

## IDEOLOGIES OF LEGITIMATE MOCKERY: MARGARET CHO'S REVOICINGS OF MOCK ASIAN<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This article examines a Korean American comedian's use of *Mock Asian* and the ideologies that legitimate this racializing style. These ideologies of legitimacy depend on assumptions about the relationship between communities, the authentication of a speaker's community membership, and the nature of the interpretive frame that has been "keyed". Specifically, her Mock Asian depends on and, to some extent, reproduces particular ideological links between race, nation, and language despite the apparent process of ideological subversion. Yet her use of stereotypical Asian speech is not a straightforward instance of racial crossing, given that she is 'Asian' according to most racial ideologies in the U.S. Consequently, while her use of Mock Asian may necessarily reproduce mainstream American racializing discourses about Asians, she is able to simultaneously decontextualize and deconstruct these very discourses. This article suggests that it is her successful authentication as an Asian American comedian, particularly one who is critical of Asian marginalization in the U.S., that legitimizes her use of Mock Asian and that yields an interpretation of her practices primarily as a critique of racist mainstream ideologies.

**Keywords:** Asian American, Race, Ideology, Humor, Performance

### 1. Introduction

In elementary schoolyards across the U.S., children of perceived East Asian descent are reminded of their racial otherness through ostensibly playful renderings of an imagined variety of American English frequently referred to as a 'Chinese accent'. This variety, which I call *Mock Asian* in this paper, is a discourse that indexes a stereotypical Asian identity. While there is no such language variety called *Asian*, I use the label *Mock Asian* in order to emphasize the racializing nature of this stereotypical discourse. Its potential semiotics is similar to that of Mock Spanish, which Jane Hill (1998) identifies as the legitimized use of "disorderly" Spanish by whites in public spaces.

But relative to Mock Spanish, which is found in various public domains from advertisements and greeting cards to political speeches and newscasts (Hill 1998), voicings of Mock Asian are less common, perhaps because of the more overtly racist implications of this variety. Some 'well-meaning' non-Asian adults might utter a *nihao* or *konnichiwa* towards a racial Asian they encounter on the street, but it is less common - at least in public spaces - for them to voice the kind of Mock Asian taunts that children

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use to overtly mark Asian racial ‘difference’. The explicitness with which this language style marks racial otherness, in contrast to the more common incorporation of Mock Spanish into a Mainstream American English (MAE) speaker’s “own” linguistic repertoire, may partially account for the relative infrequency of Mock Asian in mainstream American contexts.<sup>2</sup>

Certain contexts outside childhood play, however, do license the circulation of this particular stereotypical discourse. This paper addresses one of these contexts - namely, the comedy performances of Margaret Cho, a Korean American comedian. By discussing several excerpts from one of her performances, during which she employs Mock Asian, I describe some of the ideologies that legitimate her use of this racializing style. These *ideologies of legitimacy* depend on assumptions about the relationship between communities, the authentication of a speaker’s community membership, and the nature of the interpretive frame that has been “keyed” (Goffman 1974). To understand these ideologies beyond the context of her performances, I juxtapose her performance with two controversial Mock Asian incidents that occurred in the U.S. in recent years. As I will illustrate, the meanings that Cho’s linguistic practices convey are multiple and emergent, and her legitimacy to employ Mock Asian is negotiated by both ‘members’ and ‘non-members’ of variously defined communities. Central to this negotiation are the differentials of power to either claim or name those who belong and those who do not.

Rather than attempt to label Cho’s practices as exclusively either racist or subversive, I seek to understand the multiple meanings of a linguistic practice that is sometimes controversial. Her Mock Asian depends on and, to some extent, reproduces particular ideological links between race, nation, and language despite the apparent process of ideological subversion, or the *deauthentication* of social and linguistic identities (Coupland 2001a, 2001b). Bucholtz (1999) and Hill (1998) have similarly shown how the appropriation of non-white language by European Americans, known as racial “crossing” (Rampton 1995), may reproduce ideologies that uphold the superiority of whiteness, the stereotypical masculinity of blackness, and the stereotypical moral inferiority of brownness. Yet Cho’s use of stereotypical Asian speech is not a straightforward instance of racial crossing, given that she is a comedian who is ‘Asian’ according to most racial ideologies in the U.S. In other words, she engages in racial crossing practices without symbolically crossing racial boundaries herself, performing the speech of a *racialized other* who is not necessarily a *racial other*. Consequently, while Cho’s use of Mock Asian may necessarily reproduce mainstream American racializing discourses about Asians, she is able to simultaneously decontextualize and deconstruct these very discourses. I suggest that it is her successful authentication as an Asian American comedian, particularly one who is critical of Asian marginalization in the U.S., that legitimizes her use of Mock Asian and that yields an interpretation of her practices primarily as a critique of racist mainstream ideologies.

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<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that Mock Spanish is not often racist - and sometimes overtly so. The point being made here is that Mock Asian is often *understood* by Mainstream American English (MAE) speakers and listeners as “more racist” than typical voicings of Mock Spanish.

## **2. Margaret Cho's comedy performances as a site for sociolinguistic analysis**

Humor in interaction has long been of interest in sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropological research, yet humorous performances in the public realm, or comedy performances, have less often been the focus of analysis. Woolard's (1987, 1998) examination of Catalan-Castilian codeswitching by a professional comedian in Barcelona and Jaffe's (2000) analysis of hybrid forms of Corsican and French used by professional comedians in Corsica are notable exceptions, and both provide important insights for the present analysis (see also Labrador, this issue). Sociolinguists have traditionally been concerned with the analysis of linguistic tokens that are 'authentic' (Bucholtz 2003), both in the sense of their 'natural' and 'everyday' occurrence and their representation of 'core' members of a particular community (Coupland 2001a). Consequently, stage performances by comedians might be viewed as fundamentally 'inauthentic'; the socially marked setting in which they occur is hardly mundane, comedic language practices are highly performative, and a comedian, by nature of how she makes a living, is not likely to be a 'typical' member of the kinds of communities that have been of sociolinguistic interest.

More recently, however, there exists a growing recognition that even everyday uses of language involve performances, projections, or acts of identity (e.g., Bauman and Briggs 1990; Bucholtz (this issue); Le Page 1980). Studies of how language is stylized by speakers (e.g., Coupland 2001b; Rampton 1995), have placed particular emphasis on the centrality of performance in discourse. While less common than studies of the everyday, studies of performance in popular culture have also drawn the attention of sociolinguistics scholars, such as Barrett's (1995) examination of style-shifting by African American drag queens performing on stage, Coupland's (2001a, 2001b) studies of dialect stylization in radio and television broadcasts, and Ervin-Tripp's (2001) analysis of style-switching by two African American leaders during the civil rights movement.

As these analyses of performances in popular culture have shown, even highly conscious performances constitute sites for investigating many of the issues that sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists have generally been interested in. For instance, one of the common goals of this line of research is to understand the ways in which language practices both reflect and reproduce identities. A speaker's identity, or the way in which a speaker positions herself within ideologies that organize the social world, is constituted by her practices, which in turn are constituted by her membership in particular communities (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992). I assume in this paper that performances such as Cho's depend on the same ideologies of community membership and language practice that speakers depend on in their everyday contexts; such congruency is necessary for her audiences to interpret her practices as humorous and, more importantly, as legitimate.

In addition, like other figures in U.S. popular culture, Cho not only depends on a set of ideologies about practice and identity that she shares with her audience, but she also contributes to, and sometimes contests, their reproduction in ways that everyday speakers may not be able to. For instance, her performances have been recorded in various media formats (two films on DVD, three CDs, and numerous sound files on the internet), she has published an autobiography (Cho 2001a) that incorporates a large portion of her performed material, her television sitcom *All-American Girl*, which aired for one season in 1994-1995, drew - albeit loosely - from her earlier performances, and

her recent tours have generated numerous magazine and newspaper articles. While she is predominantly popular within Asian American and gay and lesbian communities in the U.S., revoicings of her practices likely circulate beyond them.

Comedy performances, such as Cho's, then constitute prototypical examples of how verbal texts not only incorporate and rely on various discourses and ideologies but also how they subsequently become the springboard for new practices and ideological perspectives. In other words, such performances are characterized by "entextualization" (Bauman and Briggs 1990) *par excellence*, whereby the displayed discourse becomes an extractable text. Through this process, texts such as Mock Asian are decontextualized and recontextualized (Bauman and Briggs 1990), providing meanings that move beyond those of the original text. As texts are transported by speakers through different temporal, spatial, and ideological contexts, they may be subject to varying interpretations. A single text can thus have a *multiplicity* of meanings, via both its historical links to past contexts as well as its links to contemporary and competing ideologies. In this paper, I identify some of the specific ideologies that are present in Cho's performances, in addition to the "voices" (Bakhtin 1981) that she animates and the particular stance, or "footing" (Goffman 1981), that she takes with respect to these voices.

### 3. Ideologies of legitimate mockery

Implicit in a view of language as a tool for performing identity is the notion that speakers are agents who make choices. These choices are constrained, however, by a speaker's *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977), or embodied dispositions that are both the product of the prior repetition of practices as well as the *source* of subsequent action. Researchers have additionally noted constraints that may exist within interactions, such as the speaker's relationship with her audience (Bell 1984; Giles and Smith 1979), her motivation to establish particular relationships with her interlocutors (Myers-Scotton 1993) or with social groups that she identifies with (Le Page 1980), her access to the groups whose features she seeks to employ, her ability to analyze these features, and her ability to modify her own behavior (Le Page 1980). The identification of such constraints has contributed to the understanding that speakers have agency, but that their choices are influenced by social and linguistic structures.

