Naming Neda: Digital Discourse and the Rhetorics of Association

Bradford Gyori

This article analyzes several online discourses centering on the death of Neda Agha Soltan, a young Iranian shot and killed during Iran's post-election protests in the summer of 2009. Hours after the tragic event, cell phone footage of Agha Soltan dying on camera was posted online by an anonymous citizen-journalist. Immediately, media users began juxtaposing images sampled from the footage with words, texts, photographs, drawings, and music. All sorts of competing and complimentary discourses emerged as media makers attempted to define the significance of the life and death of a young woman who became known to millions as simply, Neda.

In the pages that follow, I focus on the rhetorical practice of association, specifically, how it is commonly deployed in online discourses to suggest meanings and persuade and provoke audiences. In order to examine the rhetorics of association in relation to the Neda video (Figure 1), this article draws on the work of linguistic and rhetorical theorists (Bakhtin, 1981; Burke, 1950; Wittgenstein, 2009) social scientists (Bourdieu, 1972), political analysts (Beeman, 2005; Chesters & Welsh, 2006; Giesen, 2004; Hamedani, 2009; Singerman, 2004) and a variety of news sources, magazines, documentaries, Web sites, and blogs.

Of Tags and Taxonomies

Online media makers are often anonymous and un-credentialed, favoring ideological bias over empirical proof, yet they are still determined to persuade. As media analysts, we need to question the validity of unsupported truth-claims, but we must also consider why some audiences find acts of mediation that favor intuition over evidence highly persuasive. In a court of law, suggesting guilt or innocent by association is considered an illegitimate rhetorical strategy. Yet in online discourse, mashups and remixes that combine images and ideas are one of the most common

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Figure 1
Neda.

forms of cultural critique. Examining how media makers create and contest meaning via these suspect but nonetheless influential discursive strategies requires us to carefully examine the rhetorics of association.

Defining the word ''association'' presents an interesting semantic challenge. Semantics is the branch of linguistics involved in making distinctions between the meanings of different words or symbols. This methodology, however, is at odds with the very process of association, which suggests meaning via juxtaposition and combination. Webster's defines ''association'' as ''the process of forming mental connections or bonds between sensations, ideas, or memories.'' In other words, association is best defined as an alternative to the process of defining anything. When we associate phenomena, we are suggesting a unifying link. This is a different approach than assigning a categorical distinction to a single phenomenon. It is an intuitive process that involves inferring correlations between juxtaposed patterns, images or sets of data.

In Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates states that the most convincing rhetors are those adept at accurately discerning similarities and differences (Murray, 1988). However, the processes of combination and division are not exact sciences. Both distinctions and associations are highly unstable and always open to multiple interpretations. Nonetheless, when a particular audience encounters a combination of formal elements that it finds compelling, the collective imagination is activated and social conditions are influenced. Whether or not they have any actual basis in fact, persuasive associations can trigger reforms, riots, or both.

In the 1910s Russian filmmaker, Lev Kuleshov conducted a cinematic experiment that revealed the suggestive power of association. He edited a short film in which footage of an actor's expressionless face was alternated with various images: a plate of soup, a girl in a coffin and an attractive woman on a divan. When the film was screened, audiences believed that the actor's expression changed to reveal emotions such as hunger, grief, and desire, but Kuleshov had simply reused the same shot of the deadpan actor for each ''reaction'' in the sequence (Kuleshov, 1974).

The Kuleshov experiment reminds us that cultural meanings are often formed when we draw assumptions by anticipating familiar patterns of relationships. When we see a bowl of soup and then a man's face, we assume the man is hungry. When we see a dead child and then a man's face, we assume the man is grief-stricken. Even if the man's expression does not change, we believe it does because the association is strong enough to suggest an additional meaning, one not actually apparent yet intuitively inferred. Another Russian auteur, Sergei Eisenstein, called this phenomenon, "inner speech" (Eisenstein, 1949). He described it as a kind of "pre-linguistic patterning "which proceeds by the juxtaposition of bursts of attractions" (Andrew, 1976, p. 57).

