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Race Comedy and the “Misembodied” Voice

ABSTRACT

This essay unpacks the ways in which our “knowledge” of race and ethnicity is tied to ocularcentrism. It explores the political possibilities of ethnolinguistic imitation or “style-shifting” as part of an antiracist pedagogy embedded within popular culture. If identity is performed across different contexts, we may find an interesting dialogue of race and ethnicity within stand-up comedy, a realm of popular culture sometimes dismissed as “light entertainment.” The comedy of Russell Peters and Margaret Cho offer a site of imitation and ambivalence enabled by delinquent ethnic voices that play with the boundaries between self and Other.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article dévoile les manières par lesquelles notre « connaissance » de la race et de l’ethnicité relève du *visio-centrisme*. Il explore les possibilités politiques de l’imitation ethnolinguistique ou « alternance de style linguistique » en tant que partie intégrante d’une pédagogie antiraciste inscrite dans la culture populaire. Si l’identité se performe dans différents contextes, il nous est possible de découvrir un intéressant dialogue sur la race et l’ethnicité dans la comédie stand-up (ou

monologue comique), domaine de la culture populaire parfois qualifié avec dédain de « spectacle léger ». Les monologues de Russel Peters et de Margaret Cho procurent un lieu d'imitation et d'ambivalences où s'expriment des voix ethniques délinquantes qui se jouent des frontières entre le soi et l'autre.



In the classic anti-colonial treatise *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), Frantz Fanon describes at some length the arrival of the colonized Martiniquan in France. Fascinated at the sight of a learned Black, the French have a curious reaction to an unfolding contradiction. The Martiniquan will look like the primitive of colonialist mythology but speak in the language of the colonizer. He will “talk like a book” and roll his Rs rather than eat them, thereby distancing himself from the “guttural” language of his “jungle brethren” (epitomized, for instance, by the Senegalese soldier) (Fanon 1967: 21). And yet the French will continue to address the Martiniquan in pidgin, “imprisoning him, primitivizing him, decivilizing him” (32). Evidently Fanon is ambivalent of this adoption of Frenchness, of whiteness. On one hand, the acquisition of the French language is an acceptance of a French culture and worldview that identifies “blackness” with evil and sin. On the other hand, the colonized Francophone also exemplifies a rupture of past and present, of black and white, of primitive and civilized. In Fanon’s words, “[T]he whole structure crumbles ... [when] a black man says ... ‘I am in no sense your boy, Monsieur’” (33). Although Fanon often essentializes language and race by conflating speech and speech acts, his commentary points to a distinct tension between seeing and hearing race, one that is not easily resolved.

If the history of race is found in the history of modernity, it is also rooted in what Martin Jay calls the “empire of the gaze” (1986: 175). Supported by the rhetoric of Western science, differences of skin, hair, bones, noses, eyes and genitals emerged within the visual fictions of “race,” fictions that continue to circulate in the Euro-American imaginary and popular culture. Against this phenomenon, scholars have offered a wealth of insightful critiques. And yet film and television studies, for instance, have typically approached racist images and dialogue without exploring the ideological import of racialized speech. In the field of sociolinguistics, however, race and ethnicity have been studied with a particular sensitivity to dialect. To this end, language is understood broadly but not exclusively to be a cogent signifier of racial and ethnic identity. As a result, many sociolinguists have codified racial difference rather than challenged it. Until recently, however, cultural studies and sociolinguistics alike have understated the discord between racial sights and racial sounds.

Racial identities are not only socially constructed but also performed across a variety of contexts. The performance of race is often made explicit in stand-up

comedy, a realm of popular culture sometimes dismissed as light entertainment (Gilbert 2004). In response, this essay contemplates the slippery exchange between comedy, race and the voice as a point of critical multicultural dialogue. In the comic routines of Russell Peters and Margaret Cho, for example, racial and ethnic stereotypes are performed and impersonated through shifting dialects. As such, the visual “truth” of the body is beset by a delinquent voice, which scrambles a tidy commonsense of racial identity used to fasten the Other to “an *appearance* for which [s/he] is not responsible” (Fanon 1967: 35). Both Peters and Cho tap into a historical discourse of mimicry and minstrelsy in strategic but ambivalent ways that highlight some of the key contradictions of multicultural representations in North America. As stand-up comics, they can offer scathing social critiques that are otherwise prohibited in more “serious” genres of mass media, making humour an important but often understated site of antiracist pedagogy.

Seeing and Hearing Race

From the outset, it is important to note that Western societies have historically privileged the “truth claims” derived from sight rather than sound. Sight has long been mythologized in Western philosophy, science, aesthetics and metaphysics as the “most discriminating and trustworthy of the sensual mediators between man and world,” a truism with far-reaching implications for the formation of racial taxonomy (Jay 1986: 176). The red herrings of craniometry and physiognomy—token disciplines of Enlightenment science—were used to screen certain groups from the privileged space of political subjectivity and, moreover, the ontological dimensions of humanity (Goldberg 1993). Such scopoc regimes of modernity “produced the truth of ‘race’ and repeatedly discovered it lodged in and on the body” (Gilroy 2000: 35). While race was expressed in a variety of ways, it was *visible* difference that inspired the formation of modern racial logic.