This paper addresses another dimension of constraint on language use. Specifically, it focuses on ideologies within mainstream U.S. discourses that define particular voicings of *mock language* (Hill 1998) - namely, Mock Asian - as legitimate. Although I deal with discourses within the U.S., the ideologies described here may mirror those found in contexts outside the U.S. In addition, although this paper addresses the specific phenomenon of mock language, the analysis of language, legitimacy, power, and community membership may be generalized to stylization practices more generally. Comparisons of mock language practices to the related practices of cultural appropriation, borrowing, and emulation - along various axes of social identity - will likely lead to a richer analysis of how movements of symbols across social boundaries are interpreted by both members and non-members of particular communities.

While I have referred to these ideologies of legitimacy as "constraints" on language use, I wish to present these ideologies not as predictive of action but as frames

for understanding the multiple and emergent meanings of action. Rather than *forecasting* practices, I seek to understand how we *interpret* the meanings of practices, because even practices that defy particular conventional expectations - such as crossing (Rampton 1995) - are socially meaningful. Given the simultaneous existence of competing ideologies that legitimate language practices, a single act is likely to abide by particular constraints - thus being perceived as *legitimate* - while violating others - thus being *illegitimate, but still socially relevant*, acts. In addition, by viewing the relationship between ideology and practice *not* as mechanistically and uni-directionally predictive, I draw attention to the ways in which practices not only reflect ideologies but also reproduce and contest them.

#### 4. Abercrombie and Shaq: Two Mock Asian incidents

As useful examples for comparison and as illustrations of the ways in which the ideologies relevant to Cho's Mock Asian extend beyond the immediate context of her performance, I bring to this discussion two recent incidents involving the use of Mock Asian. Both provoked extensive discussion within Asian American communities. The first case ignited in April 2002, when Abercrombie & Fitch, a popular American clothing company for adolescents and young adults, introduced a new line of t-shirts depicting Asians and Asian speech as objects of mockery. One t-shirt read, "Wong Brother's Laundry Service: Two Wongs can make it white," referring to the stereotypical association between Asians and the service industry, as well as playing on the stereotypical difficulty for Asians to pronounce the /r/ phoneme of American English. Specifically, by structural parallelism with the saying "Two wrongs don't make a right," *wrong* is contrasted with *Wong* and *right* is contrasted with *white*. These t-shirts generated widespread protest and discussion among Asian Americans on college campuses and in virtual communities across the U.S., despite the claim by a company representative that they had been designed to appeal to "Asians" (Strasburg 2002) by being "cheeky, irreverent and funny" (O'Sullivan 2002). However, the vast majority of Asian Americans who chose to publicly voice their opinion on the issue remained critical of the clothing company and supported a nationwide boycott. The day after the protesting began, the company pulled the shirts from its shelves.

The following winter, Shaquille "Shaq" O'Neal, the star center for the Los Angeles Lakers, faced relatively subdued critique for his Mock Asian performance directed towards Yao Ming, a rookie center from Mainland China. Six months after O'Neal appeared on cable television in June 2002 remarking, "Tell Yao Ming, *ching-chong-yang-wah-ah-soh*," a national sports radio program repeatedly played a recording of O'Neal's taunt and "invited listeners and radio commentators to call in jokes making racist fun of Chinese" (Tang 2003). Within days, a series of articles appeared in newspapers and on internet sites, condemning his actions. As in the Abercrombie & Fitch case, arguments in his defense sited the humor that was intended, and O'Neal himself stated, "Those people who know me know I have a sense of humor. . . I would never seriously say something derogatory to people. . . I apologize that some people don't have a sense of humor like I do. Because when I did it, the whole room laughed. It's nothing personal. But to say I'm racist against Asians is crazy" (Beck 2003). In addition to his own assertion that he was not racist, his close acquaintances were "quick to point out [that] the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored

People] [had] recently honored O’Neal with its Young Leaders Award” (Ford 2003). As will be discussed below, Shaq’s defenders attempted to recontextualize his remarks by pointing to his purported record of commitment to racial justice, validated by the recognition bestowed upon him by an institution that has close historical links with the civil rights movement.

## 5. Features of Mock Asian

The two examples discussed above involve the use of Mock Asian features that are widely circulated in mainstream American contexts as stereotypical of Asians attempting to speak English and of Asians speaking an Asian language. The table below lists other Mock Asian features<sup>3</sup> that, like those employed by O’Neal and Abercrombie & Fitch, explicitly index Asian speech. Mock Asian jokes told by American children (e.g., *How do Chinese people name their kids? They throw spoons down a staircase.*), including Asian American children, are often the vehicle via which knowledge of these features circulates.

### (1) Prototypical features of Mock Asian<sup>4</sup>

	DESCRIPTION OF MOCK ASIAN FEATURE	EXAMPLES AND COMMENTS
<b>Phonological features</b>		
1.	Neutralization of the phonemic distinction between /r/ and /w/	[ɹ]→[w], <i>wrong</i> pronounced as <i>wong</i> , <i>right</i> pronounced as <i>white</i>
2.	Neutralization of the phonemic distinction between /r/ and /l/	[ɹ]→[l] <i>fried rice</i> pronounced as <i>flid lice</i> [l]→[ɹ] <i>Eileen</i> pronounced as <i>Irene</i> , <i>like</i> pronounced as <i>rike</i> , <i>hello</i> pronounced as <i>hero</i>
3.	Alveolarization of voiceless interdental fricative ‘th’ [θ] to [s]	<i>thank you</i> pronounced as <i>sank you</i> , <i>I think so</i> pronounced as <i>I sink so</i>
4.	Nonsensical syllables with the onset ‘ch’ /tʃ/	<b>ching-chong, chow</b>
5.	Nonsensical syllables with the coda ‘ng’ /ŋ/	<b>ching-chong, ting, ping</b>
6.	Alternating high-low intonational contour; one tone for each syllable	H      L      H      L <i>ching – chong – ching – chong</i>
7.	Epenthetic ‘ee’ [i] at the end of a closed word.	<i>break-ee, buy-ee, look-ee</i>
8.	Reduplication of word	<i>pee-pee</i> ; not unique to Mock Asian
<b>Lexical features</b>		
9.	Phrase-final <i>how</i>	<b>ching-chong-how</b>
10.	<i>ah-so::</i> [aso:]: low tone for initial syllable;	

<sup>3</sup> The listed features are based on impressionistic descriptions by Asian and non-Asian students and friends with whom I have discussed the issue of Mock Asian.

<sup>4</sup> In addition to the linguistic features listed above, there exist other semiotic resources that index a stereotypical Asian identity in similar ways. These features include (1) gestures, such as a prayer bow, bucktoothed expression, pulling up the end of eyes to create a “slant-eyed” look, and various martial arts stances; (2) non-linguistic sounds, such as the following jingle that often “introduces” Asian characters in American films:



and (3) scripts or word processing fonts, such as the following.:

Wanton, Chow fun, CHINESE TAKEAWAY, 吃人肉, KARATE, BAMBOO

	high-low falling tone for final syllable; final syllable lengthening; backing of /o/; optional interdentalization to [θ] of voiceless alveolar fricative /s/; optional creaky voice at the end of the word.	<i>ah - so:::</i> <i>ah - tho:::</i>
11.	<i>hai-YAH!</i> [hāi:ya] Initial syllable: low-high rising intonation; syllable lengthening Final syllable: high-low falling intonation; explosive, increased amplitude.	Associated with martial arts; final syllable often accompanied by a “karate chop,” or a quick, one-handed, downward movement of open-palmed hand (pinky first, palm and back of hand horizontally aligned, fingers extended and parallel to one another).
12.	<i>OOOoooOOh</i> [o:::]: high pitched; nasal airflow; high-low-high intonation; creaky voice on low tone; backing of /o/ (through exaggerated lip-rounding and lengthening of oral cavity); variations with different vowel qualities exist.	Associated with martial arts; usually accompanied by gestures that simulate “kung fu moves.”
<b>Syntactic Features</b>		
13.	Neutralization of nominative-accusative case distinction for first person singular pronoun	<i>Me so horny; Me Chinese, me play joke, me put pee-pee in your coke</i> ; not unique to Mock Asian
14.	Reduplication of two-word sentence structure	<i>You breakee, you buyee</i>
15.	Telegraphic speech (absence of grammatical morphemes)	<i>You breakee, you buyee; Long time no see</i> ; not unique to Mock Asian

The features listed above are often consciously employed and interpreted as prototypical Mock Asian features; they index a stereotypical Asianness that unambiguously mocks Asians, rather than being characteristic of “realistic” impersonations of Asian speech. While professional comedians and actors who perform a “Chinese accent” sometimes draw from some of the features listed in the above table, as professional performers, they also often engage in more subtle linguistic practices that audience members recognize as “Chinese” or “Oriental” without necessarily being able to reproduce these features. These comedians and actors commonly use a variety of other Mock Asian features in their revoicings of real and imagined Asians for the purpose of “sounding Asian.” Speakers’ and listeners’ knowledge of these practices tend to be less conscious, and thus these practices are less likely the subject of metalinguistic commentary than the prototypical features shown above. The table below, which has been based on several Mock Asian examples appearing in two of Margaret Cho’s performances (*Drunk with Power* (Cho 1996) and *I’m the One that I Want* (Cho 2001b)), provides a general catalog of such features. While some may be unique to Cho’s performance style (e.g., particular pitch, amplitude, and tempo modulations), many are present in other comedic performances of Mock Asian, from Mickey Rooney’s caricature of a Japanese landlord in the film *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (1961) to Kyle McCulloch’s portrayal of a Chinese “houseboy” in the internet cartoon series *Mr. Wong* (2001).

