked into the seeming "naturalness" and "universality" of the character's emotions, but can instead see the character's acts and reactions as crystallizations of a strange ideology to be analyzed with "scientific" (i.e. analytical) curiosity. This disruption of audience identification might in turn, Brecht hypothesizes, be achieved by disrupting the actor's identification with character. The actor comments on the character. If the audience must identify and empathize, they can identify with the actor in her compassionate but critical examination of her character. Brecht contrasts the "dramatic theater" - the bourgeois theater of humanist, universalizing, and empathetic approaches to character - with his "epic theater" - the populist theater of A-effects, historicization of ideology, and critical observation. In a famous and perhaps startling formulation, Brecht writes:

> The dramatic theatre's spectator says: Yes, I have felt like that too - Just like me - It's only natural - It'll never change - The sufferings of this man appal me, because they are inescapable - That's great art; it all seems the most obvious thing in the world - I weep when they weep, I laugh when they laugh.
>
> The epic theatre's spectator says: I'd never have thought it - That's not the way - That's extraordinary, hardly believable - It's got to stop - The sufferings of this man appall me, because they are unnecessary - That's great art: nothing obvious in it - I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh. (Brecht 71)

Brechtian acting has been notoriously difficult to achieve in practice, as is effective ideological alienation. Even when it is achieved, it is often received by an audience accustomed to the realist standard as bad acting, as a failure on the actor's part to properly "become" her character through identification. Stand-up is just the opposite - and perhaps stand-up and its cousin, camp, may be the potential Brechtian theater of contemporary culture. Stand-up's audience laughs when the

comic's persona weeps. What the audience identifies with, ideally, is not the persona or the even comic herself but the tragicomic stance to ideology that the act embodies. In stand-up comedy, if the comedian is understood by the audience to be as bumbling, confused, and neurotic as her persona the comedy will fail. The performance depends on the audience's appreciation of - and even relishing of--the difference between character and performer.

Such performances bring Brechtian theater into the realm of camp, a performance style very much a part of Cho's repertoire. Camp is best encapsulated in two famous epigrams of Oscar Wilde, himself a master of camp: "In matters of great importance, the vital element is not sincerity, but style" and "To be natural is such a very difficult pose to keep up" (quoted in Sontag 282). Sometimes, though, "to be natural" is a lot easier than to see naturalness's underlying structurations. Camp is a style that exposes both "naturalness" and "sincerity" as constructions that have forgotten they're constructions. In an early critical formulation (probably the first to read camp critically), Susan Sontag analyzes Wilde's intuitive understanding of camp: "One is drawn to Camp when one realizes that 'sincerity' is not enough" (Sontag 288). Instead of sincerity, "[t]he essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration" (Sontag 275). Camp is not just a style, but a "vision of the world in terms of style - but a particular kind of style. It is the love of the exaggerated, the 'off,' of things-being-what-they-are-not" (Sontag 279). Or in other words, "[c]amp is the consistently aesthetic experience of the world. It incarnates a victory of 'style' over 'content,' 'aesthetic' over 'morality,' of irony over tragedy" (Sontag 287). Like Brechtian theater, in which an actor may approach her character by speaking as if she were quoting the character, camp sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a "lamp"; not a woman, but a "woman." To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater. (Sontag 280)
In Cho's stand-up, she's not an Asian but an "Asian."

Richard Dyer, in his classic article "It's Being So Camp as Keeps Us Going," concurs that camp is "a way of prising the form of something away from its content, of reveling in the style while dismissing the content as trivial" (138). The main something whose form is prized from its content in classic camp is gender identity. Like Brechtian theater, camp can take identity categories (e.g. heterosexual masculinity) that seem familiar and natural, and make them seem silly and strange, arbitrary and artificial. Camp's focus tends to be most often on gender identities - their artificiality or highly constructed "naturalness," their existence as form rather than as content. This relates intimately to the particularity of camp's origins in (semi-closeted) gay culture: Camp is just about the only style, language and culture that is distinctively and unambiguously gay male. One of our greatest problems I think is that we are cut adrift for most of the time in a world drenched in straightness. All the images and words of the society express and confirm the rightness of heterosexuality. Camp is the one thing that expresses and confirms being a gay man. (Dyer 135)
Camp style embodies gay life and gay sensibility in a homophobic culture in which gay men have had to learn how to appear to fit in:

> … we are good at picking up the rules, conventions, forms and appearances of different social circles. And why? Because we've had to be good at it, we've had to be good at disguise, at appearing to be one of the crowd, the same as everyone else. Because we had to hide what we really felt (gayness) for so much of the time, we had to master the