Television advertisers are particular adept at invoking inner speech. There is no logical reason to believe that drinking a particular brand of beer will attract a pretty girl, yet such commercial tropes are highly effective. Association persuades by activating instincts that operate below the level of conscious reason. It is the ur-argument because it side steps logic altogether, allowing us to make intuitive snap judgments. It implies similarity but does not bother to justify the claim. The totality of its rhetorical heft is located in the mere act of equating this with that. Neda becomes a patriot because her face is associated with an Iranian flag. Discussion closed (Figure 2).

In the summer of 2009 Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was reelected amid allegation of voter fraud. Tens of thousands of Iranians took to the streets of Tehran in protests. This led to a government crackdown on dissent, resulting in arrests and wide spread violence. Iran's ruling regime also instituted an extensive media blackout. Reporters, foreign and domestic, were banned from the streets of Tehran. Twitter was shut down. Western television signals were cut off. Access to the Internet was blocked. And the cell phone nodes that were allowing protestors to organize were disabled (SonjaBe.com, 2009). To justify these actions, Ahmadinejad accused the international media of launching a psychological war against his

Figure 2
Neda Flag.

country. Yet despite the blackout, footage of the protests continued leaking out of Iran, generating an international uproar.

In the west, media coverage of the protests was largely cobbled together from masses of photographs and footage distributed via the Internet by unknown sources. Since western reporters had been banned from the streets of Tehran, news organizations were obliged to acknowledge that they could not confirm the validity of the shocking images they were uploading to their broadcast screens. This created many blind spots and undermined traditional journalistic codes, signaling a shift of emphasis from well informed first hand observation, to largely uninformed, second hand interpretation. Western anchors could not even verify that the images they were broadcasting had actually been posted from inside Iran. As a result, the attendant reportage often reflected as much about western norms as it did about the Iranian protests.

Tensions escalated, and on June 20th, 26-year-old Neda Agha Soltan was shot and fatally wounded while standing near a group of protestors on the streets of Tehran. Witnesses said the gunman appeared to be a member of Iran's paramilitary militia, the Basij. Neda's death was filmed by a cell-phone-camera and within hours, that disturbing viral video was being viewed internationally via the Internet and broadcast news channels, and inside of Iran via Bluetooth. It made a dramatic impact, triggering outrage around the world. Within a few months, the unknown person who shot the Neda footage would be honored with the George Polk Award for excellence in journalism. This would be the first time the prize had been bestowed on a citizen reporter, let alone an anonymous individual. But the most surprising impact of the footage was the rash of additional protests it sparked outside of Iran. In a show of solidarity with Iran's reformist green party, activists across the globe donned green armbands and held up signs identifying themselves with Neda (CNN, 23 June 2009). Clearly, Neda Aga-Soltan had been in the wrong place at the wrong time and yet, in many respects, she was an ideal candidate for martyrdom: young, pretty, and female. Not only had she died on camera, she had done so without uttering a word, becoming a blank screen, onto which, professional and amateur media pundits could project their ideological biases (Figure 3).

Immediately after Neda was shot, she was buried without an autopsy. The Iranian government ordered all of the mosques in Tehran to close, so there would be no official funeral. A few people attempted to gather at the site of her death, but were dispersed by militia members. Flowers were left on the site, but witnesses say a garbage truck came by and dumped trash on them. Protestors began to post images of Neda on the walls around Tehran but government officials tore them down (McElroy, 2009). Eventually, a headstone was place on Neda's grave, but it was soon smashed. A black marble slab with her face engraved on it was then placed on the site. Anonymous gunmen riddled it with bullets (Mail Foreign Service, 2009).

As with a gang member crossing out the tags of a rival crew, gestures like this were a way of silencing opposing views and asserting ideological dominance. In the aftermath of Neda's death, such rhetorical aggression became increasingly common. As the war of associations escalated, protestors began to spray-paint words and

Figure 3
Neda Tag.

paste images on walls around Tehran to keep Neda's memory alive and to mark the territory in her/their name (Figure 4).