As I have indicated in the rightmost column of the table below, some of the features were employed by Cho to portray the accent of speakers of specific ethnicities (*Chinese, Japanese, Korean*) or idiosyncratic features of a specific person (*Cho’s mother*).<sup>5</sup> Some of the features were used to represent both an imagined Asian of an

<sup>5</sup> I have used the general label “Korean” for features that “Cho’s mother” shares with other Korean characters in Cho’s revoicings. This categorization is also based on my knowledge of Korean phonology.

unstated Asian ethnicity in addition to portraying a speaker of a specific ethnicity (*Asian and Chinese, Asian and Korean*, etc.). However, if the features were used to portray speakers identified by Cho as Chinese, Japanese, and Korean as well as an unspecified Asian ethnicity, the phrase *all ethnicities* appears in the comments column. With a wider range of examples, a greater number of features might have been labeled as such. In other words, while the table below suggests that some features may be used in ethnicity-specific ways, we may find that Cho uses some of these features in non-ethnicity-specific ways in segments that have not been analyzed here.<sup>6</sup> In addition, comedians other than Cho, particularly those who are not as keen to the variations between various Asian accents, may merge these features in their revoicing of an Asian speaker of any ethnicity. Finally, the audience's interpretation of these features must be considered as well. Interestingly, while Cho often skillfully makes ethnic distinctions in her uses of Mock Asian, those members of her audience who are not familiar with any particular Asian accent likely interpret these features as indices of a monolithic racial Asian identity.

## (2) Features of Mock Asian in Cho's performances

	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLES	COMMENTS
<i>Phonetic features</i>			
16.	Guttural, pharyngealized voice	I am <i>no: chicken!</i> <b>YOUR EYE IS TOO BIG!</b>	Asian, Chinese, Korean
17.	High pitch	I am <i>no: chicken!</i> <b>YOUR EYE IS TOO BIG!</b>	Chinese, Korean
18.	Low pitch	<i>You are so dykey.</i>	Cho's mother
19.	Creaky voice	<i>When I was a little girl. . .</i>	Korean; impoverished character.
20.	Soft falsetto voice	<i>When I was young, I was raised on rice and fish.</i>	Korean; feminine persona.
<i>Phonological features: Prosodic</i>			
21.	Final syllable lengthening	<i>order number fou:::::r</i>	Asian, Chinese, Korean
22.	Emphatic lengthening	<i>WHY IS YOUR EYE IS SO:: BIG</i>	Asian, Korean
23.	Syllable-timed rhythm	<i>What is your mem ber ship num ber?</i>	Asian, Chinese, Korean
24.	Sudden rising and falling intonation	H L H H L H H L <i>What is your membership number</i>	Chinese, Korean
25.	Increased amplitude	<b>YOUR EYE IS TOO BIG!</b>	Asian, Korean
26.	Explosive stressed syllables	<i>My~way~or~the~highway.</i>	Chinese
27.	Increased tempo	<i>My~way~or~the~highway.</i>	Chinese

<sup>6</sup> Cho's intended ethnic portrayal is not always apparent. For example, when she satirizes herself as a subservient girl (Example 8), it is not clear whether she is constructing herself as "Asian" or specifically "Korean." In this case, I have assumed the specific ethnic category - that is, "Korean" and not "Asian" - because the features that she uses in this particular segment largely overlap with those that she employs for clearly Korean portrayals, such as when she performs her mother's character.



28.	Decreased tempo	<i>When I was a little girl. . .</i>	Korean; impoverished character.
<b>Phonological features: Vowel quality</b>			
29.	Monophthongization	<i>I don't know</i> [aî doun? nôu] → [aî don no]	All ethnicities
30.	[ə]→non-reduced vowel	<i>America</i> [əmeɪɪkə] → [ameɪɪka]	Asian, Japanese, Korean
31.	[ɪ]→[i]	<i>chicken</i> [tʃɪkɪn] → [tʃikɪn]	All ethnicities
32.	[ɛ]→[e]	<i>forget</i> [foɪget] → [foget]	Chinese, Korean
33.	[æ]→[e]	<i>have</i> [hæv] → [hebe]	Cho's mother
34.	[æ]→[ɛ]	<i>paddy</i> [pʰæɾi] → [pʰɛdi]	Asian, Japanese, Korean
35.	[ʊ]→[ʌ]	<i>world</i> [wuɹɪd] → [wʌrl]	Cho's mother
36.	[ʊ]→[u]	<i>beautiful</i> [bʲʊɾɪfʊɪ] → [bʲʊɾɪfʊl]	Cho's mother
37.	/o/-backing	<i>so</i> [so] → [sɔ]	Asian, Korean
38.	[ɑ]→[o]	<i>talk</i> [tʰɑk] → [tʰɔk]	Cho's mother
39.	[ɑ]→[ʌ]	<i>want</i> [want] → [wʌn]	Korean
40.	[ɑ]→[a]	<i>Mommy</i> [mami] → [mami]	Japanese, Korean
<b>Phonological features: Consonant quality</b>			
41.	Interdental alveolarization and de-frication	[ð ] → [d]: <i>this</i> [ðɪs] → [dis]; [θ ] → [t]: <i>with</i> [wɪθ] → [wɪt]	All ethnicities
42.	Interdentalization: [s] → [θ]	<i>high school</i> [haɪθku]	Asian
43.	Alveolarization: [θ] → [s]	<i>everything</i> [ɛvriθɪŋ] → [ɛbrɪsɪŋ]	Asian, Japanese, Korean
44.	[ɭ]→[ɹ]	<i>Lowell</i> [lowɭ] → [ɹowɭ] <i>Godzilla</i> [gɔdzɪɹə] → [gɔzɪɹə]	Asian, Japanese
45.	Reduced retroflex [ɹ]	<i>really; malaria</i>	Korean
46.	[ɭ]→[w]	<i>tall</i> [tɔɭ] → [tɔʷ]	Asian, Chinese
47.	[ɭ]→[ə]	<i>else</i> [ɛɭs] → [eəs]	Chinese, Korean
48.	[ɭ]→[l]	<i>really</i>	Korean
49.	Final nasal velarization	<i>one</i> [wʌn] → [wʌŋ]	Japanese
50.	Absence of flapping	<i>little</i> [lɪɾɭ] → [lɪtʰɭ]	Korean
51.	Trilled /r/	<i>Struthers</i> [stɹʌðəɹz] → [strʌdʌ]	Korean
52.	Increased aspiration	<i>cool</i> [kʰuɭ] → [kʰʰuɭ]	Korean
53.	Aspiration as uvular frication	<i>talk</i> [tʰɑk] → [tʰɔk]	Cho's mother
54.	Labial de-frication: [v] → [b]	<i>everywhere</i> [ɛvɹɪweɹ] → [ɛbiwe]	Cho's mother
55.	Bilabial dentalization	<i>Mommy</i> [mami] → [mɔmi]	Cho's mother
56.	Non-glottalization	<i>white man</i> [waɪʔ mæn] → [waɪt mæn]	Cho's mother
57.	De-labialization	<i>quickly</i> [kʷɪkli] → [kɪkli]	Korean
58.	Uvularization of /h/	<i>hungry</i> [hʌŋgɹɪ] → [χʌŋgɹɪ]	Korean

59.	Gemination	<i>money</i> [mʌni] → [mʌnni]	Korean
<b>Phonological features: Syllable structure</b>			
60.	Coda /r/-deletion	<i>order number four</i> [ɔɹdər nʌmbər fɔɹ] → [ɔdə nʌmbər fə]	All ethnicities
61.	Coda /l/-deletion	<i>Lowell</i> [lɔwɫ] → [lɔ:]	Asian
62.	Coda /d/-deletion	<i>fried rice</i> [fɹaɪdɹaɪs] → [fɹaɪɹaɪ] <i>Godzilla</i> [gədʒɪlə] → [gəzɪɹa]	Asian, Chinese
63.	Coda /s/-deletion	<i>fried rice</i> [fɹaɪdɹaɪs] → [fɹaɪɹaɪ] <i>like this</i> [laɪk ðɪs] → [laɪk ðɪ]	Asian, Chinese
64.	Coda /z/-deletion	<i>Struthers</i> [stɹʌðəɹz] → [stɹʌdʌ]	Korean
65.	/n/-deletion and preceding vowel nasalization	<i>substitution</i> [sʌbstətʊʃn] → [sʌbsətʊʃə]	Chinese
66.	Schwa epenthesis to closed syllable	<i>if</i> [ɪf] → [ɪfə]; <i>have</i> [hæv] → [həbə]	Japanese, Korean
67.	Glottal stop epenthesis	<i>with anything else</i> [wɪθ ɛniθɪŋ ɛɪs] → [wɪt ʔɛniθɪŋ ʔeɪ]	Chinese
68.	Onset simplification	<i>substitution</i> [sʌbstətʊʃn] → [sʌbsətʊʃə]	Chinese
69.	Coda simplification	<i>It's</i> [ɪts] → [ɪs]	Cho's mother
<b>Syntactic features</b>			
70.	Absence of copula	<i>You Øtoo tall; You Øgay.</i>	Asian, Korean
71.	3 <sup>rd</sup> -person –s verbal morpheme deletion	<i>That mean you gay.</i>	Asian, Korean
72.	Past/present neutralization	<i>I grow up on the rice paddy; I come to America.</i>	Japanese, Korean
73.	Absence of articles	<i>Because that is Øvery good way to lose weight; I want Øeggroll.</i>	Chinese, Korean
74.	Singular-plural neutralization	<i>Only gay screen call.</i>	Korean
75.	Simple negation with 'no'	<i>I am no chicken.</i>	Korean
<b>Lexical features</b>			
76.	<i>Wah</i> [h <sup>w</sup> a: : ] 'wow!'		Cho's mother
<b>Discourse features</b>			
77.	Repetition	<i>Hi, it's Mommy. Hi, it's Mommy. Hi, it's Mommy. Hi, it's Mommy.</i>	Asian, Japanese, Korean
78.	Absence of contraction	<i>What do you mean I am fucking cock? I am not a rooster. I am no chicken.</i>	Korean
79.	3 <sup>rd</sup> -person for self-reference	<i>Why don't you talk to Mommy about it?</i>	Cho's mother
80.	Miscomprehension of English	<i>What do you mean I am fucking cock? I am not a rooster. I am no chicken.</i>	Chinese, Korean
81.	Sociolinguistically awkward language use	<i>Hi, it's Mommy. Hi it's—Don't marry a white man!</i>	Chinese, Korean