> façade of whatever social set-up we found ourselves in - we couldn't afford to stand out in any way, for it might give the game away about our gayness. So we have developed an eye and an ear for surfaces, appearances, forms - style. Small wonder then that when we came to develop our own culture, the habit of style should have remained so dominant in it. (144)

Camp is a detailed reproduction - with a critical difference - of the styles that create "naturalness." Camp's thorough demonstration of gender construction suggests that gender (and sexual and racial) identity categories available to us in our culture are not inevitable, not fixed, but highly fabricated and hence manipulable, contingent, provisional. Camp shows us that gender identity can, in Brecht's words, "simultaneously be so and be capable of being different." Camp often takes the form of drag, particularly of men impersonating women to show femininity as both a performative construction and curiosity. Brecht, too, saw the potential of cross-gender casting to demystify gender identity:

> ... it is also good for the actors when they see their characters copied or portrayed in another form. If the part is played by somebody of the opposite sex the sex of the character will be more clearly brought out; if it is played by a comedian, whether comically or tragically, it will gain fresh aspects. (Brecht 197)

Dyer notes that "camping about" can be both "good and bad, progressive and reactionary" (Dyer 136) - a caution similar to one made by Brecht about alienation effects. (Brecht notes that in classic "Oriental" theater alienation effects are employed without effecting the alienation of ideology.) Drag too may in practice reactively conserve gender roles - but it always has the *potential* to deconstruct these roles.

In both camp and Brechtian theater - they may at times be the same thing - form/structure is wedged from content to reveal how content may be the (mutually constituted) effect of form rather than form's predecessor. That is, gender identity, rather than preceding and determining its manifestations, may instead be what Judith Butler calls "performative." In a performative model of identity gender is by no means a transcultural or transhistorical identity, or even an identity stable within a given culture, climate, or even body, but rather "an identity tenuously constituted in time -- an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" ("Performative" 519). Through repetition, the performance of gender is legitimated, The ideal of an innate, coherent identity, indeed, is an effect of performance that erases its own performativity: "acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body .[. . .] That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality" (Gender 136). More simply, "[g]ender reality is performative which means [. . .] that it is real only to the extent that it is performed" "Performative" 527).

The discovery of the artificiality or inauthenticity of identity construction, and particularly of gender identity, could be crushing. But for audiences of Brechtian theater and of camp, such a discovery is made highly pleasurable. As Jonathan Dollimore suggests in his book Sexual Dissidence, camp:

> ...renders gender a question of aesthetics. Common in aesthetic involvement is the recognition that what seemed like mimetic realism is actually an effect of convention, genre, form, or some other kind of artifice. For some this is a moment of disappointment in which the real, the true, and the authentic are surrendered to, or contaminated by, the factitious and the contrived. But camp comes to life around that recognition; it is situated at the point...when and where the real collapses into artifice, nature into culture; camp restores vitality to artifice, and vice versa, deriving the artificial from, and feeding it back into or as, the real. (Dollimore)

A camp sensibility receives the unfounding of identity not as a cause for panic or despair, but as a source of delight and semiotic play.

Further, the act of identification in camp and in Brechtian theater takes priority over identity proper; when the performer points out her/his difference from something, her/his identification with-it-but-not-as-it becomes clearer. Both parts of this identification with-but-not-as are crucial. Camp is not a disavowal of "false" identity categories; it is not a judgment against them so much as a playing with them. Susan Sontag articulates this appreciative dimension of camp: "Camp taste is a kind of love, love for human nature. It relishes, rather than judges, the little triumphs and awkward intensities of 'character.' ... Camp is a tender feeling" (Sontag 291-2). In good camp, the defamiliarization has to be loving but not empathetic, fierce but not violent, thorough but not absolute. (If it were the second terms of these pairs, it would be satire rather than camp.)

Camp is most often recognized in its playful alienation of gender constructs and sexual classifications. Such camp is very much a part of Cho's performance pieces and style. But equally as important is her camp-inflected alienation of racial and ethnic configurations - in particular of "Asianness," and concomitantly of "whiteness." Cho extends the camp tradition of gender insubordination to ethnic and national deviance. Through camp, Cho's performances can, ideally, achieve Brecht's alienation effect, with "Asian" and "Asian American" identities as primary targets of playful defamiliarization. Camp is a way to embody the contradiction (authenticity as inauthentic, identity as duplicity) that might otherwise seem to be hypocrisy - or that may in fact be hypocrisy, but an inevitable hypocrisy, a duplicity that can't be avoided because it's fundamental to identity.

