

"Words Should do the Work of Bombs": Margaret Cho as Symbolic Assassin

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Abstract: This essay examines comedian Margaret Cho's 2005 *Assassin* tour in order to assess the rhetorical potential of stand-up comedy as a nodal point for dissent. Within the contracted space for political dissent and the anti-Asian backlash in post-9/11 U.S. public culture, Cho's concert film *Assassin* created, however temporary, a symbolic economy that worked to expand discursive space and, consequently, to re-imagine the role of dissent. By adopting the speaking position of a "symbolic assassin," Cho's comedy helps expand discursive space in the contemporary moment. This essay consequently opens up for consideration temporalities of circulation that might, even momentarily, release public discourse from rhetorical captivity.

During a 2007 campaign stop in South Carolina, presidential hopeful Senator John McCain (AZ-R) attempted to woo his audience of fellow military veterans by joking about a possible U.S. attack on Iran. When asked to share his thoughts about the escalating U.S.-Iran conflict, McCain responded with his own rendition of the popular Beach Boys song, "Barbara Ann." Altering the song's lyrics, the senator crooned, "Bomb Iran . . . bomb, bomb bomb. . . ."¹ As the U.S. led "war on terror" continues to unfold, McCain's joke exemplifies the ease with which the language of war can be elevated above the language of diplomacy. What is unspoken and yet all too evident in his joke is the disposability of Iranian lives, a gesture that mirrors the deportation and "indefinite detainment" of Arab, Muslim, and South Asian people well underway since 9/11, an equally halting—and haunting—spectacle as the "shock and awe" of bombs.

Of course, the racial profiling of U.S. citizens and immigrants as "enemy combatants" are not mere spectacles to be consumed but are lived experiences. Along side those suffering under conditions of corporeal imprisonment runs a story about the mass mediated public sphere, which, in many ways, has been held in rhetorical captivity. The loss of civil liberties authorized by the USA PATRIOT Act and the absence of Congressional debate culminating in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq signal what Lisa Duggan (2003) has aptly termed a "shrinking public sphere."² Despite growing agitation against the war in Iraq, scholars, journalists, and activists attending to the political economies of media have well documented the collusion between news media and establishment/governmental perspectives on the "war on terror" (McChesney, 2004; Zinn, 2002; Snow 2003; Murphy, 2005). This collusion is only exacerbated by the consolidation of the ownership of our media into the hands of a few corporations. As recently as the summer of 2008, the *Columbia Journalism Review* pronounced a "dissent deficit" in U.S. public discourse ("Dissent Deficit").

In such a contracted space for dissent, it is no wonder that the political left struggles to be "louder than bombs." To celebrate its 95th anniversary, *The Progressive*, long a voice box for the left, published a collection of interviews it had conducted in recent years with public intellectuals from Edward Said and Angela Davis to Kurt Vonnegut and Howard Zinn, titled *Louder than Bombs* (Barsamian, 2004). Though absent from this line-up, comedian Margaret Cho was named in a 2004 issue of *The Progressive* as among an "insurrection" underway among a "cultural front" comprised of Michael Moore, Jon Stewart, Bruce Springsteen, Ani DiFranco and the Dixie Chicks ("The Meaning of Defeat," 2004, p.10). As part of this "insurrection," Cho launched a *State of Emergency* comedy tour through swing states prior to the 2004 presidential election, one that, as she told *The New York Times*, addressed "the obliteration of democracy, a complete disregard for human rights all over the world, a government which is corrupt and a media that has [sic] been infected by the same thing" (Carr, 2004, p. 30). This tour inspired much of the material for her post-election tour, *Assassin*.

Following the re-election of George W. Bush, Margaret Cho advised readers of her blog to strike offensively, and "get [their] war on" (Cho, 2005a, p.7). Echoing *The Progressive's* slogan, she asserted, "Words should do the work of bombs" (Cho, 2005b, p.). By summoning the explosive potential of discourse, Cho's anti-war statement mobilizes the language of war in a decidedly different, and more productive, direction than McCain's joke. This essay examines Cho's 2005 *Assassin* tour to assess the rhetorical potential of stand-up comedy as a nodal point of dissent, an important quality if we are to place hope in publics as agents of historical change.³ For those "exiled from the centers of power," comedy, it has been argued, "can signal the transformation of speechless outrage to persuasive, vocal, joyous audacity" (Walker, quoted in Gilbert, p. xviii). When the conditions of possibility of dissent are confined to "free speech zones" or eroded by police brutality, it is worth contemplating how a cultural form such as stand-up comedy helps "create conditions of possibility, [and] expand the present by informing it with memories of the past and hopes for the future" (Lipsitz, 1989, p. 16).