## 6. Mocking as social privilege

While the previous section suggests that different sets of features are typically deployed by different kinds of speakers - for example, a child as opposed to a professional comedian - the public revoicing of Mock Asian features in general is legitimated by

similar ideologies. One ideology of legitimacy that permits Mock Asian in some public contexts, such as those described above, licenses those in positions of power to revoice stereotypical discourses of those in less powerful positions.<sup>7</sup> As noted by Hill (1998), such stereotyping language practices not only typically derogate the speakers who are mocked, but also simultaneously elevate the personas of those who do the mocking. And like Hill, the many Asian Americans who voiced protest against Abercrombie & Fitch pointed to the racism inherent in those who benefit from this privilege (e.g., Chin 2002). The company's use of Mock Asian on its t-shirts was widely interpreted as a privileged white representation of a relatively powerless racial group. Such an interpretation is likely a consequence of the fact that Abercrombie & Fitch is a U.S. corporation that gears its clothing to a predominantly European American middle-to-upper-class market, thus having popular associations with 'middle-class whiteness'.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Shaquille O'Neal, while African American, was likely viewed by his critics as abusing his privileged status as a famous basketball star and as unquestionably 'American', in contrast to immigrants from Asia to whom Mock Asian is ideologically linked.<sup>9</sup>

Margaret Cho's Mock Asian might be similarly interpreted. Not unlike uses of Mock Asian by non-Asians, her humor derives at least partially from an implied comical character of Asian Americans who cannot speak English without a 'foreign accent'. In the following example, taken from *Drunk with Power*, a 1996 recording of one of her live performances in a club in San Francisco (Cho 1996), she initially utters "Lowell High School" with a Mainstream American English (MAE) pronunciation and then replaces the pronunciation of "Lowell" with "Rowell" [ɾowɛɫ] in a Mock Asian style that is marked by a low, guttural voice, monophthongal and backed /o/ vowels, the interdentalization of /s/, a coda-less syllable structure, syllable-timed rhythm, explosive stressed syllables, and an increased tempo for particular strings of words (lines 3, 6, 8, 10).

### (3) "Lowell High School"<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Davies (1987) has similarly argued that, cross-culturally, cultures in dominant positions tend to poke fun at those in less dominant ones.

<sup>8</sup> In fact, in June 2003, several Latinos and Asian Americans who were once employed by Abercrombie & Fitch sued the company for racial discrimination in its hiring practices. According to the plaintiffs in the lawsuit, the "[Abercrombie & Fitch] look. . . is overwhelmingly white, judging from the low percentage of minority members who work on the sales floor and from the company's posters and quarterly magazine, which overwhelmingly featured white models" (Kong 2003).

<sup>9</sup> As Keith Walters has commented (personal communication), O'Neal's use of Mock Asian also constructs a particular kind of urban masculinity. In addition, his attempt at a playful insult may relate to the verbal practice of "signification" that sociolinguists describe as characteristic of African American discourse.

<sup>10</sup> Transcription conventions adapted from Goodwin (1990):

<b>word</b>	Focus of discussion
—	Sudden cut-off
<i>word</i>	Emphasis (pitch, amplitude)
wo:rd	Lengthening
.	Falling contour
?	Rising contour
((comment))	Transcription comments
WORD	Increased volume
(h)	Breathiness, laughter

- 1 I-I was *raised* in San Francisco. I went to Lowell High School.
- 2 ((A few cheers from audience))
- 3 or uh **Rowell** High School.
- 4 ((Audience laughs))
- 5 Such a *hu:ge* Asian population that they dispensed with the L altogether.
- 6 **Ro—Ro:: I~go~to Ro:: High~School.** [ɔ̃ ɔ̃ ɔ̃:: aĩ go t<sup>h</sup>u ɔ̃ ɔ̃:: haĩθku] ((Mock Asian style: low guttural “samurai” voice after first word; monophthongization in ‘go’; backed /o/ in ‘Lowell’ and ‘go’; [s] to [θ] in ‘School’; [l] to [ɭ] in ‘Lowell’; coda /l/-deletion in ‘Lowell’ and ‘School’; syllable-timed rhythm; explosive stressed syllables; increased tempo for ‘I go to’ and ‘High School’))
- 7 ((Audience laughs))
- 8 **Ro:: High.** ((Low guttural voice))
- 9 ((Audience laughs))
- 10 **Ro:** ((Low guttural voice))
- 11 Great school. I was expelled. ((MAE style))

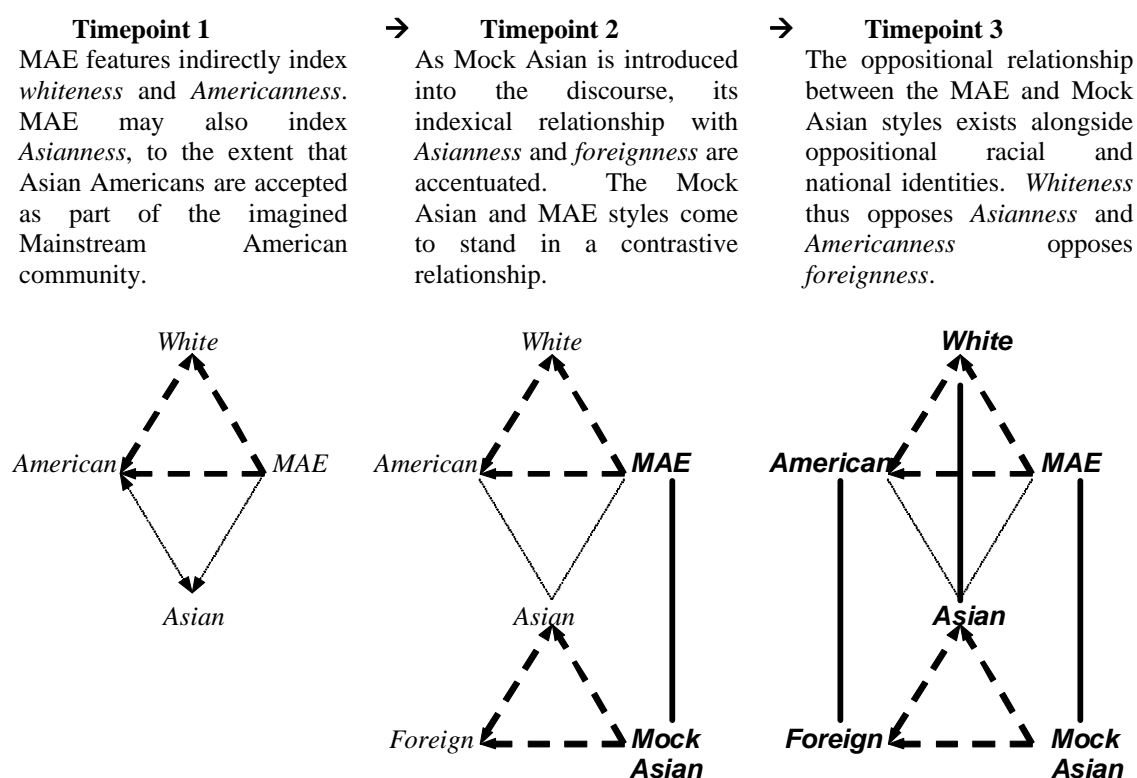
The paradigmatic shift from MAE phonology (line 1) to one in which the /l/ and /r/ phonemes are confused (line 3) highlights the Mock Asian pronunciation, as do the six repetitions thereafter (lines 6, 8, 10). From the perspective of a linguist who is familiar with the non-native English spoken by those who speak Japanese natively, Cho’s Mock Asian might appear to most closely approximate a ‘Japanese accent’, given that neither an /l/ phoneme nor an [l] allophone exists in the Japanese phonemic inventory. Japanese non-native speakers of English often use a trilled [r] where MAE speakers use either a retroflex /r/ or liquid /l/. While I am suggesting that the replacement of /l/ with /r/ is sometimes characteristic of a ‘Japanese accent’, Americans who do not know Japanese or any dialects of Chinese often associate such a stereotype with a ‘Chinese accent’, or Mock Asian, which is associated with all racial East Asians. An interpretation of Cho’s shift to /r/ as ‘Asian’ requires the elision of various Asian ethnicities, supporting a mainstream ideology that *all Asians look and therefore sound alike*. The laughter that this use of Mock Asian generates likely results in part from the derisive nature of Mock Asian, which, like Mock Spanish, constructs the imagined speaker as comical.