Immediately after Neda's death, her image was combined with maps of Iran. These associations reflected more than an attempt to claim Iran in the name of Neda and the protestors; they implied a desire to alter Iran's core identity by literally putting a new face on the country. In order to claim a specific geographic domain, one has to tag an actual physical space, as with gang signs. Yet it is possible to claim ideological terrain from anywhere in the world by simply tagging images online. Such associative acts are hard to censor, so they are prevalent and often highly persuasive. What's more, in the age of online discourses, protestors and gang members are not the only people who engage in tagging. For billions, the digital tag has become a favored mode of communication, bonding, and self-expression.

Tagging was originally viewed as a more flexible and fine-grained approach to classification, as it allows search engines to discern between specific homonyms. Before digital tags, if you searched for the word ''salsa,'' you might get a tangy tomato dip, or a dance, or a type of music. But since the advent of tagging, an article about salsa dancing can be associated with keywords such as ''steps,'' ''movements,'' and ''choreography.'' This makes it much easier for media users to refine online searches.

But tags do not just allow us to sift through homonyms. They also help us *create synonyms*. Around the globe, groups defined by geography, demography, philosophy, or affinity are now effacing and defacing the influence of rival groups,

Figure 4
Neda Map.
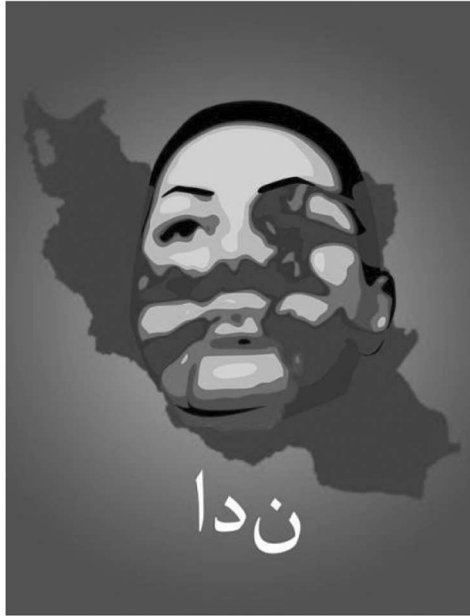
while staking out and defending their own ideological turf. Often this involves tagging words and images in various ways. More than a passive classification aid, the digital tag has become an *active* mode of communication and ritual communion. For example, Facebook's tagging function automatically pushes photos to the page of the person who has been tagged. What's more, tagging not only entails associating invisible keywords with photos and videos. When media users create mashups, fan fic, photo collages or diaporamas, they are, in effect, tagging one form of media with another and creating new ideological associations.

Identifying (with) Neda

Some carried signs. Others wore T-shirts and masks associating their bodies and faces with Neda. Throughout the western world—in major cities such as Paris, Los Angeles, and Washington D.C.—protestors gathered. In addition to collectively as-sociating with Neda, they sought to associate Neda—and by extension themselves—with martyrs of the past, honoring her with candlelight vigils, creating shrines, and reciting prayers. Some also associated her with the present, i.e., altering a photo of Neda to resemble street artist Shepard Fairey's famous campaign poster of Barack Obama (Figure 5). More than a stylistic flourish this rhetorical move associates Neda

Figure 5
Association as Identification (Brinon, 2009).

with the politics of a Western leader known for his progressive agenda (Figures 6 & 7).

By engaging in these rhetorical acts, protestors and pundits were also defining who and what they did *not* identify with, namely, the Iranian theocracy. In his *Rhetoric of Motives*, Kenneth Burke points out that each form of identification implies some type of division (1950). Thus, identification with Neda's death presumes division with Iranian's rulers. If Neda is labeled the ''Angel of Freedom'' then rhetorically, Ahmadinejad is the devil (Figure 8).

Psychologist Peter Weinreich defines two types of aspirational identification. The first involves attempting to emulate a favored agent. The second involves attempting to dissociate with a despised agent (2003). These modes of identification are mutually influential (Figure 9). Because each associative act is also a dissociative act, those who seek to associate with Neda, must also seek to dissociate with Ahmadinejad.