While stand-up and camp, I'm arguing, have tremendous potential as Brechtian theater, they don't always fulfill Brechtian goals. In fact they usually don't. Stand-up, like camp, drag, and even Epic theater, can alienate and critique a dominant ideology and offer alternative visions, but it doesn't have to. It can, instead, merely ridicule deviation from the dominant ideology, including deviation from perceived authenticity or from our culturally validated identity categories. Where it's more pleasurable for an audience to have its ideology confirmed than challenged, ideologically conservative stand-up sells better.

But while stand-up is generally very conservative in effect (although superficially seeming to be transgressive), I believe that Cho exploits stand-up's potential for identity/ideology sabotage. Note that Cho's version of stand-up is *campy*; a camp sensibility (and concomitantly a certain kind of gay sensibility) pervades her performance. If her TV acting required that she maintain the illusion

of a consistent character, stand-up self-representation has instead allowed Cho to perform, without becoming, other roles — roles which may be contradictory, fragmented, and fundamentally different from Cho. That is, Cho exploits the Brechtian potential of stand-up to alienate ideological tropes, including our currently culturally recognized identity categories and the cultural mythologies maintaining them, rather than simply re-embody them and play them straight. When Cho deromanticizes the Madame Butterfly mythology by playing the tragic heroine as a comic foil, she engages the aesthetics of camp to alienate a powerful cultural mythology. (Using different terminology, Rachel Lee reads Margaret Cho's acts of bowing in performance - "Cho's mimicry of Asian obedience" - as what Brecht would call social gestus, alienating "the repression of historical memory regarding race relations" (Lee 109).) The campy alienation of ideological tropes both entices and frustrates audiences. Allison Fraiberg astutely describes Cho's process:

> Once she cauterizes some of the initial assumptions about her identity at the beginning of her routine, Cho's strategy centers on isolating a moment with the greatest potential for identification. She takes that moment of connection as a starting point and then fragments it based on cultural expectations. And the process continues with each fragment reshaped into a new moment of identification, then shattered once again. Cho uses moments of generalized identification and forecloses on their potential to act as universal images. Her process of fragmentation doesn't just deconstruct universalizing impulses, but fragments the generalization to offer more localized nodes of connection. Each final image, in its temporary manifestation, offers a limited space for identification, a space accessible only to some. This strategy relies on drawing people into a moment of identification and then systematically restricting that space of connection. (Fraiberg 325)

Because identification (of audience, and of Cho, with her various personae) is both encouraged and disrupted, the process of identification itself, along with its underlying assumption of a prior identity to be identified with, becomes the true subject of performance. Prior identity morphs into post-identity.

The Birds and the Bees and the Butterflies

This post-identity performance mode is best exemplified and complicated in Cho's lovingly campy portrayals of her Korean American mother, which are the trademark of her act and her most popular routines. For example, Cho's encore, and hence the final words, to the show I'm the One that I Want, depicts her mother explaining gay porn to the young Cho:

> [*Cho in her "own" persona*] But I grew up here, on Polk Street, in the seventies, which was the gayest place in the world. And my parents owned a bookstore, and my mother was in charge of the gay porn. So every day she would unpack boxes of gay porn and try to talk to me about it.
>
> [*Here Cho switches into the persona of her mother: pulls chin into her neck, squints her eyes into slits, adopts a voice hat ranges from high questions to low gutteral emphatic pronouncements. She adopts an exaggerated Korean accent. Mimes looking at a book.*]

> Dis book? Dat's called-uh "Ass Master." [*audience cheers at the appearance of the mother persona, who looks at imaginary book, then shows it to the imaginary Margaret in front of her*] Dis book for gays. Because-uh gays? Dey like ass. Dey like ass so much they don't know what to do! I think they like ass too much. [*pauses between sentences*] I would say you have to have ass-uh? In moderation. You cannot have ass all the time. If you have-uh ass? All the time? Then it's not special! [*looks at book cover again*] I know gay? His name is Paul. And Paul so nice-uh. But Paul only like two things. He like ass? And Judy Garland! That's all! What kind of life [giggling] is that-ha-hat? [*looks at book, mumbles*] Ass Master. [*mimes craning her neck to peer stage right, then stage left*] Mommy gonna look at Ass Master now. [*giggles*] I have to look at it. I'm so curious [*pronounced kew-ee-us*]. I'm so curious about Ass Master. [*looks at book, mumbles*] Ass Master. [*turns page. Screams*] AAAAHHH! [*mimes looking away in exaggerated agony. Several poses of silent pain as she holds book away from her body. Takes a quick look at book again, then again pulls away in extreme distress*] I wasn't ready for dat! It was just ass right away! I wasn't ready for [combination laugh-cry] tha-ha-hat. Just ass [*mimes the book hitting her eyes*] right away! I wasn't ready for tha-ha-hat. [*mimes turning page of book back*] I thought there would be table of content, then ass.