Characterized in the popular press as offering "new lessons in women's rights and gay pride" (Bierly, 2005, p. 56), *Assassin* is largely an interpretation of the contemporary political culture, but one that I argue exceeds a rights based discourse. Indeed, it exceeds the constraints of the contemporary moment by "informing it with memories of the past," creating a symbolic economy that expands discursive space and, consequently, re-imagines the role of dissent. This essay, thus, consequently opens up for consideration temporalities of circulation that might, even momentarily, release public discourse from rhetorical captivity. Before moving to an

analysis of *Assassin* and its reception, I want to contextualize this concert film within Cho's career as a comic in order to highlight the unique speaking position she adopts in *Assassin* to tether comedy and dissent.

From *All American Girl* to Symbolic Assassin

While Margaret Cho is now best known for her stand up comedy, her claim to national fame was her role on *All American Girl* (1994-1995), the first television sitcom in U.S. history about an Asian American family. Criticism from ABC executives that Cho's role wasn't "Asian enough" was followed by criticism that it was "too Asian," and culminated in the show's cancellation after one season (Caswell, 2000). Her experience on the show later became the basis of her first concert film, *I'm the One That I Want*, which was named one of the "Great Performances of the Year" by *Entertainment Weekly* and "Performance of the Year" by *New York* magazine (Anderson, 2001).⁴ Her second concert film, *Notorious C.H.O.*, also received rave reviews. The Hollywood trade magazine *Variety* wrote, "She's the best girlfriend whose brass always livens up the party" (Anderson, 2001). And *Asian Week* enthusiastically observed that her act "features enough X-rated material to make Richard Pryor proud and give Jesse Helms a heart attack" (McDorman, 2001).

Cho's stage extends beyond the comedy club, as she plays to crowds in concert halls, gay cruises, universities, and political rallies, while the CDs and DVDs of her concert tours circulate the live performance beyond the original event. Her writing also enjoys cross-circulation. In addition to her two books, Cho's essays have appeared in women's studies readers intended for both academic and mass audiences, as well as in books on gay and lesbian legal rights (see Prince and Silva-Wayne, 2004; Maran and Watrous, 2005; Jervis and Zeisler, 2006). Moreover, as an advocate for free speech, same-sex marriage, immigrant rights, and a woman's right to choose, her speaking position surpasses the comic frame. What unites her activism and comedy, however, is a critical perspective toward the logics that render the racially marked, female, queer, and immigrant body culturally abject. Abjection is a common enough experience for Cho, whose father was deported to Korea three days after her birth during Cold War hysteria of the late 1960s; who works within a genre that has popularized Korean dog eating jokes; and who inhabits a body continuously deemed a threat to national security.⁵ For promoting equal rights under the law, Cho received the First Amendment Award from the ACLU of Southern California, and has been recognized by the National Organization for Women, Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, Lambda Legal, and the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund.

As a Korean American woman who has traveled through the circuits of television, film, and stand-up comedy, Cho is all too aware of the limiting speaking

positions available to Asian Americans. About the cancellation of *All American Girl*, she has offered these remarks:

[The program] was trying to put my comedy and what I do as a comedian in a family setting. It didn't fit, even though I talk about my family in my act. . . . They were looking for this heartwarming comedy about immigrants, and my life isn't like that. My act is about, 'My family's fucked up.' (Donohue and Kirkman, 2001)

Cho's explanation foregrounds the incongruity between her style of comedy and the television sitcom's narrative demands, specifically the assimilationist immigration story ABC sought to tell. If, as Lisa Lowe (1996) suggests, debates about aesthetic representations are always about political representations, then television's narrative demands are also national demands, with which Cho's stand-up comedy frequently collides. Reflecting the position of displacement from which she often speaks, Cho's comments here highlight the "unassimilable conflicts and particularities" (Lowe, 1996, p.4) that stand-up comedy might allow in ways that the television situation comedy cannot or does not. This is not to idealize stand-up comedy as a cultural form but to identify the differential economy between the network television sitcom and stand-up. As Phillip Auslander puts it, "there is no 'situation' to surround and contain the actions of the comic woman" (326). Thus, stand-up comedians might possess a cultural "license for deviant behavior" (Mintz, quoted in Gilbert, 18).