Within days of her death, T-shirts, buttons, and even coffee mugs with Neda's likeness were manufactured and purchased. She had become a cottage industry. Many of the people who sought to define the meaning of the Neda footage lived outside of Iran and were not of Iranian descent. This should come as no surprise, for, as Bernard Giesen explains, ''Rituals of collective identity are no longer a matter of just two parties, the insiders and the excluded and offended outsiders. Instead, they are constantly monitored and morally evaluated by a larger third part, that is, the international public'' (2004, p. 152). In the age of big data, such weak ties are an increasingly important aspect of social activism (Chesters & Welsh, 2006). Because they are widely dispersed, flexible, and adaptive, weak ties are an effective

Figure 6
Neda.

Figure 7
Obama Poster (Fairey, 2008).

Figure 8
Identification and Division.

Figure 9
Neda Merchandizing.

means of mobilizing social actors, and because they are loosely aggregated, they are challenging to combat. There is no central command to neutralize, no organizational hierarchy to subvert, no coherent strategy to counter. Their influence spans multiple social and political fields, shaping discourse in countless ways, crisscrossing social, economic, and political hierarchies and forging collective identities that challenge the boundary between institutional and non-institutional politics (Singerman, 2004).

Bystander

Neda was not actually protesting when she was shot. She and her music teacher, Hamid Panahi, had been stuck in traffic on Karegar Street, east of Tehran's Azadi (Freedom) Square, on their way to a larger demonstration. It was just after 6:30 p.m. After sitting inside a Peugeot 206—a subcompact with a poorly working air conditioner—for over an hour, they decided to step out for some fresh air. Panahi later told the press that the two of them were merely standing across the street from some protestors and observing when a bullet, apparently fired by a government militia member, hit Neda in the chest, severing a main artery and puncturing her lung (CNN, 2009).

Two days after the tragedy, Neda's fiancé Caspian Makan was quoted on BBC Persian, a Web site run by the BBC in Farsi, Iran's national language. Makan claimed that Neda had been politically neutral and that her goal was *not* to support reform leader Mir-Hossein Mousavi or conservative president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. ''She was just in love with her country'' (Connett, 2009). Many of the initial accounts of Neda's death emphasized her political ambivalence and suggested she was a hapless bystander who had not been actively participating in the protests. A group

of her close friends told the press she was fundamentally apolitical (Zavis, 2009). Her mother, Hajar Rostami, stressed that she was not a political activist. ''She wasn't political. She didn't belong to any party or group. She didn't support any faction. Every other young Iranian was there, and she was one of them'' (Muslims Debate, 2009). The fact that Neda did not vote in the election might appear to lend credence to this perspective. (Dehghan, 2010)

In subsequent interviews, however, friends and relations have described Neda as far more politically active and socially idealistic and thus more willing to risk her life for the post-election protests. Her sister, Hoda, told the BBC that Neda only resisted voting because of reported fraud at the polling stations. According to this account, Neda was not too apathetic, ambivalent or fearful to vote. She simply did not trust the process (Garnsey, 2009).

As time passed, Neda's public image continued to evolve as she was transformed from an innocent bystander into a political firebrand. When examining the social forces that may have influenced this transformation, it helps to consider the political climate inside Iran at the time of Neda's death. Because protestors were being beaten and killed in the streets, the few Iranians who were willing to speak to the press insisted on disguising their identities with false names. Under such conditions, associating oneself with a political agitator would have been a risky proposition. Soon, however, Neda's sacrifice took on a kind of mythical status. When this occurred, those directly associated with her discovered that they were able to speak much more openly about political matters since any attempt to suppress them would only confirm the impression that the government had unfairly persecuted Neda in the first place.

Then there is the issue of perceived intent. In order for Neda to be recognized as a true martyr, she has to be viewed as more than a hapless victim. Those who want her death to take on heightened symbolic significance are compelled to insist that she willingly sacrificed herself for the greater good. Given these social opportunities and pressures, it is not surprising that Neda was initially characterized as a passive bystander and then, increasingly, described as a political and religious firebrand. But none of these roles is a perfect fit.