The visual currencies of race and ethnicity are in some ways a palimpsest in contemporary culture (Wiegman 1995). Visible differences continue to (mis)inform racial thinking by stretching across the sets of popular film, news reports and television programs, a phenomenon sharply criticized in media and cultural studies. The historically important work of Herman Gray (1995), Ed Guerrero (1993), Robyn Wiegman (1995), Michele Wallace (1990), Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis (1992), for instance, operate from different theoretical bases but consistently unpack visual representations of race articulated through gender, class and sexuality. Studies by such critics have situated visual narratives of popular media, including the film and television genres of science fiction, horror, drama and comedy, within the cultural politics of the post-civil rights era. Although an inventory of media theory and racism is beyond the scope of this essay, it is important to note that an overwhelming number of studies have approached racist images and dialogues without addressing what Roland Barthes calls the “grain” of the character’s voice (1971).

In the field of sociolinguistics, however, race and ethnicity are heard as well as seen. Dialect is understood to be a symbol of cultural membership, origins and political power (Fox 2004). Speech is recognized as a “social act,” one that is “informed by an ideological system of representation” (Irvine 2001: 24). In North America, this can be vividly illustrated in a number of ways. During the late 1800s (and continuing until 1996), aboriginal youth encountered a Euro-colonialist agenda that relied on the Canadian residential school system and often-violent disciplinary regimes to purge its students of indigenous languages. At the same time, a plethora of ethnic groups entered the U.S. en masse, bringing with them distinct ways of speaking that were bitterly received by xenophobic Americans. Indeed, the rise of Standard American English gained momentum from heightened anxieties of racial Otherness. With the support of the U.S. government and a sweeping campaign of moral edification, the standard language movement targeted ethnic groups in hopes of stamping out the heterodoxy of “impure” English vernaculars (Bonfiglio 2002). Like the melting-pot paradigm, “the decoy of language standardization” promised the ethnic immigrant equality and opportunity in exchange for assimilation and erasure of linguistic difference (134).

Such events illustrate some of the institutional supports of language standardization that continue to inform the politics of multiculturalism. In Canada during the 1990s, for instance, the use of dialect in literature became a polemical issue. Of particular interest was the work of Black Canadian writers like Claire Harris (1995), George Elliott Clarke (1990) and M. Nourbese Philip, whose contention was echoed in the anthologies *Sounding Differences* (1993) and *Grammar of Dissent* (1994). Philip describes an artistic tension between using standard and dialect:

If you work entirely in ... the Caribbean demotic of English you do, to a large degree, restrict your audience to those familiar enough with it; if you move to standard English you lose much of that audience and ... an understanding of many of the traditions, history and culture which contextualize your work. (1992: 37)

Along related lines, we may find that the speech coaches and pronunciation experts described by Raymond Williams forty-eight years ago in “The Growth of ‘Standard English’” (1961) now serve an entire industry of whitening speech for potential executives, political candidates, actors and even aspiring super models. (During “Cycle Six” of *America’s Next Top Model* a Black contestant was required to undergo speech tutorials to remove her Southern accent.)

Whereas standard language movements and institutional supports sought to reclaim the (multicultural) nation through whiteness, sociolinguists have drawn attention to alternative vernaculars, most notably African American English. “Black English” is purportedly defined by a series of phonetic differences, including double-negatives (i.e., *She ain’t never*), the loss of a postvocalic /r/ and the absence

of connecting verbs (i.e., *you fast*) (Wolfram and Torbert 2006). Although African American English may be denigrated as jive, it is also celebrated as a signifier of cultural resistance to Standard American English and compulsory assimilation (Hewitt 1986; Rickford 1997). The use of certain dialects against the standard language is such that speakers “refuse the demand to bury their own identities by trying to perform as someone else” (Creese and Kambere 2002: 18).

Some critics now insist, however, that Standard English is a simulacrum (Bonfiglio 2002; Lippi-Green 1997). It only exists as a ghostly reference within a dialect. By comparison, a dialect is “not a mere deviation or deformation, but a particular *use* of language [that] ... puts the standard ... in conflict with itself” (North 1994: 72). This is not to deny the real political forces behind the phantom standard or the colour-coding of linguistic hierarchies; instead, it is to recognize the provisional and ideological status of all speech types. As Adrienne Lo contends, “No social group, not even the domestic household, is internally linguistically homogeneous in practice” (1999: 461). Indeed, dialect can be a “patently misleading” signifier of cultural identity (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985: 234). In the case of Black English, researchers have historically limited their focus “to the language of the street, neglecting the simultaneous presence in African-American communities of many other registers” (Hill 1999: 548). Although one cannot dismiss the diversity of speech patterns or linguistic elements of discrimination (“seeing” a foreign accent *a priori*) it is important to realize that “racial voices” do not always align with “racial bodies.”