However, the backlash Cho has encountered from both the left and the right for blending comedy and political commentary post-9/11 indicates that she has not been afforded that same license. After criticizing George Bush during her *State of Emergency* act, Cho found herself dis-invited from headlining at The Human Rights Campaign's major fundraiser at the 2004 Democratic National Convention (Carr, 2004). And once her comments circulated over conservative websites, she was inundated with hate mail. Given the xenophobic aspects of the hate mail, a topic she discusses in *Assassin*, Cho's comedy presents a site to further explore Lisa Lowe's (1996) observation that "the Asian American, even as a citizen, continues to be located outside the cultural and racial boundaries of the nation" (p.6). As the symbolic annihilation of Asian Americans and South Asians persists in popular media (Ono, 2005; Feng, 2002; Nakayama, 1994; Tajima, 1989; see also Gerbner and Gross, 1976), Cho's rhetoric in *Assassins* calls for the examination of a speaking position we might term "symbolic assassin." This is a mode of address whose objective should not be mistaken for character assassination. Rather, it functions to expand the space for dissent against disparate power relations, drawing upon an archive of symbol that "do the work of bombs."

Assassin

Cho reportedly selected the title *Assassin* for her 2005 tour because “things have gotten so bad you just want to hire an assassin” (Biggs, p. 49). In the prelude to the *Assassin* DVD, she explains that she wanted to choose the “most volatile, most provocative, incendiary name [that] would make the right wing just go crazy.” Stopping short of labeling her own speech inflammatory, Cho nevertheless intends to set ablaze the political landscape. When asked in an interview with *The Advocate*, “What is it you—and presumably your fans—will go on to ‘assassinate’?” (Andreoli, p. 24). Cho responded that the tour is “about finding levity in the situation and taking that opportunity to shoot down all those false idols like homophobia and George Bush. We take on the role of assassin and take out these negative ideas, get people connected and feeling like there’s a way through it all” (Andreoli, p. 24). Of the many cities in which *Assassin* toured, it is significant that the one selected for the DVD was her performance in Washington, D.C., the site from which, Cho explains, a “very destructive, corrupt administration” hails. The opening shot of the DVD—a close-up of the White House—zeroes in on her target.

Having built a successful comedy career and reputation as a “female Korean American version of Richard Pryor” (McDorman, 2001), Margaret Cho seems to have disappointed industry critics in 2005. Unlike her previous stand-up performances, her *Assassin* tour did not receive high accolades from the entertainment industry. Surprisingly, Cho’s *Assassin* dodged the obscenity bullet, despite the FCC’s “war on indecency,” which was in full force following the 2004 Superbowl halftime incident with Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake. Instead, critics scrutinized *Assassin*’s political content and the anger with which she delivered her material. Dennis Harvey (2005) of *Variety* claimed that her “fourth concert film . . . compares poorly to her oft-hilarious first two,” reading Cho’s political commentary as a sign that “inspiration is running thin” (p. 63). “Having already mined her tumultuous S.F. youth and disastrous sitcom star launch,” he writes, “Cho seems to have run out of material—either that or she’s begun taking herself far too seriously as a spokesperson for the disgruntled left” (p. 63). Her stabs at Bush’s blunders are dismissed as predictable, merely offering a “series of weak ‘So, what’s in the news today’ jokes” (Harvey, 2005, p. 63), even though that approach seems to be working well for Jon Stewart and Jay Leno.

If political topics aren’t considered adequate inventional resources, neither is political anger. Giving *Assassin* a “B-” rating, Owen Gleiberman (2005) of *Entertainment Weekly* charged Cho with an “overdose of anger” (p. 61). Despite calling anger “the gasoline of standup comedians, the fuel that gets them revved,” Gleiberman analogized that Cho’s “overdose of anger,” like too much gas flooding an engine, stalls her “jokes with a didactic sputter” (p. 61). Bierly (2005) similarly opined, “We’re all for comedy for a higher purpose, but laughs should be the top priority” (p. 56).