### 6.1. Semiotics of Mock Asian as a racializing discourse

Cho’s humorous use of Mock Asian draws from a system of stylistic distinction (Irvine 2001) that indexes and constructs racial and national difference. Throughout her performances, Cho *authenticates* herself as a speaker of MAE - a particularly Californian variety - and *deauthenticates* (Coupland 2001a, 2001b) her use of ‘accented English’. While she is not white, she explicitly tells her audience that she was born and “raised in San Francisco” (line 1) - that is, not in Asia - and presents convincing linguistic ‘evidence’ that MAE, which she uses in linguistically unmarked segments of her performance, is her authentic variety. Cho’s audience accepts her use of Mock Asian as her *inauthentic* variety, as shown by its laughter; they undoubtedly ‘get’ the humorous meaning when she employs the mocking style in contrast to her authentic MAE. As the diagram in Figure 4 (Timepoint 1) below shows, her audience does not regard MAE to be linked exclusively to ‘whiteness’ (heavy, broken arrow), even though it may be more strongly associated with whiteness than any other racial identity. In

other words, mainstream racial and linguistic ideologies do allow for racial Asians born and raised in the U.S., like Cho, to speak MAE as their authentic variety (light arrow). In addition, given that MAE also indirectly indexes (Ochs 1992) an 'American' national identity, whiteness and Americanness are in a mutually constitutive relationship (two-headed arrow). Similarly, in most mainstream U.S. discourses of race and nation, Asianness and Americanness are also mutually constitutive categories (light two-headed arrow), although less saliently so than Americanness and whiteness are.

#### (4) Emergent indexical meanings of the Mock Asian style



However, the introduction of Mock Asian into the discourse highlights different indexical relations, and new meanings emerge. Mock Asian is a clearly racializing discourse with indexical links to both 'Asian' and 'foreign' ('non-American') identities, as shown in the bottom half of the diagram under Timepoint 2. The linguistic contrast between MAE and Mock Asian (illustrated by the vertical line connecting the two varieties), which Cho introduces when she voices Mock Asian, thus becomes indirectly indexical of the racial and national contrasts between 'White' and 'Asian' and 'American' and 'foreign', respectively, as illustrated in the diagram under Timepoint 3. The resulting oppositions between categories of language, nation, and race demonstrate a "fractal recursivity" that is characteristic of language ideologies (Irvine and Gal 2000). Importantly, such oppositions, while present as part of the ideological backdrop of many discourses in the U.S., emerge as relevant oppositions when Cho introduces Mock Asian into the ongoing discourse. I suggest that, as a result of the interactional salience of this set of linguistic, national, and racial oppositions, the links between an Asian racial identity and Americanness and MAE, which are present at Timepoint 1, become

less relevant to the discourse by Timepoint 3.<sup>11</sup> In other words, while Cho's audience continues to see Cho as simultaneously Asian, American, and a speaker of MAE, her alignment *with* those who take pleasure in making fun of Asians invokes the use of an interpretive frame used by those who view Asianness as being more closely linked to foreignness and a 'Chinese accent' than with Americanness and MAE.

In addition, these oppositions are hierarchically arranged within mainstream ideologies of race, nation, and language. Cho's audience sanctions re-voicings of the 'Asian accent' as acceptable - as a "strategy of condescension" (Bourdieu 1991) - because it knows that she can speak the more socially acceptable mainstream variety, just as Bourdieu has shown that an educated and urban French mayor, who can speak what is regarded as "good quality" French, may acceptably use the provincial variety of Bearnais. And just as a peasant who speaks only Bearnais would not be praised for using this local variety in a formal speech, a recent Japanese immigrant who uses a Japanese-accented English as her authentic discourse, would typically not be able to elevate her persona merely through her use of such accented English. The legitimacy that a MAE speaker has - regardless of her racial identity - to employ Mock Asian in public spaces as a means of elevating her persona parallels uses of Mock Spanish noted by Hill (1998). The legitimated performance of a debased racialized variety by a person who can speak the socially powerful one ultimately maintains the hierarchical relationship between the two racialized varieties.

Thus, while listeners apparently maintain an ideology of pluralistic acceptance of various races into the American landscape, their appreciation of Cho's humor hinges upon the crucial assumption that an acceptable American must speak 'without an accent' from the perspective of MAE speakers. Most recent immigrants would thus be excluded from this category because they are perceived by the mainstream as speaking 'with an accent'. Such immigrants are taken as being not acceptable Americans, but rather acceptable targets of mockery according to this ideology.

The example of O'Neal's Mock Asian provides a useful comparison. As mentioned earlier, his uncontested 'American' identity might, according to some, place him in a position of political privilege relative to immigrants and non-fluent speakers of English who, in legal and everyday contexts in the U.S., are often treated as second-class citizens. However, as an African American and speaker of a variety of African American English, he does not have clear links to a racial community that has historically oppressed Asians or immigrants.<sup>12</sup> The subdued nature of the critiques against O'Neal, relative to those against Abercrombie & Fitch, might have derived partly from his racial identity as an African American, absolving him of suspicions of racism, given the history of African Americans in this country.<sup>13 14</sup> Comments in

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<sup>11</sup> While the indexical link between Asianness and her Americanness become less relevant, it does not completely disappear, since the audience still regards Cho as American and Asian.

<sup>12</sup> While African Americans are not typically constructed as oppressing Asian immigrants in most mainstream discourses, discourses of racial conflict between African American customers and Korean immigrants storeowners are common (Bailey 1997; Bailey 2000).

<sup>13</sup> There are likely other reasons not mentioned in this paper that the public protest against Abercrombie & Fitch was greater than that against O'Neal, including the perception that corporate entities have historically engaged in oppressive practices and the belief that printed images and words on a t-shirt have the potential for circulation that spoken words may not.

<sup>14</sup> In contrast to the muted reaction against O'Neal's use of Mock Asian, New York Mets scout Bill Singer was fired in November 2003 after he directed "Mock Chinese" to a Chinese American assistant general manager, Kim Ng, of the Los Angeles Dodgers. It was generally assumed within the

O'Neal's defense that have appeared in newspaper articles suggest not only his membership but also his authentic and representative status within the African American community. For example, newspapers cited that the NAACP, an organization that has historically fought for the civil rights of African Americans, had officially recognized, or authenticated, his representative status in the community just days before the controversy.<sup>15</sup>

## 7. Mocking as self-deprecation

I have argued above that Cho may perpetuate racial and national hierarchies through her use of Mock Asian. Indeed, some of her critics have argued that her revoicings of Asian stereotypes cater to a racist, European American audience. However, mocking of this sort differs from mainstream "yellowface" depictions of Asians, given that Cho is Asian herself according to most racial ideologies that link particular phenotypical traits with racial categories. In one part of the performance, she alludes to the fact that her "race" is written on her body, when she notes that she does not need to pull up the edges of her eyes to stereotypically portray an Asian person whom she has just imitated.

### (5) "Doing this with my eyes"

- 1 I don't know why I'm doing this with my eyes ((While pulling up edges of eyes))
- 2 ((Audience laughs loudly))
- 3 I don't have to
- 4 ((Audience laughs))

Similarly, the audience's acceptance of her phenotypical authentication and thus her membership in the Asian racial community is evidenced in the following example. Members of her audience laugh as she performs a *linguistic* authentication of her race by explicitly stating that she is "Asian."

### (6) "Well, you see, I'm Asian"

- 1 You know what? I really lo:ve drinkin? (0.5) I(h)—it's *g(h)rea:t* you know and I never did it that much before? because um (0.5) ((alveolar click)) well you see I'm Asian? ((hyper-articulated style, slight breathiness)) ((light alveolar click))
- 2 ((Audience laughs lightly))
- 3 and uh when we *drink* we get all *red*.
- 4 ((Audience laughs lightly))

Cho's membership within an Asian racial community is obvious to her audience; her overt claim of her membership ("Well, you see I'm Asian" in line 1) is humorous because of its redundancy, and her audience likely recognizes that she keys a humorous frame by her use of alveolar clicks as well as a prosodic shift to a hyper-articulated

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mainstream media that his actions were unquestionably racist likely because of the general recognition of the racial privilege enjoyed by whites like Singer.

<sup>15</sup> Discourses that position victims of racism as necessarily non-racists do not remain uncontested in mainstream discourses, as evidenced by writers' references to O'Neal's association with Louis Farrakhan (e.g., Beck 2003; Brown 2003), a Muslim African American leader who was at the center of a controversy in the early 1990s after making anti-Semitic remarks.

style. Her use of the third-person pronoun “we” (line 3) to allude to this racial community positions her within this community, privy to knowledge sometimes unknown by out-group members.