The “Misembodied” Voice

What is perhaps most striking about the voice is its uncanny ability to misrepresent, to eschew causality and presence. Sound in general has the potential to mislead an audience by betraying the image of its source. Because sight and sound are intrinsically different modes of knowledge production, they may quarrel with one another (Doane 1985). Film theorist Kaja Silverman (1988) claims that the body is situated in a particular relationship of power and subjected to normative assumptions of identity by the sound and accent of its voice. The voice, in other words, “can function as an index of the body” (Smith 2008: 3). In cinema, “we are often given to believe, implicitly or explicitly, that the body and voice cohere in some self-evident, natural way,” when in fact they do not (Chion 1999: 126). The successful synchronization of body and voice in motion pictures conceals the “material heterogeneity” of sight and sound (Doane 1980).

This uneasy relationship has sometimes been exploited by comedy pioneers. From Charlie Chaplin and the Marx brothers to Eddie Murphy and the Wayans family, comics have played “on the very situation of the human being as a dislocated body, a puppet, a burlesque assemblage of body and voice” (Chion 1999: 131). As several critics have pointed out, however, comedy is a double-edged phenomenon

(Gilbert 2004; Horton 1991; King 2002; Palmer 1987). On one hand, the safe and unthreatening reputation of comedy allows its political perspectives to circulate in sensitive areas of culture (King 2002). On the other hand, its frivolous nature undermines its own political efficacy. The rhetorical spirit of comedy is such that both radical and conservative viewpoints are endorsed within a single utterance. Because of the liminal space in which s/he works, “the comic is plural, unfinalized [and] dependent on context” (Horton 1991: 9). As such, comedy is a site of both political potential and limitation, especially in relation to racial and ethnic stereotypes (King 2002).

Unlike situational comedy, which operates within a political economy of box-office returns, network ratings and advertising agendas, stand-up comedy is said to “champion individualism and at least potentially radical ideologies” (Horton 1991: 4). It is an exceptional genre of popular culture that consists largely of monologues. Without a supporting cast, the stand-up comic must count on the voice to mark narrative shifts and verbal exchanges; different characters appear in the comic’s routine through style-shifting and linguistic crossing. As a result, the stylized speech patterns of certain stand-up comics present a rich opportunity to study dialect as a mode of representation. While comics like Richard Pryor, Dick Gregory, Ellen Cleghorn and Dave Chappelle have used “accents” to map American racial politics in largely polarized terms (black and white), Russell Peters and Margaret Cho employ the linguistic stereotypes within a multicultural framework, which is dramatized by a migrant minstrelsy. Here stand-up comedy represents a “unique example of performed marginality,” making it “particularly relevant to the investigation of power in contemporary [North] American culture” (Gilbert 2004: xvii).

“Indian Tourette Syndrome”: The Stand-up Comedy of Russell Peters

Russell Peters is an Indo-Canadian comic whose popularity is largely the result of stand-up comedy festivals, active downloading and ambitious international touring. He was the first South Asian performer to sell out the Apollo Theater in New York City and has appeared in a variety of Canadian television programs, including *Lord Have Mercy* and *Comedy Now!*, for which he received four Gemini Award nominations. Unlike many comics, Peters relies almost entirely on style-shifting, mimicry and audience participation (captured in the DVDs *Outsourced* and *Red, White and Brown* as well as his jokes as host of the Juno Awards in 2008 and 2009). His shtick, in other words, is the ethnolinguistic imitation of himself and his viewers, which doubles as a rich commentary on racism and identity politics. Although Peters uses style-shifting to imitate various inflections of whiteness, he is renowned for performing Asianness and illustrating the heterogeneity of ethnic identity.

In *Outsourced* the comic carnivalizes ethnic difference by distorting the speech of his guests in an embellished ethnic dialect, demarcating the identity of the viewer from that of the minstrel performance. The racialized voice, of course, was central to blackface minstrelsy in the late 1800s (Lott 1995). As an endorsement of slavery and “one of America’s first culture industries” blackface minstrelsy included “northern white men [who] ‘blacked up’ and imitated what they supposed was black dialect, music and dance” (Lott 1995: 16, 17). With the decline of the blackface stage, however, racial impersonation jumped to the disembodied airwaves of vaudeville radio entertainment (like the “Cohen” records made from 1910-1930) and, later, telephone pranks and cassette recordings (Smith 2008). As Jacob Smith points out: “The fluidity of identity heard on prank calls [was] not used to eliminate social or racial hierarchies, but instead to bring them into even sharper focus” (226). This custom of vocal minstrelsy continued well into the 1970s with the tape-recorded antics of “Lucius Tate,” an ostensibly Black prankster voiced by a white actor (Smith 2008).¹ In Canada during the 1990s, a similar series of minstrel recordings were made in which white actors used narrative and linguistic stereotypes to impersonate aboriginal DJs of the eponymous radio station, “Brocket 99.” It is this dubious discursive tradition in which Peters participates, but in markedly different ways.