Still others have recognized Cho’s ability to turn words into bombs, or at least bullets. Though accused of stale, predictable jokes, Cho’s routine in *Assassin*, from this perspective, obtains an unpredictable quality. *The Dallas Morning News* remarked that “Cho and her act are as coy and subtle as a ‘shock and awe’ bombing raid” rife with “verbal weapons-of-mass-destruction” (Granberry, 2005). Rob Thomas (2004) of *The Capital Times* disagreed with such a depiction, believing there is a more calculated quality to her humor, and implicitly, her anger. He even refuted *The New York Times* characterization of her speech as “Tourette’s syndrome onstage” because “that makes it sound like she spews out thoughts at random like a machine gunner.” Far from a weapon of mass destruction, Thomas insisted, Cho is “an expert marksman [sic] with her satire.” It is possible, though, that her delivery in the stand-up genre is crafted to come across as unpredictable and spontaneous. So much of her routine is based on a practice of shifting contexts, and quickly taking her audience from one topic to another. Such unpredictability may leave her audience (and some of these critics) not knowing what hit them.

Though chastised for lacking imagination, Cho views her comedic “anger” as the fuse that could reignite the political left. The potential for “insurrection” is important given what some have described as the disappearance of rage from the lexicon of the left. In an essay inspired by a “climate of unacceptable complacency” in the wake of the L.A. uprising after the 1992 Rodney King verdict, Judith Halberstam (2001) argues that in “political demonstrations . . . outrage often takes a back seat to organized, formal, and decorous shows of disapproval (p. 248).” Citing a San Diego march intended to protest police brutality, Halberstam observes, “What might have been an outpouring of rage and anger and frustration directed at the racist, violent tactics of the local police turned into a passive and indifferent meeting” (p. 248). Halberstam leaves open the vitality of volatility, expressions that “might lead to something spontaneous, something that spills across the carefully drawn police lines, something threatening” (Halberstam, 2001, p. 249).⁶ Cho’s *Assassin* tour offers a timely opportunity to examine that “something” that spills across the boundaries of decorum.

It is significant that she is accused in the popular press of producing “what’s in the news?” style of jokes as Cho’s stand-up becomes one strategy to keep the discourse of a public in motion. This is her way of expanding the present by “informing it with memories of the past.” In one moment, she derides the hypocrisy of the “red states” through juxtaposition, claiming, “If you oppose same-sex marriage but love *Will and Grace*, then fuck you!” Despite attention to contemporary issues such as same-sex marriage or scandals such as Enron, she does not confine herself to the immediate past, the “current event.” Instead, she circumvents the “temporarily of the headline” by making an “archival turn” (Warner 2002, p. 97), summoning from the 1970s a figure that symbolizes both captivity and freedom: Patty Hearst. Before her act

begins, the prelude to the *Assassin* DVD introduces us to Cho, who arrives in Washington, D.C., and who, in voiceover, remarks upon the powerlessness felt by many in the U.S. today: "Usually that's when someone wants to hire an assassin." As the sound of a gun shot fires, an image of the publicity poster for *Assassin* appears on screen featuring Cho posed in Patty Hearst drag. If McCain's "Barbara Ann"/"Bomb Iran" joke is predicated on his audience's familiarity with the Beach Boys, Cho's poster recalls memories of Patty Hearst, a controversial icon of 1970s radical left politics. Late one night in 1974, while an undergraduate at UC Berkeley, twenty-year-old Hearst was abducted from her apartment by intruders calling themselves the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA). The group, which was comprised of leader Donald DeFreeze, an African American ex-convict, and eight white disciples, sought the "symbiosis" of white and black America (Castiglia, 1996, p. 89). The SLA targeted Hearst, the white heiress to wealthy media tycoon William Randolph Hearst, in order to draw media attention to the plight of the poor and to racial inequalities, particularly the cause of black prisoners' rights. So scandalous was the Hearst kidnapping that the SLA succeeded in pushing "Watergate off the front pages" (Castiglia, 1996, p.88). For weeks, Hearst was held captive in a closet, often blindfolded, while the SLA read revolutionary literature to her, educating her about gender roles and race relations within the U.S. and abroad.

After nearly sixty days in captivity, Hearst surprised her family, the FBI, and the enraptured "American" public by joining her captors in their armed struggle, taking on a new name, "Tania" (Castiglia, 1996). Eager to announce its newest "member," the SLA released a poster featuring Hearst dressed in combat uniform and beret. In the background was a banner displaying the organization's logo, a black writhing seven-headed cobra against a red background. In the foreground was Patty Hearst brandishing an automatic rifle. This now infamous picture of Hearst enjoyed wide circulation on the cover of *Time*, *Newsweek* and other such news outlets at the time, even becoming the image for a best selling poster among college campuses that proclaimed, "We love you, Tania" (Browder, 2006).