In terms of the firebrand persona, there is little evidence that Neda was a political agitator. And in terms of the bystander persona, we must allow that she was *not* entirely apolitical either. She would have been much safer had she merely stayed home. Then there was her placement in the environment. When she and her music instructor parked their car and stepped out for a breath of air, they chose to stand across from the protestors, not among them, but nearby. If they had kept their distance, she would have been safer and may not have been shot.

Rebel

In the eyes of millions, it did not initially matter whether or not Neda was an activist. Immediately, she became a symbol of political revolt. And within hours of

her death, YouTube subscribers began posting tributes, including a song performed by a young Iranian man titled ''The Call of My Country'' that was juxtaposed with images from the footage of Neda's death (Figure 10). It featured the lyrics: ''I swear on your last innocent look, that we will take back your vote from the deceivers, that we will always confront oppressors, that we will continue your path for all eternity'' (Erdbrink, 2009).

Rebelling against the Iranian government presented some unique challenges both practically and rhetorically. After all, since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran's ruling regime has defined itself as a ''revolutionary government'' defined by a spirit of emancipation and defended by Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). This association of the Iranian government with the word ''revolution'' implies that those who oppose the regime oppose the right to self-govern. Because of this, the government labeled the post-election protests ''counter-revolutionary'' acts. So how does one bring about a revolution in a country ruled by a regime that defines itself as inherently revolutionary?

In his later work, Wittgenstein argues that the act of classification contains a strategic component. How we choose to define things, betrays personal motives and agendas (2009). From the outset, protestors knew they needed to draw a productive

Figure 10
Neda the Rebel.

distinction between Iran's revolutionary regime, and the new form of revolution they were advocating. This proved challenging, as the Iranian regime insisted western forces were secretly organizing the protests. For conservative Iranians, this associ-ation of western powers with the green party conjured many additional negative associations, which led to increased polarization both inside and outside of Iran. As William O. Beeman points out, Iranian regime tends to characterize the U.S. as ''The Great Satan,'' while U.S. opinion makers often characterize Iran as a den of ''Mad Mullahs'' (2005).

In an effort to appear as peace loving, patriotic, and law abiding as possible, the protestors sought to associate themselves with the type of passive resistance effectively utilized by Mohandas K. Gandhi and Martin Luther King. To this end, they agreed that the protests should be mostly silent and non-confrontational. Many of them initially wore strips of tape over their mouths to illustrate that they were not going to be loud and belligerent. Yet despite such efforts, the protests soon turned violent. The strips of tape were replaced with surgical masks concealing the identities of those perpetrating the on-camera mayhem. State-run news pro-grams began broadcasting images of rioting in the streets of Tehran. These reports, however, may have been deceptive. As Nina Hamedani points out, during past demonstrations, members of the Basij have duplicitously associated their violent action with the behavior of peaceful protestors by dressing in ordinary clothes and infiltrating crowds to incite riots and set fire to street barricades. Such actions appear to justify a violent response from uniformed militia members (2009).

As the protests grew more violent, the rhetoric of the protestors became more heated and defiant. Soon after Neda's death, her fiancé, Caspian Makan stopped de-scribing her as politically neutral and even began acting as a posthumous spokesper-son for her, providing the press with lengthy quotes detailing her purported political views. For instance, Makan claimed that, before attending the protest, Neda had told him, ''Even if a bullet goes through my heart, it's not important. What we're fighting for is more important. When it comes to taking our stolen rights back we should not hesitate. Everyone is responsible. Each person leaves a footprint in this world'' (Fletcher, 2009).

There is no way to prove or disprove whether Neda actually said these things in a private conversation with Makan. However, we can speculate as to why Makan felt compelled to share these details with the media. Now that he was associated with a famous martyr who had apparently died in the name of peace and democracy, he was suddenly a powerful opinion maker capable of potentially promoting peace in the Middle East. In March of 2010, he visited Israel and met with President Shimon Peres. Said Makan, ''I come to Israel as an ambassador of the Iranian people, a messenger from the camp of peace.... I have no doubt that Neda's spirit and soul feels the sensitivity and warmth I received in this meeting'' (Sobelman, 2010).