In one sketch, audience members Catherine and Vincent offer Peters their Chinese names, which are returned to them in the comic’s heavily accented and exaggerated speech. Here the linguistic utterance is double-coded with not only the cited stereotype but also the comic’s “ironic transmission” (Bakhtin 1981: 358). Peters then asks the couple where they are from, a benign but classic attempt to place racial difference elsewhere. When Vincent responds with “the Bay area [of San Francisco],” Peters rolls his eyes and adds: “I mean *before* that.” The audience bursts with laughter as Peters becomes momentarily trapped in ethnic essentialisms, which allow for a vocal minstrelsy of the migrant. The comic shifts to a stylized Asian English dialect to situate the Asian-American couple within but also against ethnolinguistic stereotypes; that we learn of Catherine and Vincent’s “unmarked” pronunciation *before* Peters’ impersonation of them foregrounds the duplicity of ethnolinguistic signifiers. Gaps between ethnic voice and ethnic body appear when the Indo-Canadian comic adopts the Chinese linguistic stereotype, which neither Catherine nor Vincent readily present in English. Unlike blackface minstrels, who were often mistaken by their white viewers for “actual Negroes” speaking “darky dialect,” Peters’ verisimilitude of race is always already in question because of an obvious audiovisual rupture (Lott 1995: 24). Indeed, his audience has grown to expect a carnivalizing of race through vocal impersonation, that is, performance and artifice.

While Peters impersonates various ethnicities, it is perhaps the *self-directed* stereotype that earns the most attention, a truism that complicates his relationship to the minstrel tradition (much like Spike Lee’s *Bamboozled* (2000)). He repeatedly shifts

from a central Canadian dialect to stylized South Asian English, a speech pattern marked by “the stressing of every syllable, with no apparent nucleus” (Rampton 1995: 68). In one skit, Peters situates what he calls “redneck” rhetoric within the “brown voice” of his Indo-Canadian father, who is attempting to purchase a sofa. The European retailer, we are told, does not speak English, which frustrates Peters’s father: “You doan come to my country if you can’(t) speak duh language.” The father ends the phone call and turns to Russell in disbelief: “Immigrants!” The irony is that Peters’s father is himself an immigrant (who actually studied English at an Indian university). The comic plants an anti-immigrant commentary and nativist politics within a foreign dialect as a way of exposing the paradox of xenophobia practised by a white settler colony. While the skit raises critical questions of race, origins and ownerships, it also undercuts the popular assumption that identity politics and physical appearance are codetermined. Peters explores the multiplicity of Canadian identity and the extent to which the nation is defined not by ethnic “belonging” so much as intolerance and monolingualism. The joke rests on but also questions an imagined incommensurability between Indian ethnicity and Canadianness.

Evidently, the sketch illustrates reciprocating social forces at work within a Canadian “multicultural” landscape, those of a disavowed assimilation and a lauded ethnic pluralism. The rhetoric adopted by Peters’s father speaks to a nativist backlash against immigration and English-only campaigns that continue to thrive in (Anglo-) Canadian and American cultural politics. From the sporadic prohibition of patkas and hijabs in sporting events to the sharpened ethnic tensions reported by the Bouchard-Taylor Commission, in Quebec, recent outbursts of intolerance have been explained and contained as embarrassing anomalies in an otherwise multicultural nation (Marotte 2007; Séguin 2007). Ethnic erasure is shunned as antithetical and incompatible with liberal multiculturalism in Canada, which is largely defined against a model of American assimilation imagined to be ubiquitous and fundamentally un-Canadian (Mackey 2002).

Under the conditions of official multiculturalism in Canada, however, ethnicities are frequently purged of political value and fetishized as immutable signs of a “heterogeneous” nation, signs that are also consumed as spicy but innocuous servings of diversity. Despite its benevolent intentions, the practice of defining, preserving and promoting ethnic difference marks in many ways the colonialist heritage of contemporary multiculturalism. Unlike Homi Bhabha’s classic colonial mimic—who was encouraged to adopt European tastes, languages and cultures as her own—the ethnic subject of a multicultural society “is expected to come to resemble what is recognizably ethnic” (Chow 2002: 104). This is what Rey Chow describes as “coercive mimeticism,” or the self-imitation of ethnicity. Under the purview of diversity, ethnic subjects are called on to “replicate the very banal preconceptions that have been appended to them, a process in which they are expected to objectify themselves in accordance with the ... familiar imagings

of them as ethnics” (107). In other words, Chow updates Bhabha’s concept to account for the contemporary social forces under which ethnic subjects are expected to resemble Western fantasies of ethnicity rather than whiteness. It is this underlying logic of fixed ethnic difference *qua* pluralism, however, that Peters plays against in ethnolinguistic self-mimicry.