According to a commonly held mainstream ideology in the U.S., mocking ‘one’s own’ is harmless - not racist - given that ‘native’ comedians neither are in a position nor would have the intention to oppress their own. In addition, in-group members are often viewed as conveying a more “truthful” and thus acceptable representation of their own community, as noted by Guy Aoki, the president of an organization that polices Asian American media representations:

If an Asian-American is making fun of its own community, I think that’s accepted because the audience sees some greater truth in it, like Margaret Cho imitating her Korean mother. But if it’s someone from outside the community who makes fun of a minority, there’s some suspicion there. If Margaret was to make a joke about blacks, people would feel more uncomfortable. (Justin 2002)

But it is also of interest that, in Example 6, by ‘having to explain’ the ‘fact’ that Asians cannot drink alcohol without “get[ting] all red” (line 3) she constructs her own community as distinct from - or at least not identical to - the racial community (or communities) of her audience.<sup>16</sup> In other words, just as Cho’s self-mockery is sanctioned by mainstream ideologies, so is an out-group’s public expression of enjoyment of that mocking.<sup>17</sup> Those who are not members of the community, however, may risk accusations of racism if they engage in the performance of Mock Asian.

A parallel ideological assumption is present in claims that the use of ethnic slurs is acceptable as long as the speaker can claim membership in the specific ethnic group labeled by the slur. Speakers are consequently licensed to mock stereotypical features commonly attributed to a community in which they can authenticate their membership. Cho, who is racially marked as Asian, is thus licensed to publicly use a style that out-group members have historically used to ridicule Asian social and linguistic ineptitude. In particular, those in a higher position on the racial hierarchy - for example, whites - are seen as potentially having the power to reproduce unequal relations of power. This is the operative ideology that restricts white-on-non-white mocking in many public contexts, while non-white-on-white mockery is often deemed as relatively more acceptable.

While such ideological assumptions might be rationalized as a means of censoring racist discourses by out-group members - European Americans in particular - licensing based on in-group membership also problematically elides differences between Asians and Asian Americans of various generational, national, class, gender, and sexual identities. As scholars in Asian American Studies have noted, the essentialism that Asians and Asian Americans perpetuate by identifying as ‘Asian American’, while often necessary and strategic for political empowerment, risks the

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<sup>16</sup> The audiences at the two shows I attended in Austin, Texas in 2002 and 2003 appeared ethnically diverse, although more than half of each of the audiences was European American, based on my own impressionistic observations.

<sup>17</sup> The possibility of diverse readings of Cho’s stereotyped portrayals of Asians became starkly apparent to me at the last show I attended, as I had feelings of both pleasure and discomfort when hearing peals of laughter from non-Asians who seemed to profoundly enjoy her caricatures of Asians and Asian speech. Clearly, my sentiments were partly based on an ideology that restricts out-group members from not only performing but also enjoying Cho’s Mock Asian.



erasure of lines of political differences and oppressions within (Lowe 1991). In addition, the ways in which different audiences may have contested definitions of community membership, and thus may read different social implications into instances of crossing, is an important consideration in understanding the multiple social meanings of Mock Asian. While Cho is one of the most prominent Asian Americans in the U.S., her status as a 'role-model' has been questioned by Asian American community leaders who have taken offense at her stereotypical portrayals of Asian Americans and Asian American culture. Others have disapproved on the basis of her image of defiance against particular expectations of gendered and sexual behavior.<sup>18</sup> One newspaper article reports that "[s]he was lambasted by the Korean community for presenting a negative image" (Chonin 1999). Much of the humor of her stage persona depends on rampant carnivalesque subversions of mainstream society's physical, linguistic, sexual, and filial expectations for Asian women. As such, she holds an ambiguous representative status within the Asian American community as she notes in the following example.

(7) "Controversial within the Korean community"

- 1 I was very controversial? within the Korean community? I am like the *worst* role model in the world. I-I'm sorry that Korea has *me* t(h)o r(h)epresent them.
- 2 ((Audience laughs lightly))
- 3 I-I feel *bad* but I-I can't help being myself? And I-I d—you know—sorry but I wou—I would read in Time and Newsweek when the show was on—I would *read* all these Korean *leaders* were saying really mean things about me? And of course *I* didn't try to get their support at all? I was calling them at home? all drunk? from a bar? at three in the morning? (going) WHAT THE FUCK IS *WRONG* WITH YOU, YOU FUCKIN *COCK*? And um— ((self-quotation in high, guttural voice))
- 4 ((Audience laughs))
- 5 It's really stupid to call a fifty-year-old Korean man a fuckin cock? because they have *no* idea what it is—you know **what do you mean I am fucking cock=I am not a rooster?=I am no: chicken!**  
[wʌt du yu min ʌi ɛm fʌkɪŋ kɔk ʌi ɛm nɑr ɵ rustɪ ʌi æm no tʃɪkʌn]  
((Mock Asian style: high pitch, guttural vocal quality; monophthongal /o/ in 'no'; [æ]→[ɛ] in 'am'; [ɪ] to [i] and non-reduced [ʌ] in 'chicken' [tʃɪkʌn]; syllable-timed rhythm; increased amplitude; absence of article 'a'; simple negation with 'no' instead of 'not'; absence of contraction 'I'm'; miscomprehension of English))
- 6 ((Audience laughs))
- 7 Yeah they didn't know
- 8 ((Audience laughs))
- 9 Called me a *racist* which *really pissed* me off.=because I am *many* things but I am *not* racist.

In the above sequence, Cho's Mock Asian (line 5) is used in a retelling of an incident in which a Korean American man supposedly responded to her attempt at insulting him. The phonological features that she uses to mark him as a non-native speaker of English

<sup>18</sup> After the airing of the first episode of *All-American Girl*, a Los Angeles-based Korean American publication listed several quotations by local Korean Americans who disapproved of both Cho and the sitcom in which she appeared. One Korean American explained, "I read an article on Margaret Cho and her show and how it's supposed to be a role model for KAs. I would be so disappointed if any kid were to look up to her and want to be so irreverent, rude, and rebellious to her mom. How evil! Not even American kids do that to their parents if they were brought up right" (Whang 1994).

are consistent with the literal, and thus non-native, interpretation of the term *cock* 'penis' (vulgar slang) (line 5). The particular frantic, guttural vocal quality and high pitch that she uses, which portray him in a comical light, also mark his discourse as oppositional to her own. As in Example 1, Cho depends on an interpretive frame that closely links an Asian identity with foreignness and a non-native variety of English.

Cho's narrative above suggests that one's status as a community representative is negotiated from both inside and outside the represented community. While particular audiences, for example, those who attend her live performances, are likely to accept her representative status with respect to the Asian American community, her membership status is a negotiated project - not a stable reality. Additionally, given the relative lack of power that Asian Americans have historically had in influencing racial ideologies in the U.S., community-designated representatives are not necessarily those who eventually represent the community in mainstream cultural production.

Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) provide the insight that a community of practice, in contrast to the traditional notion of a community, is "defined simultaneously by its membership and by the practice in which that membership engages" (464). However, I additionally suggest that communities are imagined not only by those who have assumed the right to claim membership but also by non-members who have assumed the power to define this membership. Cho's self-identification as a member of an Asian community must thus be seen in the context of competing claims about her membership status.

Yet within the particular bounds of her live performance, typically attended by those who recognize the aesthetic value of her work, Cho's proclaimed racial status as Asian is not problematic. She is thus a legitimate animator of Mock Asian texts who can escape accusations of racism. Even while she may invoke the racializing interpretive frame shown in Timepoint 3 of Figure 4, this frame co-exists with the ideology that Cho, as Asian, would likely simultaneously assume alternative ideologies that do not place Asians like herself in a position of racial inferiority. It is perhaps the ironic tension between these co-existing ideologies that gives rise to her voicings of Mock Asian as humorous.

## 8. Legitimacy through humor

In addition to Cho's positioning with respect to particular racial communities, the context of *stand-up comedy* contributes as well to the meanings of her performances. Her practices locate her in a community of stand-up comedians who engage in a similar style of self-deprecating ethnic humor, especially alongside other comedians of color. As in other communities of practice, her practices probably draw upon those of more seasoned performers, or "masters" (e.g., Richard Pryor), who are the object of emulation for many newcomers, or "apprentices" (Lave and Wenger 1991).

As a genre, stand-up comedy has stylistic features that diverge from but are related to other modes of communication, such as face-to-face interaction. Stand-up comedy is a *performance* in Bauman's (1977) sense and "consists in the assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative competence" (11), thus "[calling] forth special attention to and heightened awareness of the act of expression and [giving] license to the audience to regard the act of expression and performer with special intensity" (11). In addition, unlike face-to-face interactions, a single comedian

typically stands on an open stage with a microphone and performs while facing her seated audience, who is expected to employ a limited set of responses to the comedian's performance, such as laughter, claps, cheers, whistles, and, occasionally, silence. Such performances are also "keyed" (Goffman 1974) via linguistic cues such as special formulae (e.g., the emcee's<sup>19</sup> introduction, the comedian's greeting, or conventions used in narration), and paralinguistic cues (Bauman 1977: 16), including phonological features of stereotyped styles. By invoking a frame of stand-up comedy, comedians are often sanctioned to break with social conventions of politeness or political correctness that restrict, for example, uses of overtly stereotypical language.

Still, the boundaries between frames - for example, between *non-serious* frames, such as comedy and joking, and more *serious* frames - are not always clear. In Cho's performances, for example, she often shifts between serious narratives and humorous portrayals of characters, but also employs such humorous caricatures in the midst of narrations about serious experiences, such as her struggles with alcohol, eating disorders, and racism. Both O'Neal and Abercrombie & Fitch representatives alluded to this potential ambiguity between serious and non-serious frames, when pointing to their humorous intent, despite the offense taken by some.