Not everyone associated with Neda agreed with Makan's tactics or political perspective. In response to his trip to Israel, Neda's mother Hajar Rostami, told reporters that Mr. Makan does not represent the views of Neda or her family (Esfandiari, 2010a). Meanwhile, the Iranian-backed broadcaster, Press TV, published

a piece on its Web site calling Makan a suspect in Neda's murder. Comments on the site suggested that Mr. Makan was a Mossad agent, who killed Neda and then returned to his homeland. The hard-line and pro-Ahmadinejad Fars News Agency said the meeting between Peres and Makan was further evidence that foreign countries were involved in Neda's death (Esfandiari, 2010b).

Threat

As remarkable as this may sound, the Iranian government even attempted to associate Neda's sacrifice with its own image and agenda. According to the BBC documentary, *A Death in Tehran*, Iranian officials offered to pay a financial reward and to declare Neda an official "Iranian Martyr" if her family would state that foreign agitators had killed her. Her family refused (Garnsey, 2009).

Left with no alternative, the regime worked to actively discredit the popular belief that Neda had sacrificed herself to oppose them. They began contriving all sorts of conflicting counter-narratives in an attempt to excuse their reactionary politics. They claimed that the CIA and "Zionist spies" had killed her. They also said Green Party activists staged the shooting, using her as an unknowing pawn for a propaganda video (World Watch, 2010). Meanwhile, the Iranian newspaper Javan claimed that a BBC reporter had shot and killed Neda (Dalje.com, 2009).

Iranian officials were more reticent, however, when it came to impugning Neda's character directly. After all, dishonoring the memory of a martyr is a risky strategy, particularly in an Islamic country. With the exception of the Vatican, the Republic of Iran is the only working theocracy in the world. At the same time, the forces of modernization and an explosion in population growth have radically destabilized its traditionalist culture. In many respects, Neda was nontraditional. She was shot while wearing western clothing: a baseball cap and jeans. And even when photographed in Islamic garb, she wore make-up. She had married young and then divorced. She was also somewhat worldly, a travel agent who had been to Dubai, Turkey, and Thailand and wanted to live Istanbul one day. She had a Turkish fiancé. She was student of philosophy and she had arrived at the protests in a French car. She was also an aspiring pianist and a singer (Farber, 2009). So even though Iranian officials were reticent to directly discredit her, they could do so *indirectly* by associating her with the western forces they blamed for inciting the protests (Figures 11 & 12).

During the first series of trials for Iranian protestors, the accused were not allowed to speak in their defense. This policy was changed during the second round of trials, not for any of the Iranian citizens being sentenced, just for Clotilde Reiss, a young French woman accused of instigating social unrest.

By this point, Neda—whose name means, "divine calling" in Farsi—had been given many posthumous titles: "The Angel of Freedom," "The Angel of Iran" and perhaps most compellingly, "The Voice of Iran" (Cassandra, 2009). However, by letting Reiss speak, the Iranian government gave another type of voice to the protests. According to the Islamic Republic News Agency, Reiss confessed in a heavy French

Figure 11
Clotilde Reiss (Reuters, 2009).

Figure 12
Neda Agha Soltan.

accent, "I had personal motives for joining gatherings to see what was happening out of curiosity, but I admit that I made a mistake and should not have attended." Reiss had no legal representation. Nonetheless, a government prosecutor accused her of attempting to engineer a "soft overthrow" of the government (CBS, 2009). Reiss was 24 at the time, just 2 years younger than Neda. She appeared with her dark hair covered by a scarf, as Neda had in the photos that were, by then, circulating widely on the Internet. Her delicate features and quiet demeanor made her a suitable stand-in for Agha Soltan in the counter-narrative of foreign interference the Iranian government was constructing. By indirectly associating Neda's image with that of a foreign agitator, they were subtly discrediting Neda and offering Iranians a new face and voice of counter-revolutionary protest.

Hoax

After the footage of Neda's death created an international furor, the Iranian government fought back by launching various disinformation campaigns, utilizing both mainstream and social media. In additional to blaming her death on foreign operatives, they suggested that maybe she did not die at all. According to one report, footage of Neda's death was a ruse perpetuated with the help of British reporters (Mackey, 2010). And in reference to the footage of Neda's death, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad stated, "I didn't see who shot who … the whole scene looked suspicious to me" (CNN, 2009).