Peters uses stylized South Asian English as a form of “self-mockery that actually mocks the mockers” (Doniger 2005: 12). Typically mistaken for a sign of linguistic inadequacy, the East Indian accent is presented by the comic as a forgery, a performance used to accommodate white people. In one skit, Peters uses “brown voice” to dramatize an exchange between an Indo-Canadian convenience-store clerk and an Anglo customer: “Hello, sir. How you are? ...Okay, my friend. That will be \$ 5.95. Seeing you, bye-bye!” He then shifts to Standard English to express the clerk’s disbelief: “And once you leave, it’s like, ‘What a loser! I can’t believe that guy just paid \$ 5.95 for a pack of gum’.” The skit relies on a rhetorical inversion and Socratic irony to present a cunning Indo-Canadian in a dialect of incompetence, which is used to fool a white customer (vaguely reminiscent of the slave trickster of early blackface). Peters twists the terms of coercive mimeticism to his advantage, complicating the racial assumption that Indo-Canadians have a limited grasp of English. The Indo-Canadian mocks dominant white culture by impersonating an ethnic dialect that was appended to him by a myopic discourse of “diversity” rather than ethnic heritage *per se*. In other words, “author A quotes author B quoting author A” (Doniger 2005: 7).

If the “performance of brown voice participates in the simplification of racial identities,” it is made increasingly complex through self-impersonation (Davé 2005: 327). Although South Asian English is often mistaken for a sign of verbal inadequacy it can also be adopted as a means of negotiating postcolonial power relations within and beyond the stage. In his study of multicultural dialects in British public schools, Ben Rampton found that South Asian students often “put on an ‘Asian’ accent and projected a comic persona” as a way of toying with white substitute instructors (1995: 52). While “crossing” was at times “highly illiberal” in the classroom, it was also apparently “designed to disrupt smooth transition ... partially obscure the speaker’s personal identity [and] evoke a wider relation of Anglo-Asian domination as a relevant interpretive framework” (84). Such performances of incompetence are not unlike those found in Peters’s *Outsourced*. The difference, however, is that Peters’s duplicity operates within a circuitry of production and consumption that is not only mass-mediated but also increasingly global (with sold-out performances in India, Dubai and Australia as well as a second DVD release). As a result, Peters provides a critical pedagogy of race in the more broadly conceived terms of education through popular culture.

Like the students of Rampton’s study, however, it is the myth of intrinsic Indianness that Peters often plays with. At times he uses South Asian English to

mark proximity and affiliation, at other times distance and parody. For example, he explains his outbursts of stylized South Asian English as a symptom of Indian Tourette Syndrome (a suspect commentary on disability). The self-diagnosis sardonically excuses the comic for his own unassimilable ethnicity, framing the ethnic dialect as an abnormality in the West. If the trace of ethnicity found in one's English is to be exorcised, however, it is occasionally celebrated as a sign of pluralism and diversity within the nation-state, especially during ethnic festivals (and, evidently, Peters's own routines). As such, the performative space of the ethnic self-impersonator is one of ambivalence, indeterminacy and cultural synchronicity. Peters performs a dialogue between "authentic" Indian subject and assimilated "dark white guy" (his words) through linguistic variation, which serves to discomfit racial assumptions of language proficiency. It is in many ways a negotiation between a "fixed symbolic cultural identity and the context of heterogeneous difference" (Lowe 1996: 78).

Although distinctions between self and other erode in the moment of self-mimicry, Peters's trademark skit relies on the brown voice of someone else. In it he performs a generational rupture, one that distances the Canadian-born comic from his immigrant father and the nation's linguistic periphery. The foreigner, in other words, appears as an absent-subject of disavowal through a vocal minstrelsy of the migrant. As Laura Browder claims, the success of ethnic impersonators "rests on their ability to manipulate stereotypes, thus further miring their audience in essentialist racial and ethnic categories" (2000: 10). Evidently, self-imitation of ethnolinguistic stereotypes is a rather thorny subject. The Indo-Canadian impersonator "pretends to a certain sort of mastery over 'the real' [but his] effectiveness depends upon an act of repetition that *rejects virtuosity*" (Chen 2005: 63). While the vocal performance draws on racial images of an "embodied speaker" the linguistic stereotype becomes the site of its own transgression, mocking the ethnic essentialism from which it is born (Creese and Kambere 2002: 10).

Not "Asian" Enough? The Stand-up Comedy of Margaret Cho

Margaret Cho is a Korean American comic who rose to stardom during the mid-1990s when she received her own short-lived television sitcom called *All-American Girl*. Since the show's demise, Cho has released four DVD recordings of her stand-up routines, which earned her an American Comedy Award and the Intrepid Award given by the National Organization for Women. Currently, the comic hosts *The Cho Show* on VH1. While she is perhaps best known for her stand-up comedy, Cho is also a political activist, campaigning against racial, gender and sexual discrimination. Most important for our purposes here, Cho performs and parodies ethnic authenticity and identity politics through vocal impersonation. In *I'm the One That I Want* (2000) and *Cho Revolution* (2004), she offers cogent and

comical negotiations of the contradictory conditions of multiculturalism in North America and the ethnic entrapment practised by the entertainment industry.