The two kinds of frames are also not clearly separable in that they both invoke, and may reproduce, the same set of ideological meanings, such as ideologies about language, race, gender, and community membership. Practices that invoke laughter, and that are thus defined as humorous, can still reproduce hierarchies of race and other social axes, as Hill (1998) has argued. It is for this reason that some Asian Americans have voiced opposition to out-group Mock Asian, even if intended as a "joke" (e.g., Chin 2002). While they may understand that a non-serious frame has been invoked, the ideological assumptions about Asian racial otherness eclipse any humor that might have been intended or achieved.

## 9. Ideological critique by mocking Mock Asian

It appears then that a context of humor is an ideal space for engaging in ideological work, given that humorous performers have license to break with everyday norms of interaction, such as political correctness, while still drawing from the same ideologies of social organization. Bauman and Briggs (1990) have similarly suggested that "play frames not only alter the performative force of utterances but provide settings in which speech and society can be questioned and transformed" (63). On the one hand, such license may allow those in power to reproduce their privilege, as in some cases of Mock Asian and Mock Spanish that construct imagined Asians and Spanish speakers as linguistically comical and socially inferior. On the other hand, a humorous frame sanctions ideological *critique* that might otherwise be unacceptable. In this way, Cho's performances, while necessarily drawing from and, thus, reproducing social hierarchies,

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<sup>19</sup> The emcee, or master of ceremonies, typically has the role of introducing the featured performer and signaling the start of the performance. Such introductions are often followed by the audience's cheering and clapping as the performer enters the stage. In one of Cho's performances (1996), the emcee uses dramatic patterns of intonation to create a sense of anticipation as he says, "She is the all-American girl. She is a *sweetheart* of darkness. She looks *amazing* in a miniskirt. It is her party. Let's hear it for the GORGEOUS MARGARET CHO!"

simultaneously critique these same ideologies without risking accusations of either ‘being a poor sport’ or ‘being whiney’.

Cho’s crossings into a Mock Asian style indeed suggest a highly critical stance towards racist imaginings of the Asian *other* as passive and self-sacrificing. In the following excerpt, she describes an incident in which a tabloid magazine called *The Star* used “fake quotes” (line 3) from her in what she calls a “racist” article about an Asian diet.

(8) “Chow like Cho diet”

- 1 I was on the cover of the Star? once? and it was for this thing called the ‘Chow like Cho’ diet?  
((Unmarked, MAE style))
- 2 ((Audience laughs lightly))
- 3 It was *so fuckin racist* because they just *made* this diet up. They didn’t consult me. I mean like this *total* diet that they *made up* that they said that I went on? and all these fake quotes from me?  
((Increased tempo; amplitude))
- 4 **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.** ((Feminine, calm MAE style: falsetto; decreased tempo; exaggerated and gradual intonational rise and fall))
- 5 You could almost hear the *mandolin* in the background. ((Unmarked, MAE style))
- 6 ((Audience laughs))
- 7 **When I was a little girl? and I grow up on the rice paddy? We don’t have any foo:d because this was before Sally Struthers. So—**  
[wɛn aɪ wʌz ə lɪt<sup>h</sup>l̩] gʌɪʃ ænd aɪ grəʊ ʌp ɒn də raɪs p<sup>h</sup>ɛdi wi dɒnt  
hæv ɛni fu:d bɪkʌz dɪs wʌz bɪfo sæli strʌdʌ sɒl  
((Mock Asian style: falsetto; creaky voice; decreased tempo; syllable-timed rhythm; monophthongization of /o/ in ‘don’t’, ‘before’, and ‘so’; vowel shifts [ə] to [ʌ] in ‘girl’, [æ] to [ɛ] in ‘paddy’, [ɪ] to [i] in ‘this’; de-frication [ð] → [d] in ‘this’ and ‘Struthers’; [ɹ] to trilled [r] in ‘Struthers’; aspirated [t<sup>h</sup>] in place of flap in ‘little’; increased aspiration in ‘paddy’; coda deletion in ‘before’ and ‘Struthers’; past/present neutralization for ‘grow’ and ‘don’t’))
- 8 ((Audience laughs))
- 9 **We are so hungry all the ti:me. and we have no money and I want to go to the market to buy a chicken head but I have no money eh—so I have to sell my finger. But—**  
[wi ə sɒ ʧʌŋɡɹɪ əl də taɪm ɛn wi hɛvə nɒ mʌni ɛn aɪ wʌn t<sup>h</sup>u go t<sup>h</sup>  
u də mɑ:kɪt t<sup>h</sup>u baɪ ə tʃɪk<sup>h</sup>hɛd bʌt aɪ hɛv nɒ mʌnnɪ ɛ sɒ aɪ hɛv  
t<sup>h</sup>u sɛɪ mʌɪ fɪŋɡɹɪ] ((Similar Mock Asian style and with vowel shift [ɑ] to [a] in ‘are’, [æ] to [ɛ] in ‘and’, ‘have’, [ɑ] to [ʌ] in ‘want’, [ɪ] to [i] in ‘finger’; monophthongal /o/ in ‘go’, ‘no’, and ‘so’; non-reduced vowel in ‘to’; uvularization of /h/ to [χ] in ‘hungry’; de-frication [ð] → [d] in ‘the’; /n/-gemination in ‘money’; aspiration of /k/ in ‘chicken’; coda deletion in ‘are’; schwa epenthesis in ‘have’; past/present verb neutralization in ‘are’, ‘have’, ‘want’))
- 10 ((Audience laughs))
- 11 **I (0.5) I (0.5) was very hungry but I still have tendency to put on weight.**  
[aɪ aɪ wʌz vɛɹɪ ʧʌŋɡɹɪ bʌt aɪ stɪɪ hɛv t<sup>h</sup>ɛnʌnsɪ t<sup>h</sup>u put ɒn wɛɪt]  
((Similar Mock Asian style and with vowel shift [æ] to [ɛ] in ‘have’, non-reduced vowel in ‘to’; uvularization of /h/ to [χ] in ‘hungry’; past/present verb neutralization in ‘have’; absence of article ‘a’))
- 12 ((Audience laughs))
- 13 **which is why I really hope that I catch malaria (0.3)**  
[wɪtʃ ɪz waɪ aɪ rɪli dæt aɪ kætʃ mʌlɛɹɪə]  
((Similar Mock Asian style and with vowel shift [ɪ] to [i] in ‘which’ and ‘is’; reduced retroflex in ‘really’ and ‘malaria’; light /l/ in ‘really’; de-frication [ð] → [d] in ‘that’))

- 14 because that is very good wa:y to lose wei:ght quickly:: (0.4) malaria and dysentery.  
 [bɪkʌz dæt ɪz vɛɹi gud weɪ tʰu luz weɪt kɪkli mʌləɹiə ən dɪsʌntɛɹ  
 i] ((Cheerful Mock Asian style: falsetto; exaggerated binary high-low tones for 'good way', lose  
 weight', 'quickly'; non-reduced vowel in 'to'; [ð] → [d] in 'that'; de-labialization in 'quickly';  
 reduced retroflex in 'very', 'malaria', and 'dysentery'; absence of article 'a'))
- 15 ((Audience laughs))

The “fake quotes,” which had been the tabloid’s appropriations of Cho’s voice, are re-appropriated by her in a stereotypically soft feminine style in line 4. Given the non-stereotypically feminine persona that Cho constructs as her own in the rest of the performance, her sudden switch to a soft style aligns herself in opposition to it. While Cho makes explicit in line 3 her critical stance towards the “racist” media representation of her, there exists the possible interpretation that the oppositional footing with respect to the feminine Mock Asian style *simultaneously* (Woolard 1998) positions her against Asianness *in addition to* the specific racist practices of the tabloid. While such hybridity (Jaffe 2000) in positioning is possible, and likely, there is ample evidence suggesting that her use of Mock Asian is primarily a critique of racist imaginings of Asian women and not of these Asian women themselves.

As the narrative continues, the extent of self-sacrifice (first, the selling of her finger, then, the desire for disease in order to lose weight) intensifies as Cho shifts to a Mock Asian style (lines 7, 9, 11, 13, 14). Through this exaggerated style, Cho decontextualizes and critiques stereotypes of Asian women as idealizations of passive, petite, and self-sacrificing femininity. In addition, in line 7, she makes a reference to Sally Struthers, a European American actor who was once a visible spokesperson for Save the Children, a British charity organization that organized sponsorships of Third World children. By mockingly, as opposed to genuinely, voicing her own words as an Asian woman who is grateful to Struthers for saving her family from starvation, she contests a mainstream U.S. ideology that Europeans and European Americans have saved the Third World. In other words, although Cho engages in a Mock Asian style, her comedic recontextualization functions as an ideological critique of mainstream imaginings of Asian women as ‘lotus blossoms’ that seek to be saved by the West. Her retelling of an incident in which a magazine appropriated her name and Asian identity comments on and deconstructs mainstream ideological links between Asia, femininity, and poverty, particularly perpetuated by the U.S. media.

Although Cho is American, I suggest that her use of a Mock Asian style does not reflect her conception of her Asian self or of other Asian women but rather comments on racializing mainstream discourses that attempt to ascribe identities to Asian women like herself. It is the Mock Asian text, which suggests an orientalizing Asianness (Said 1978), that she lifts from its racist context and asks her audience to join in objectifying, scrutinizing, and critiquing.

## 10. Mock Asian as a tool for de-centering whiteness

The example above presents a rather explicit decontextualization and recontextualization of racist discourses about Asians. I wish to argue, however, that even in cases in which Cho does not metalinguistically label particular Mock Asian acts as “racist,” an interpretation of Cho’s Mock Asian as ideological critique is possible. In the following example from *I’m the One That I Want* (Cho 2001b), Cho uses Mock

Asian to describe how “a bunch of Asian people” unapologetically objectify “white people” in their presence.