The footage of Neda's death proved to be such a powerful piece of anti-Ahmadinejad propaganda many Iranian officials felt compelled to dismiss it as a hoax, as

Figure 13
Conspiracy Theories.

Neda and her fake blood
checking to see
camera angle

did western conspiracy theorists seeking to undermine its credibility by associating Neda's actions with those of an actress performing a scripted role. A posting on AboveTopSecret.com features a shot-by-shot break down of the video and comments such as, ''A gunshot wound to the chest would have killed her or left her unconscious. Yet she keeps looking, not at the people she 'knows.' She looks at the cameraman'' (December_Rain, 2010). As cinematographer Seven D. Katz explains, in film, the viewer identifies with the camera and this creates a strong sense of emotional connection (1991). Thus, pundits seeking to define the footage as a hoax were compelled to characterize Neda's unblinking gaze as mere stagecraft (Figure 13).

The blood that spilled from Neda's nose and mouth is also rhetorically significant. According to another conspiracy theory site, nolanchart.com, one of the figures leaning over Neda can be seen placing some fake blood in her nose. ''Shortly thereafter blood appears to pour from her right nostril.... Looking carefully in the video, it appears that both the mouth and nostril bleeding occurs right after a hand is seen pushing up onto or into them'' (Trieste 2010).

Martyr

Before Neda's death, the Iranian leadership believed it had a highly effective strategy for challenging the global primacy of the west, a mix of ancient ritual practice and high-tech media dissemination. In 2005, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad stated, ''a nation with martyrdom knows no captivity'' (Nissimov & Savyon, 2008, p. 1), but at the time, he failed to consider that the act of self-

sacrifice can be motivated by any number of ideologies, including those deeply inimical to his own views. He went on to declare, "Today, more than ever, we must inculcate in the younger generation the culture of shahada [martyrdom]. This is a mission of supreme ideological importance.... One who treads the path of martyrdom and brings himself to this extreme attains the pinnacle of human achievement." The irony of these statements deepens when we consider that the Basij, the paramilitary militia group Ahmadinejad was addressing, would soon be implicated in the country's most infamous act of martyrdom in decades, not by becoming martyrs themselves, but by creating a new type of Iranian martyr.

Since the advent of suicide bombing in the 1980s, stories of middle-eastern martyrs willing to kill and die for their beliefs have become an all-too-familiar feature of international news coverage. In some respects, Neda's death resembles those martyrdom operations. She was an Iranian, after all, taking part in a political protest, and supporters say she willingly died for her beliefs. Yet unlike other Iranian martyrs, she has been canonized around the world. This suggests that the act of martyrdom, which western commentators often equate with outmoded superstitions, remains emotionally compelling to the supposedly secular west. That is, as long as the victim appears to have died for values congeneal to western ethics and in a manner appropriate to western norms. Unlike the Islamic martyrs usually discussed in the press, Neda had not set out to harm anyone else. She also died at a rally protesting the Iranian government. This meant she was a martyr that the west could uncritically celebrate, but what exactly did she stand for?

According to literary theorist M.M. Bakhtin, there can be no neutral words because language is "overpopulated with the intentions of others" (1981, pp. 293, 294). Bakhtin coined the word "heteroglossia" in order to characterize the way that language "permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships" (p. 263). The Heteroglossic qualities of the term "martyr" allow it to mean different things to different people in different social contexts. While the label most commonly associated with Neda is "martyr," the term has been used in a wide variety of ways related to competing ideological agendas. One of the most surprising associations involves identifying Neda as a Christian martyr. In July of 2009, some western Web sites began suggesting that Neda might be a Christian (Geller, 2009). A well-known photo of Agha Soltan accompanied these articles (Figures 14 & 15). An area below her neck was circled and enlarged, drawing attention to what appeared to be a crucifix. Christians who accepted this theory could view Neda's death as another episode in a long-standing feud between Muslims and Christians, underscoring key ideological differences, including opposing views of martyrdom.