Like Peters, Cho relies on style-shifting for a variety of political purposes. She often defies ethnolinguistic absolutism by shifting from a Californian dialect toward Valley Girl, African American and Korean English. For Cho, style-shifting is a way of negotiating fictions of Asian authenticity. In *I'm the One That I Want*, she uses the narrative logic of market multiculturalism to parody an infomercial for a fad diet (apparently Asian). In her Californian dialect she pretends to confess: “when I was young I was raised on rice and fish. So, when I get heavy I go back to that natural way of eating’ [end of recitation]. That is so *Mulan*!” The comic pretends to play a mandolin and continues the skit with an imitation of a *buchaechum* or Korean fan dance. She slips into stylized Asian English to boost the authenticity of the moment:

When I was a littta girl [Cho puckers her lips and dances in short steps]
I grow up on de rice paddy and we have-uh no food. But even dough we
have-uh no food, I have-uh a tendency to put on weight [Cho frowns].
The pound fall away so quickly, when you have malaria or dysentery [Cho
giggles and covers her mouth].

Cho performs a Western fantasy of Asian authenticity by drawing on stylized speech patterns and foreign signifiers (rice paddy, dysentery, malaria, fan dancing and *Mulan*). She evokes “a spectacle of the exotic artefact” used to construct ethnic cultures as “perpetuating the past in petrified form” (Gunew 1993: 6). The ironic reference to Disney’s *Mulan* illustrates the centrality of orientalism in American popular culture, evoking images of the Forbidden City, dragon iconography and “simplistic visions of the exotic other” (Ma 2000: 127). To criticize a discourse of market multiculturalism, Cho disidentifies with primitive cultural traditions, muddling the lines between theft, ownership and fabrication. Cho is “neither the ‘Good Subject,’ who has an easy or magical identification with dominant culture, nor the ‘Bad Subject,’ who imagines herself outside of ideology” (Muñoz 1996: 12). The act of ethnic self-impersonation emphasizes the preconceived identities attached to the ethnic subject under the conditions of multiculturalism and the possibilities of interrupting such roles through ironic citation.

The comic also relies on style-shifting to mark intra-ethnic differences. In *I'm the One That I Want*, Cho adopts a Korean English accent to impersonate her mother: “Ah you gay? Peek up da phone. If you doan peek up da phone, dat mean you gay!” As Cho mimics her mother with altered prosodic features, she squints and purses her lips. The racial caricature is channelled by a foreign voice, which produces a precarious gap between landed Asian immigrant and native-born Asian(-)American. Through style-shifting, Cho (like Peters) articulates the hyphen as a site of division, connection and contestation. She vocalizes not only generational difference but also (unlike Peters) “divergent interpretations”

of gendered boundaries (Lowe 1996: 79). Cho's ambiguous sexual positioning is a defiant gesture against Asian American cultural nationalism of the 1970s, which idealized a militant heteromascularity as the essential site of oppositional politics (Eng 1997; Lowe 1996). And while the articulation of sexual uncertainty through generational conflict in some ways confines diasporic complexities to the "feminized" domestic sphere of family relations," Cho is quite skilled at performing and "publicizing" sexual politics in and through a prism of ethnicity (Lowe 1996: 78).

As a site of performative tension, however, the hyphen is often articulated in complicated and complicit ways. In one skit, Cho recalls vacationing with her fiancé's white parents in Florida. She describes the family's generosity as overwhelming and alienating, which she quips about in the stylized English of an Asian exchange student:

[Cho bows slowly] Dis is, uh, my host famiry [slow bow again]. I come from Koh-rea [slow bow again]. America is numba one. Sank you, meestuh Eddie's fada.

Cho calls the trip "the most Long Duk Dong experience," a direct reference to John Hughes's *Sixteen Candles* (1984) and the Hollywood tradition of typecasting.² Her "mimicry of Asian obedience," however, is double-coded (Lee 2004: 109). While the racial caricature interrogates the ways in which the Asian American body is often positioned as abject, immigrant and temporary it also essentializes immigrant culture in the U.S. If the self-directed stereotype is used to critique American racism, it ironically privileges the Americanized ethnic at the immigrant's expense. So while Cho's sexual politics may articulate the vicissitudes of Asian American identity, her disidentification with the Asian immigrant echoes a more traditional cultural nationalism, one that potentially privileges the "American born and raised" (Chin, Chan, Inada and Wong 1974: xi). Like Russell Peters, Cho speaks within and against a soundscape of Asian clichés in ways that are highly ambivalent but no less insightful.

Such ambivalence is consistent with the "intrinsically paradoxical" status of comedy; the comic may subvert a discourse of xenophobia even as she appears to reproduce it (Palmer 1987: 181). While comedy can operate along conservative, even racist, lines (ethnic stupidity jokes told by white performers, for instance) Cho uses style-shifting to render Asian stereotypes a simulacrum. And yet her migrant minstrelsy reiterates how many people of colour "remain immigrants in a profoundly psychic sense ... no matter how old [their] citizenship" (Philip 1992: 29). To this end, dialect is "metacommunicative" in that it provides a message about the message (Urciuoli 1996: 26). In Cho's routine we find a "deft use of identity features at critical junctures" to mark not only racial fantasies in a white mainstream but also the ways in which such stereotypes are decoded by some Asian Americans (Ervin-Tripp 2001: 55). Cho's shift to Asian English reproduces

the migrant stereotype with a difference, one that works within but also against a dominant assumption that an ethnic body and an ethnic voice are somehow co-determined.