The *Assassin* poster features Cho standing against the same red background and seven-headed cobra, wearing a black jump suit and beret, as did Hearst. A critical difference between the two posters, however, is that Cho wields a microphone instead of a gun. As the *L.A. Times* described it, "In Cho's hands, the former is just as lethal as the latter" (Bonin, 2005). This image of Cho as Hearst also appears on the cover of her 2005 book, whose title is likewise inspired by Patty Hearst: *I Have Chosen to Stay and Fight*. When Hearst announced that she had joined her captors, she issued the following statement: "I have been given the choice of: 1) being released in a safe area, or 2) joining the forces of the Symbionese Liberation Army and fighting for my freedom and the freedom of all oppressed people. I have chosen to stay and fight" (Stone,

2004). Hearst's decision to stay and participate in the SLA, seemingly inconceivable to the mainstream, was explained within media accounts as the effect of brainwashing. For some, Hearst's cross-class and cross-race identification was only imaginable as pathology. While still a member of the SLA, however, Hearst refuted the brainwashing thesis in a communiqué, calling it preposterous and clarifying that she was a "soldier in the people's army." When security cameras caught Hearst, strapped with a machine gun, participating with the SLA in the armed robbery of Hibernia Bank, the FBI issued a wanted poster and listed her as a voluntary member of the SLA (Stone, 2004).

Although Cho does not dress as Patty Hearst during her stand-up routine in *Assassin*, her adoption of this 1970s figure merits further commentary. Hearst might seem an unlikely figure for Cho to embody, given that in mainstream media, Hearst is more often remembered as a brainwashed abduction victim who later dropped her revolutionary leanings for marriage and middle class life style (Hall 2006). Despite this mainstream image, several scholars have noted that "public memories of Patty Hearst remain contested" (Hall 2006, 366; see also Castiglia 1996 and Browder 2006). For example, Castiglia's analysis of Hearst's 1988 autobiography complicates the media's accounts of her brainwashing by showing that "even after she [wa]s reportedly 'de-programmed,' Hearst continued to express many of the same doctrines she adopt[ed] from her kidnappers," especially their rhetoric of gender equality (98). She has also been a heroine for various American subcultures, including campy John Waters films and the music of Patty Smith, while the SLA has inspired anti-racist, queer performance art in Los Angeles (Castiglia 1996; Hall 2006, Muñoz 1996).⁷

Given the contested nature of Hearst's memory, it is significant that the Hearst who Cho resuscitates is not the domesticated version but the radical urban guerilla.⁸ I draw attention to this image not to stabilize the meaning of Patty Hearst, but to pause over Cho's performance of this radical past. In the *Assassin* poster, Cho replaces Hearst's vacuous and averted gaze with a campy "bring it on" gaze aimed directly at the viewer. It is Cho who as gotten her war on, as a "soldier in the people's army." Cho's Patty Hearst drag is not entirely surprising if one considers the publicity poster for Cho's 2004 tour, *Revolution*, which featured Cho's face drawn in black paint to resemble the image of beret wearing Che Guevara, the Argentinian guerilla. Hearst reportedly adopted the name "Tania" after one of Che Guevara's comrades (Stone, 2004). Although the SLA fashioned themselves as guerillas, the US government considered them a "revolutionary terror group,"⁹ a view that resurfaced in the news media in 2002, when members of the SLA were brought to trial on charges for a 1975 murder. In an interview with Patty Hearst conducted in the wake of these arrests, CNN's Larry King described Hearst as "one of the classic victims of domestic terrorism" ("Interview").

In a moment when the word "terrorism" invokes the Orientalist imaginaries fueling much of the post-9/11 political climate, Cho's performance of terrorism via Patty Hearst, instead of say, Osama bin Laden, importantly reminds American audiences of a "home-grown" terrorism.¹⁰ In this way, Cho's Patty Hearst drag resembles what José Esteban Muñoz terms "terrorist drag." In his essay on Los Angeles based performance artist Vaginal Davis, Muñoz reads Davis' performance of white militiamen and black welfare queen prostitutes in the 1990s as engaging in aesthetic terrorism: "Davis uses ground level guerilla representational strategies" that conjure the "nation's most dangerous citizens" (p. 108). Like Cho, Davis "appropriates both the dominant culture and different subcultural movements" (p.94). Such strategies enable Davis to reject the glamour girl drag found in spaces of queer consumption in favor of drag that performs the "nation's internal terrors around race, gender, and sexuality" (p. 108).