As Keith Lewinstein explains, Christian and Islamic martyrdom have strongly contrasting characteristics related to their historic origins. "Martyrdom achieved its religious significance for Christians in the period before the faith had enjoyed any political success ... Islam, by contrast, had more success from the beginning; it emerged not as a persecuted sect, but in the course of military conquest and political victory. (2002, p. 79). Carole Straw adds, "A Christian gloried in suffering for its own sake, for this sacrifice imitated the passion of Christ, which had redeemed humanity

Figure 14
Christian Martyr?

Figure 15
Crucifix?

from the dreadful damnation of hell. Passivity itself became the ideal'' (2002, p. 41). In contrast, ''What struck the Muslims more naturally was the Prophet's call for active struggle against injustice and idolatry'' (Lewinstein 2002, p. 80).

Yet while Christian martyrdom glorifies passive suffering, some of the Christian rhetoric related to martyrdom actively reinforces ideological divides. Some responses to the Christian rumor include the following blog posts: ''I wouldn't be surprised if she was targeted by the Basij thug because of her cross necklace'' (nicedeb, 2009). And ''In fact, if she is a Christian, that could create greater support for religious freedom in Iran'' (tmatt, 2009).

To date, no credible evidence has surfaced that would suggest Neda actually was a Christian. The pendant around her neck is most likely a farvahar, one of the best-known symbols of Zoroastrianism and the Iranian nation.

Discussion: Symbolic Violence

Symbols matter, not because they define the truth once and for all, but because we want them to. When a human being becomes a symbol, she is thought to transcend mundane existence. One of the best ways of achieving such a transformation is via ritual sacrifice. When a person appears to *willingly* die for a particular cause, she seems to affirm its value by paying the ultimate price. She also becomes a type of symbol strongly associated with that cause. This necessarily involves limiting her

complexity. It is a reductive process, a distillation bent on filtering away ambiguity. Of course, if linguistic signs are never entirely stable and autonomous, human beings—living or dead—cannot be either. What's more, a single act of victimage is never a monophonic mode of rhetorical invention. Instead, it is the occasion of a high stakes debate. One man's saint is another man's infidel. Is Che Guevara a martyr or a monster? How about Malcolm X? Or Lenny Bruce? Or Harvey Milk? Victimage not only creates consensus, it also allows for contention.

Pierre Bourdieu defines ''symbolic violence'' as the manner in which some forms of discourse serve to tacitly perpetuate discrimination against particular social groups (1972, p. 191). I expand this usage to account for the symbolic violence done to and by individuals as well, calling attention to the way that language can participate in the reduction of a complex human being into monological sign (Figure 16). Symbolic violence, in this sense, is often related to actual violence. In the case of the Neda footage, violence has created a figure capable of halting or creating more violence depending on her perceived symbolic significance.

A polysemic analysis of the media texts swirling around Neda's death reveals that many people find it meaningful for many different reasons. Does this bring us any closer to understanding her true motives for being on the street that day? Probably not, but it may help us expose the ongoing symbolic violence militating against a more complex understanding of her identity. This matters because if we are to look past the ideological struggles that create division and disharmony, we must find ways to empathize with complicated individuals, recognizing that they are just as multifaceted as we are.

Figure 16
Multiple Associations.

Symbolic violence is seductive. It tempts us with transcendence, the possibility that—by aligning with righteous saints or dissociating from irredeemable demons—we might somehow, once and for all, establish the unimpeachable Truth. Because Neda can no longer speak for herself, we now feel compelled to speak for her. From a rhetorical standpoint, this is one of the chief advantages of sacrificial victimage; it entirely silences the person whose deepest commitments it claims to represent. And because symbols *feel* fixed and definitive, they can serve as ideological fulcrums utilized to leverage social change. Therefore, the ongoing attempts to transform Neda into a symbol are not merely sentimental gestures; they are calls to action. Those most interested in the rhetorical opportunities Neda's death affords need her to become a particular sort of symbol in order to further a particular type of cause. This is why they must associate her with specific images or ideas, transforming her into a captivating, if necessarily two-dimensional icon.

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