Cho shows her mother, here, not as hypocritical but as contradictory. Cho's mother stocks books that disturb her; she neither prudishly shuns gay culture nor identifies with it; she is neither a tradition-bound alien in American culture nor an assimilationist; she is neither worldly-wise nor innocent as a Butterfly. She both confirms and contradicts our culturally recognizable identity category of Korean American mother. Her inconsistencies and contradictions demonstrate—or alienate—the discrepant cultural bits and pieces out of which her identity is constructed. "Contradictions are our hope!" writes Brecht (47) because contradictions allow us to see identity as not universal, not natural or coherent, but as constructed out of discrepant fragments of cultural scripts, repertoires, and performance bits.

Some folks have worried that Cho's depictions of her mother (and of gay men) are making fun of Asians and perpetuating stereotypical representations. I see it differently. I hear in this portrayal the "*tender* feeling" that Sontag attributes to camp. Cho "relishes, rather than judges, the little triumphs and awkward intensities of 'character'" (Sontag 291) - in this case the character of Cho's mother. In other words, Cho's campy performance of her mother's Asianness is a kind of drag, appropriate for a woman who says in her encore, as a set-up to the bit quoted above:

> Some people were raised by wolves, I was raised by drag queens. And they say that certain smells bring you back to childhood. Like my friend says when she smells wood burning in the air she's reminded of Christmas in Maine when she was five years old. And the smell that brings me back is balls in pantyhose. [*sniffs around, locates scent, smiles*] When I smell that, tears come to my eyes. When I smell poppers I wet my pants.

Cho regularly acknowledges the influence of drag on her performance mode and on her very sense of identity. She recounts her lesson on Divine and drag as a young girl: "It was like the Birds and the Bees and the Butterflies" (I'm the One (book) 31). While talk of "the birds and the bees" usually offers the option of only two genders and only one sexual orientation, the addition

of butterflies undoes the certainty of birds and bees, of seemingly natural and nature-based identities. This kind of Butterfly, an alternative, deviant Butterfly, acts as a dangerous supplement to the birds and the bees. Not an identity as a way of being in the world, the butterfly of drag performance is resistant to definitive meaning or fixation, as her friend Forbes explains to the young Cho:

> Some do it to be funny. They aren't that cute or whatever, feel somewhat lacking, so they get attention that way. Some just like the way it looks. Some do it because they love women. Some because they hate women. They're all different. It's such a bother really. I couldn't imagine putting all those things on, makeup and binding up your naughty bits. You can see them do shows sometimes. It can be very entertaining. There are clever ones and pretty ones, ones so good you can't even tell they're men and ones so bad you're glad that they are because no woman should have to look like that. (I'm the One 31-2)

Based on men's identifying with women but not as women, drag may be the ultimate Brechtian performance mode, replete with all its rewards and dangers. Drag can be extremely offensive, because it always mocks the one that it wants, always ridicules what it also loves, lacks, and desires. But if it's good drag, the love is a little bit more powerful than the mockery, and the cross-identification more compelling than identity proper. Cho, in ethnic drag as her mother and others, is most authentic when she *both* embodies a caricatured stereotype *and* differentiates herself from it, rather than when she tries to present a truly authentic identity prior to stereotype. Perhaps Cho's depictions of her mother produce so much anxiety because they expose identity's own resemblance to stereotype, and expose identity politics' foundation in stereotypes of authenticity. Cho's approach to the Madame Butterfly mythology is similarly campy. Her energy goes not only into rejecting it as false and harmful, but also into playing it with tender irony. Part of the appeal of the Madame Butterfly myth for Westerners is that it allows them both to sympathize with her victimization and at the same time to pose her in opposition to the West. But another (related) part of the appeal is in the myth's promise of a stable racial/ethnic identity as metonymized in the figure of Butterfly. Cho's acts aggressively revoke such a promise even as they identify with the seductive draw of a metonymizable culture. Her representation of Asian American female identity, then, is ambivalent - if not duplicitous. Cho's stand-up acts campily alienate Madame Butterfly and other cultural mythologies structuring race and ethnicity. Such acts both assert her Asian identity and observe, with both outrage and amusement, the mechanisms of its production. Doing so, Cho embodies a post-identity politics of American-ness as an identity that both is and is not - an identity that can be very real, but (only) because we continually reproduce its reality in a naturalistic performance mode. In Cho's representations, Asian American female identity must, to borrow Brecht's phrase, "simultaneously be so and be capable of being different."

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