While we could read Cho's adaptation of the Patty Hearst iconography as engaging in semiological guerilla warfare, doing so would miss a key aspect of Cho's performance: temporality. I want to suggest that Cho's 2005 embodiment of Hearst, although a performance of "terrorist drag" on some levels, enacts what historian Elizabeth Freeman calls a "temporal drag." Unlike the "reconfigured cross-sex, cross-race minstrelsy" of Davis' terrorist drag (Muñoz, p. 108), Freeman's "temporal drag" describes a kind of cross-temporal identification, a "useful distorting pull backwards," one that asserts "necessary pressure upon the present tense" (729). Of course, invoking the past is not always going to puncture the strictures of the contemporary moment, but what it can do is apply "pressure upon the present" by working against the forces of cultural amnesia that, in this historical period, lodge terrorism within the bodies of Arab, Muslim, and South Asian people. It would, of course, be a mistake to read Cho's identification with this particular radical past as advocating a form of physical violence characteristic of the SLA. Afterall, the "gun" she holds is a microphone, a verbal weapon.

If Hearst circulates in contemporary mainstream media primarily as an abduction victim needing rescue (Hall, 2006), Cho claims for herself what Hearst struggled to achieve: rhetorical agency. In the *Assassin* poster, the gun Cho has replaced with the microphone is testament to that agency. Given Cho's appropriation of Hearst's image and memory, it is fitting that she closes her act with a captivity narrative, but one that Cho does not remain captured by. While much of her act moves quickly from one context to another, mimicking a headline temporality, the final sequence offers extended treatment to an event that involved Cho herself. Here, she explains how she wound up with a "deluge of hate mail from the right wing." She tells us that while speaking at a 2004 MoveOn.org benefit designed to galvanize voters against presidential candidate George W. Bush, she had refuted the comparison between George Bush and Adolph Hitler that a MoveOn.org commercial had popularized. Her

argument was: "He *would* be Hitler if he only applied himself." It wasn't long before her comment circulated over conservative internet sites such as Freerepublic.com and the DrudgeReport.com, and that hate mail poured into Cho's own website.¹¹

Using standards of civility to evaluate the hate mail, Cho states that none of the mail was "about political discourse." None of it, she says while adopting the reasoned voice of political decorum, resembled: "Ms. Cho, I believe you are being unfair to our Administration." After revealing some of the racist, xenophobic, sexist, and homophobic epithets hurled at her, she begins her refutation. Her first line of argumentation challenges the nativism underwriting one of the insults, "Go back to your country." She can't "go back," she maintains, because she was born here. "I'm already in my country." This refusal to accept the equation between Americanness and whiteness authorizes and extends her next point that "the only person who has a right to tell you to go back to your country is a Native American."¹² Her second line of refutation is more humorous, "Why do they think 'fat dyke' is an insult?"

Before her refutation becomes entirely contained by a reason-giving structure, she offers her final and more provocative line of defense. Grounding it in First Amendment rights, she states, "But since I whole heartedly believe in free speech, I posted [the hate mail] on my website along with their return email address." Her publication of the mail demonstrates that if the First Amendment can be used to protect hate speech, it can also be used to expose hate speech. Such a move prevents those responsible for the speech from withdrawing into the security of privacy. She continues by saying:

I hadn't realized this but there are a lot of people out there who really, *really* like me and they are pissed off to begin with, and they need *half* a reason. . . . So, in posting these mails, what I had inadvertently done is activate "al-Gayda." That is a sleeper cell you do not want to wake up. Yo!

Invoking her widely recognized gay following, who has evidently "gotten their war on," she explains that into the right wing email boxes flew al-Gayda's reply. Here, Cho reveals an awareness of the ways in which queers have long been considered terrorists within the national imaginary, whether as associated with Communists during the McCarthy era or as "domestic terrorists" in contemporary debates over same-sex marriage (Puar, 2007, p. xxiii). Accordingly, she constructs her audience as more than fans; they become "sleeper cells" awakened by "speechless outrage" against racist, xenophobic, homophobic, sexist speech. Such a construction implies that they lie dormant until pushed over the brink to retaliate against social injustices, needing only "half a reason" to do so. The eruption of al-Gayda is crafted as a spontaneous, not deliberate, outcome of Cho's decision to publicize the otherwise private email correspondence. And according to Cho, al-Gayda's rhetoric of retaliation

reaches beyond the email in-boxes of the right wing. In Cho's narrative retelling, she projects that this sleeper cell has "started al-Gayda training camps where they offer Pilates." While the campy "Pilates" joke may function to defuse the threat of al-Gayda, what is important here is the significance of the "training camps" themselves. Implying the reproduction of future cells, the mention of training camps invests al-Gayda with the potential for continued uprisings.