This is also apparent when Cho describes the inability of whites to grasp the concept of “hyphenated” ethnic identities. In one skit, she recalls a promotional interview with the host of a morning television program:

Host [Cho in “white voice”]: Hey, Margaret, we’re changing over to an ABC affiliate, so why don’t you tell our viewers in *your native language*?

Cho: [in dry broadcast English] They’re changing to an ABC affiliate.

Here the ideological contract between the Asian body and authentic Asian voice hails Cho (an experience echoed in Ien Ang’s *On Not Speaking Chinese* (2001)).³ Cho’s skit demonstrates how “an ethnic body without an ethnic language” is sometimes perceived as “an imperfect” copy of ethnicity (Chow 2002: 124). A similar confusion arises when Cho mocks the perceived benefits of Asian American identity. She quips, “You spend half of your day in America and the other half ... [shift to Asian English] ‘in a foh-ren laaand’.” Here the hyphen connects as much as separates, marking both tension and excess between singular identities (Feng 1996; Wah 2000). Of course, “to undercut the negative stereotype, the artist must hail the audience so that it recognizes the subject/Other relations that the negative stereotype calls into play” (Margolis 1998: 215).

While the Asian immigrant is mythologized as a model minority s/he is also described as a threat, against which the nation is defined. American cultural fictions have historically situated the Asian subject as a national suspect, one that is said to bring a rolling tide of moral degeneracy and yellow peril to the shores of the U.S. As Lisa Lowe writes, “the project of imagining the nation as homogeneous requires the orientalist construction of cultures and geographies from which Asian immigrants come as fundamentally ‘foreign’ originals antipathetic to the modern American society” (1996: 5). Cho explores this phenomenon by describing an awkward encounter with an airline attendant. Although the steward presents an in-flight meal as Asian chicken salad for the white passengers, he drops the “Asian” in the presence of Cho. Confused and slightly annoyed at the omission, she asks the audience, “What does he think I’m gonna do?” She then moves into a crouched position with her head down and left palm held up. She slowly raises her head to reveal a furrowed brow, rolled-back eyes and a protruding pout. The comic hisses slowly in stylized Asian English:

Dis is not de salad of my people [Cho crawls toward audience]. In my homeland [eyes squint and crawl continues] ... dey use mandarin orange slices and crispy wonton crunchies. Dat, my friend, is an Asian chicken salad!

As Cho rises, her microphone becomes an imaginary sword, which she swings in multiple directions. After pretending to slash the flight attendant the audience erupts with laughter and applause.

Cho uses the phantasm of the primitive Asian to expose the colourblind politics of the flight attendant—based ironically on visual markers—as problematic and contradictory. She summons the orientalist fantasy through a samurai caricature, which stands in the void of Asian recognition. In doing so, she plays one form of racism against another, revealing the essentialist underpinnings of both. The skit seems to suggest that “colourblind” civility is a tacit return of the racist politics it claims to abandon. If “civility ... requires the alienation of anger [and] passion ... laughter releases or works a revenge against the alienation of sensation, a revenge that is not necessarily obverse to historical and political understanding” (Lee 2004: 125). And yet Cho’s parodic performance presents what Sheng-Mei Ma calls a “deathly embrace” between orientalism and Asian American subjectivity; Cho’s identity as an Asian American emerges onstage only in relation to the Western fantasy of the Oriental. Here the stereotype is central to ethnic identity, as the source of a rejection that is never wholly achieved.

Although she relies on ethnolinguistic essentialisms to evoke certain ethnicities, Cho is particularly adept at highlighting the constructed and embellished nature of the stereotype. Like Peters, she offers an ironic version of coercive mimeticism “by transforming preexisting stereotypes and by manipulating the master’s language” (Ma 2000: xvi). In doing so, Cho undermines any obvious binary opposition of race in the U.S., even as she negates authentic Asian representation. Moreover, she illustrates the extent to which the American melting pot has morphed into what Angela Davis sardonically calls a “colourful and beautiful salad” (perhaps an Asian chicken salad) (1996: 45). Cho’s contempt for discourses of ethnic authenticity suggests that multiculturalism is not a “radical break from a racist past” but rather an equally essentializing set of conditions that “tolerates” the other as an artifact of pre-modernity, a static signifier of “elsewhere” (Hage 1998: 82). Ironically, it is the burlesquing of ethnic authenticity and coercive mimeticism that fills the theatres of Cho’s enormously popular performances. Both Peters and Cho are in many ways fork-tongued spokespersons for a market multiculturalism with which they have an ambivalent and complicated relation. In other words, multicultural populism—realized in part through comics of colour—is both the enabler and the target of critique in Peters’s and Cho’s routines.