(9) “Your eye is too big”

- 1 Although it’s difficult to be the only Asian person around a bunch of white people? I think it’s  
wa::y wo:rse? to be the only white person? around a bunch of Asian people?
- 2 ((Audience cheers, claps))
- 3 Because we will talk shit about you right to your face?
- 4 ((Audience cheers, claps))
- 5 **YOUR EYE IS TOO BIG.** [yo aî iz t<sup>h</sup>u big] ((Mock Asian style: guttural; increased  
amplitude; syllable-timed rhythm; coda deletion in ‘your’; monophthongal /o/ in ‘your’; vowel  
shift [ɪ] to [i] in ‘is’ and ‘big’)) ((Makes “scrunched up” expression: eyes made small; head  
pulled back; shoulders lifted))
- 6 ((Audience laughs))
- 7 **WHY IS YOUR EYE IS SO:: BIG.** [waî iz yo aî iz so: big] ((Similar Mock  
Asian style with emphatic lengthening for ‘so’; vowel shift [ɪ] to [i] in ‘is’ and ‘big’; de-  
frication [ð] to [d] in ‘this’; coda deletion in ‘your’; double auxiliary ‘is’ for question))
- 8 ((Audience laughs, cheers))
- 9 **YOUR~EYE~LIKE~THIS~LIKE~THIS~YOUR~EYE~LIKE~THIS~LIKE~THIS**  
**WHY~YOUR~EYE~LIKE~THIS.**  
[yo aî laîk dɪs laîk dɪs yo aî laîk dɪs laîk dɪs waî yo aî laîk  
dɪ] ((Similar Mock Asian style with increased tempo; de-frication [ð] to [d] in ‘this’; coda  
deletion in ‘your’ and ‘this’; absence of copula ‘is’; repetition)) ((Confused expression: enlarges  
eyes; ends of mouth point downward; lips never close completely; bends torso forward; extends  
neck; swings face and body from her left to right; points to eye on last instance of ‘this’..))
- 10 ((Audience laughs, cheers))  
**YOUR EYE IS LIKE THIS.** [yo aî iz laîk dɪ] ((Similar Mock Asian style with  
normal tempo; vowel shift [ɪ] to [i] in ‘is’ and ‘this’; de-frication [ð] to [d] in ‘this’; coda  
deletion in ‘your’)) ((Maintains forward bow and facial expression with slight bobbing motion  
and tilting of head; points to eye on ‘eye is like’))
- 11 **ARE YOU GONNA CATCH A FLY WITH YOUR EYE?**  
[ɑ ju gənə kɛtʃ ə flāi wis yo aî]  
((Similar Mock Asian style with vowel shift [ɪ] to [i] in ‘with’; de-frication [θ] to [s] in ‘with’;  
coda deletion in ‘are’ and ‘your’))
- 12 ((Audience laughs, claps))
- 13 ((Retracts head; makes eyes small)) **Also you are too tall.** [α<sup>w</sup>so<sup>w</sup> ju α t<sup>h</sup>u t<sup>h</sup>α<sup>w</sup>]  
((Similar Mock Asian style with [ɛ] to [w] in ‘also’ and ‘tall’; coda deletion in ‘are’ and  
‘your’))
- 14 ((Audience laughs))
- 15 **YOU TOO TA::LL** [ju t<sup>h</sup>u t<sup>h</sup>α::<sup>w</sup>] ((Similar Mock Asian style with [ɛ] to [w] in ‘tall’;  
absence of copula ‘are’)) ((Tilts head back; feigns shouting in upward direction; brings right  
hand to side of mouth to “direct” sound upward on ‘tall’))
- 16 ((Keeps head tilted back for 7 seconds while audience cheers, whistles, laughs))
- 17 **He look like Godzilla** [hi luk laîk gaziɹa] ((Similar Mock Asian style with non-  
reduced [a] in ‘Godzilla’; [l] to [ɹ] in ‘Godzilla’; coda /d/ deletion in ‘Godzilla’; 3<sup>rd</sup>-person –s  
morpheme deletion in ‘look’)) ((Brings head back to normal position; cups right hand around  
mouth and directs speech to her left side))
- 18 **GAZIRA:::** [gaziɹa:] ((Raises right arm; turns to right; and runs in place))

At first glance, the Mock Asian in this example parallels that in Example 7. Specifically, her use of Mock Asian represents the “authentic” variety of a non-native

speaker of English; it does not represent - at least directly - racist imaginings of Asians as in Example 8. Consequently, this excerpt might be subject to an interpretation that parallels that of Example 1 and 7; Cho reproduces a semiotic process of racialization that links Mock Asian with an inferior Asianness and foreignness as illustrated in Figure 4.

In other ways, however, this example is far more complex in its ideological commentary. If we consider Cho's stance towards the character she revoices, it is distinct from the one that she takes in Example 7. While in the earlier example, she used Mock Asian to distance herself from a Korean character who had caused her offense, in this excerpt, she uses it to bring the audience to see "white people" from the perspective of Asians, who might view them as "too tall" (lines 13, 15) and as having eyes that are "too big" (line 5). In other words, in Example 1 and 7, Mock Asian functioned to construct Asians as "foreign"; in Example 9, however, it serves as a tool for conversely *de-centering whiteness*.

On the other hand, the argument might be made that the particular content of the revoicing is hardly realistic. Given the normative status of white phenotypical characteristics in the media, racial Asians would not likely claim that whites are either too tall or have eyes that are too large. Rather, these particular critiques are based on "white" objectifications of Asian bodies, who are viewed as "too short" and whose eyes are "too small." Indeed, Cho's revoicing derives some of its humor from its ludicrous nature. *Does it then fail to de-center whiteness because it indexes racist imaginings of physically deficient Asians?* I suggest that while such images of Asian bodies as non-normative are invoked, they are simultaneously critiqued through their invocation. As discussed earlier, ideologies that assume that in-group members are not likely to "oppress their own" and that easily permit ideological critique in contexts of humor encourage an interpretation of Cho's revoicing as ideological critique; the revoicing of racial objectifications by an Asian points to and directs listeners to critique racial objectifications of Asians. The complex interplay and tension among these ideological processes, which include the racialization of Asians through Mock Asian, the performance of a highly unrealistic discourse, the decentering of whiteness, and the sharp ideological critique, contribute to the excerpt's humor.

## 11. Discussion

To the extent that any use of a Mock Asian style articulates with overtly racist usages of this style, there exists the potential for interpretations that continue to construct Asians as *other*. Indeed, it is not always clear whether Cho's use of Mock Asian succeeds in eliciting laughter because it has been decontextualized from racist contexts or because of the direct indexical links to Asians as comical figures. Just as different audience members might interpret Cho's community membership in different ways, they may interpret Cho's Mock Asian as having different ideological meanings (Jaffe 2000).

As mentioned earlier, stand-up comedy, like other genres of verbal art, are characterized by a hyper-awareness of how something is said; "[p]erformance puts the act of speaking on display" (Bauman and Briggs 1990: 73). It is the potential for a performed text to be decontextualized that makes critical and reflexive *metacommentary about* this text a likely interpretation. In particular, the markedness of Mock Asian texts, which are directly linked with racist ideologies of Asian othering and ridiculing,

potentiates decontextualization. Given the typical inappropriateness in public contexts of serious statements that overtly suggest racial inferiority, Mock Asian texts, as overtly racist texts, key a non-serious frame. The text is thus “put on display” for an audience. Certainly, decontextualization of these texts does not necessarily entail a critique of them; in some cases, the recontextualization of such texts may function to construct a speaker as having a humorous persona without deconstructing the ideologies to which these texts are linked. In the case of Cho, however, an interpretation of social critique is possible because of factors and ideologies that contextualize her revoicings, including the persona she has constructed as someone who is critical of racism, her overt claim that the texts are racist (Example 8, line 3), paralinguistic cues that align her *against* rather than *with* the text, and an ideology of legitimacy that assumes that an in-group member would have neither the intention nor the power to oppress her own community.

On the other hand, analysts of political humor via linguistic recontextualization must be wary of simplistic readings that blindly celebrate its “critique” of oppressive ideologies. As Jaffe (2000) suggests, drawing on Irvine’s (1996) notion of “leakage,” animators of texts cannot escape the fact that “the meanings of the language used do stick to the animator; the words of the character come out of his mouth” (49). In addition, Hill (1998) questions the efficacy of such practices if they remain limited to restricted domains; she suggests that comedy catering to a white middle-class audience is yet another form of “orderly disorder.” In the case of Cho, we might ask whether such social critiques are welcomed outside the arena of comedy performances or for audiences that extend beyond “elites in White public space” (Hill 1998: 686). Finally, as I have suggested throughout this article, the ideologies that give meaning to these practices are always multiple. The multiplicity of potential meanings of Mock Asian, and language practices in general, presents a challenge for those who seek to understand the relationship between linguistic form and meaning. The meanings of Mock Asian depend on a variety of ideologies about race, nation, community membership, and linguistic legitimacy, which are often simplistic in their organization but complex in their relationship with actual discourse. Numerous ideologies are co-present as potential frames for the interpretation of practices. And practices, while often habitual in their production, are never stable facts about the world that index singular meanings. During the ongoing production and interpretation of practices, whether as live performances or replays of pre-recordings, certain ideologies become more relevant than others, thus allowing for new meanings to emerge in the context of alternative, potential interpretations.

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