Although Cho does not reveal the substance of al-Gayda's initial response, she offers a description of the impact it made on those who had initiated the hate speech. When describing that she was immediately flooded with apology emails, Cho mimics the whiny, frightened voice of one unsuspecting victim who pleads with her to "[p]lease tell them to go away. I think Cirque de Soleil is warming up on my front lawn!" As al-Gayda seemingly "spills over" from cyberspace to the physical space of "front lawns," they are said to infiltrate heterosexual, white, bourgeois suburban neighborhoods, striking with an element of surprise. The fear that al-Gayda's intrusion strikes in this unsuspecting victim reinforces the hypocrisy of a country who loves its gay pop cultural performances such as Cirque de Soleil or *Will and Grace*, but only at a safe distance. The space of apology, fear, and surveillance she assigns the political right reduces them to captives in their own homes. By locating the authors of the hate mail in the suburban home, she shows that the white civility characteristic of "political discourse" is a thin veneer unable to conceal its hate speech.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, let me offer some implications about the relationship between comedy, dissent, and public discourse. I have argued that Cho's "symbolic assassin," far from obliterating discursive space, helps elongate it. By activating memories of Patty Hearst, Cho's "archival turn" asserts a "temporal drag" that puts pressure on contemporary understandings of terrorism. Although her purpose is not to provide an analysis of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, Cho's narrative shifts the terms of the principle narrative used to explain the causes of 9/11—that "they hate us and our freedoms." In Cho's scenario, the source of hate is not external to the country, but internal.

The erosion of American civil liberties since 9/11 has re-animated rhetorical studies' engagement with the democratic vistas of deliberative rhetoric. Collections such as *Rhetorical Democracy* and journal articles in *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* highlight the need to prevent public deliberation from becoming an endangered species.¹³ Cho's "symbolic assassin" opens up for consideration a creative way of imagining and enacting dissent beyond the lexicon of deliberation and debate. In particular, her characterization of her fans as "sleeper cells" folds the language of terrorism onto the social imaginary of publics. Such a characterization re-casts the

role of a "public" in contemporary U.S. culture from a Habermasian inspired space for debate to a "sleeper cell," one that fires off missives, much like her own mode of address. This strategy speaks to a concern within public sphere scholarship that the social imaginary of publics is overly coded with metaphors of conversation and dialogue (Warner, 2002; DeLuca and Peeples, 2002; Schudson, 1997). Michael Warner has observed, "The usual way of imagining the interactive character of public discourse is through metaphors of conversation, answering, talking back" (p. 90). The outcome of such dialogue and debate is idealized as a better, more informed decision reflecting the public's interest (Habermas, 1989). These are often seen as attractive ideologizations about publics, Warner suggests, because "they confer agency on publics" (97).

However, as a metaphor for the circulation of public discourse, "dialogue" does not adequately capture the interaction between Cho's sleeper cells and the publics of hate speech they enage. Not satisfied with decorous protocols of conversation and debate, or "polite displays of disapproval," al-Gayda, by contrast, retaliates. The racially marked term of "al-Qaeda" converges with the racially unmarked term "gay." What forms is a "sleeper cell" whose eruption develops a coalition politics, forcing a confrontation with racism, xenophobia, homophobia, and sexism. This closing anecdote, therefore, expands Cho's stated targets from the "false idols" of homophobia and George Bush to imperialist, xenophobic, and patriarchal worldviews and practices. Because the hate speech emanates not from a specific locale or concentrated center of political power such as Washington, D.C., but from the American suburban home, the sketch implies that scapegoating political figures, such as the president, is an insufficient strategy, as the source of the problems she discusses is much more diffuse.