Conclusion

In their own ways, Peters and Cho offer an interesting dialogue with overlapping versions of multiculturalism and identity politics. Whereas ethnic identity is situated as “dress, dance and dinner” within some versions of multiculturalism, it is described as a site of contestation and struggle within another (Cameron 2004:

xxi). This critical variant has emerged in contradistinction to official multicultural categories which, as Himani Bannerji explains, “are themselves the constructs of colonial—orientalist and racist—discourses” (2000: 9). Although style-shifting may participate in a similar commodification of ethnicity as state and corporate brands of multiculturalism, Peters and Cho use racial and ethnic dialects as metonyms of larger political struggles. They aestheticize race and ethnicity to a variety of political ends, but they also rely on coercive mimeticism and ironic impersonation to defy the dominant assumption that ethnic groups are “self-identical ... lacking any differences within” (Ahmed 2000: 104).

Style-shifting, however, is far from a “runaway deconstruction of ethnicity” (Rampton 1998: 299). Although vocal imitations underscore the performative nature of identity and stereotypes, they reproduce racial mythologies of Standard, African American, South Asian and Korean English. Indeed, the rhetorical spirit of comedy is such that both radical and conservative viewpoints are endorsed within a single utterance. And yet the comic’s own prosodic identity is often difficult to pinpoint within an array of caricatures. The *we/they* binary that underwrites the logic of style-shifting for many sociolinguists is not easily identified in the double-voiced discourse. Through style-shifting, however, the linguistic stereotype often betrays the body by which it is brought to life. If the visual referent is always somewhere else, the ethnolinguistic stereotype, is purged of its ontological status and its fidelity in ethnic signification. As a result, it is the comics’ “exposure as impersonators that offers readers the possibility of being liberated from fixed ideas about the meaning of racial and ethnic identity” (Browder 2000: 11). And yet it is within the ludic space of stand-up comedy—where normal social codes and political correctness are often inverted—that such problematic stereotypes are manipulated. As Joanne Gilbert explains, “Because it can avoid inflaming audiences by framing incisive ... sociocultural critique as mere ‘entertainment,’ comedy is undeniably a unique and powerful form of communication” (2004: xii).

While accent is a slippery signifier of ethnic identity, it is symptomatic of larger political and material realities that cannot always be parodied into the dustbin of history. That is to say, “making the ‘Master’ laugh is one thing; unseating him from a position of power is quite another” (Gilbert 2004: 21). If ethnolinguistic signification is often ephemeral, the social forces behind it are quite real. In the company of an ethnic “stranger,” white Anglos frequently imagine an ethnic accent where none is present (Lippi-Green 1998). Along related lines, a multiethnic audience is likely to interpret racial irony in disparate ways. As M. Nourbese Philip asks of white patrons of multicultural arts: “Were they laughing at the *same* things I was laughing at, and if their laughter lacked the same admixture of pain, was it laughter which, having been bought too cheaply, came too easily” (1992: 31)? In other words, any antiracist pedagogy in the arts and popular culture requires the audience “to do some work as well” (36). Although the misembodied voice is far from unproblematic, comedy has often performed “a complicated inclusion

in a way that neither [North] American multiculturalists nor uniculturalists can theorize” (Limon 2000: 85).

As a misrepresentation of identity, however, ventriloquism may double as a parody of pluralism, drawing attention to the ongoing fantasy of white people as the sole proprietors of a nation “enriched” by the ethnic stranger. Ventriloquism “accentuates the power relations involved and certainly raises questions about whose voices we are hearing and who the ‘we’ are” (Gunew 2004: 75). What the “misembodied” voice offers, then, is an understanding of race and ethnicity as a performance enabled by multiple modes of representation that are not always in agreement. Lest we forget, “the visual ... never comes ‘pure,’ it is always ‘contaminated’ by the work of other senses” (Shohat and Stam 1998: 45). That the visible and audible dimensions of racial identity are often incongruent suggests that race and ethnicity are heterogeneous and resistant to one-dimensional assumptions used to alternately govern and celebrate the foreign body as the originary site of difference within the multicultural nation. The misembodied voice as an antiracist pedagogy is not a will to forget ethnicity but rather a negotiation of the vicissitudes of identity and the necessary existential illusion of representation and recognition within contemporary multicultural settings. That is to say, while “identity is radically unstable” it is our identifications that remain imperative to political practice (Davis 2004: 169).

Notes

1. Along similar lines, Kira Hall notes how female phone-sex workers are able to impersonate various racial and ethnic identities to suit the desires of their clients (1995). Likewise, Michael Chaney (2004) and Shilpa Davé (2005) criticize ethnolinguistic impersonation by white actors on *South Park* and *The Simpsons*, respectively.
2. In *Sixteen Candles* “Long Duk Dong” was an Asian exchange student played by Utah-born Gedde Watanabe, an actor who has built a career on impersonating Asian immigrants through “broken” English.
3. As Jen Ang suggests, ethnicity is often a problematic visual (mis)cue:

At a party, I was introduced to a man who ... immediately started to blurt out some words in Cantonese, then Japanese, then Malay.... It surprised and frustrated him that I understood nothing of what he said and that I refused to speak to him other than in English. (2001: 145-46)

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