We are invited to understand the transformative effects of such sleeper cells as products of their "training camps." On one hand, Cho's reference to "training camps" invokes Nancy Fraser's concept of subaltern counterpublics. Fraser theorizes counterpublics as "discursive arenas" of which one function is to serve as "bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics" (Fraser, 1992, p.124). Like counterpublics, Cho's sleeper cell is a "discursive arena," formed in opposition to the hate mail Cho publicized. In this case, participation in a sleeper cell it is not contingent upon one's identity but a shared commitment to battling social injustices. Unlike Fraser's counterpublics, though, the training camps inhabited by al-Gayda capitalize on the social imaginary of terrorism whose far reaching tentacles are "ever regenerating despite efforts to truncate" (Puar, p. xxiii). Unencumbered by dialogue, the discourse hailing from sleeper cells is imagined to halt hate speech and circulate continuously despite attempts to silence it.

As the controversy that was sparked by Margaret Cho's Bush/Hitler comment suggests, Cho's "symbolic assassin" has the potential to activate publics,

transforming captive audiences into rhetorical agents that contribute to the ongoing circulation of public discourse. If Cho's public performances are a nodal point for dissent, by stirring unrest and awakening from slumber fans and foes alike, it might serve the public well to likewise "stay and fight."

Notes

- 1 As it turns out, McCain's imperialist joke was not terribly original. Between 1980-1981, during the Iran hostage crisis, the band Vince Vance and the Valiants released the hit song "Bomb Iran," sung to the tune of "Barbara Ann." See "Just the Facts" at <http://www.vincevance.com/new/facts.html>.
- 2 The literature on the public sphere is vast as modifications to Jürgen Habermas' theory continue to emerge. The notion of a "public" I am invoking in this paper is the sense of a "public" as Michael Warner (2002) describes, one that "comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation" (p.66). This emphasis on circulation, the continued uptake of the discourse, makes a "public" different from an "audience" (as in a crowd witnessing a speech).
- 3 For a discussion of publics as agents of historical change, see Warner (2002, p.96-105). For a discussion of hope in publics, see Deem (2002).
- 4 For an insightful analysis of *I'm the One That I Want*, see Lee (2004).
- 5 In response to the media coverage of the 2007 shootings at Virginia Tech committed by a young Korean-born man, Cho has critiqued the racialization of crime. Without defending his actions, she attempts to destabilize the invisibility of whiteness: "When white people do something that is inexplicably awful, so brutally and horribly wrong, nobody says – 'do you think it is because he is white?' There are no headlines calling him the 'White shooter.' There is no mention of race because there is no thought in anyone's mind that his race had anything to do with his crime" (Cho, 2007).
- 6 Like Halberstam, DeLuca and Peoples (2002) leave open the rhetorical potential of media spectacles of violence in their analysis of media coverage of the 1999 WTO protests in Seattle.
- 7 The SLA also inspired some of the early work of Los Angeles based queer performance artist, Vaginal Davis, who portrayed a member of the fictional "Sexualese Liberation Army" (see Muñoz 1999, 98).
- 8 When signing papers for jail upon arrest, Hearst listed her profession as "urban guerilla" (Browder, 2006, 180).
- 9 This characterization of the SLA was used in a 1974 study about the organization that was released by the House Committee of Internal Security, a standing committee of the U.S. House of Representatives (formerly the House Un-American Activities Committee) (See House of Representatives, 1974, p. 1).
- 10 As Puar (2007) notes, "guerillas and terrorists have vastly different national and racial valences, the former bringing to mind the phantasmatic landscapes of Central and South America, and the latter, the enduring legacy of Orientalist imaginaries" (xxiii). In a discussion of the queer aspects of terrorism post-9/11, Puar analyzes a photograph of a man dressed as Osama bin Laden holding a sign that states, "I am a homosexual also" (p. 12).
- 11 As of this writing, the hate mail is still posted on Cho's official website. See www.margarecho.com/attacks_from_the_right.htm
- 12 Cho's response is similar to a T-shirt circulating among the left circa 2004 to oppose the anti-terrorism practices authorized by the Homeland Security Office, which was created after the events of September 11, 2001. The T-shirt features an antique photograph of Native Americans wielding guns and a caption that states, "Fighting Terrorism Since 1492." Displayed above the photograph are the words "Homeland Security." Like Cho's retort, such slogans are designed to challenge the national valences of terrorism and land proprietorship.
- 13 See Hauser and Grim (2003) and the special issue of *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* devoted to the 2004 presidential election, which assesses the quality of public sphere politics in the face of U.S.

nationalism and the war on terror since 9/11 (Parry- Giles and Parry-Giles 2005).

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