

# HYSTERICAL!

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*Women in American Comedy*

EDITED BY LINDA MIZEJEWSKI  
AND VICTORIA STURTEVANT

FOREWORD BY KATHLEEN ROWE KARLYN

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## FOREWORD

"LAUGHTER THAT DOES NOT STOP is hysterical." This straightforward but evocative statement from the introduction to this book brings to mind the rich tangle of judgments and metaphors commonly associated with laughter. We imagine laughter as waves or ripples spreading across the surface of water, expanding in space while diminishing in time. We speak of laughter as an explosive force that bursts forth or erupts from the body. Laughter can peel or ring like bells, or it can echo after encountering a surface that absorbs its energy, only to bounce it back again and again to its source. Laughter is infectious or contagious, with uneasy suggestions of disease, something we can "catch" as easily as the common cold when our defenses are down and the right bug strikes. At the same time, that infectiousness makes laughter inevitably social, a means of connecting those who share it. These connections—ripples, echoes, felicitous contagions—are at the heart of *Hysterical!* and my enthusiasm for it.

Laughter, like hysteria, lends itself to metaphor because it touches on the ineffable, that which escapes our efforts to pin it down or tame it with reason. That ineffability first lured me to the study of women and comedy some years ago. I was riveted by the laughter that would not stop at the end of Marleen Gorris's fiercely feminist film *A Question of Silence* (1982)—laughter that appeared both hysterical and utterly rational. I was seduced by comedian Roseanne's claiming the last word in the opening credits of her sitcom (1988–1997) with laughter that continued after the images faded, refusing to end on cue. I was tickled by Miss Piggy's grotesque play with the conventions of femininity and captivated by the witty, glamorous women of romantic comedy in Hollywood's Golden Age. I wanted the emotions I felt from all of these instances of laughter: power, pleasure, renewal, release, and often simply delight.

Seeking to understand anything, including laughter, brings us into the realm of the rational, to the explorations and conversations that take place in the critical discourse on a subject. And if the notion of laughter's infectiousness speaks to its inherently social nature, the same is true of scholarly discourse. *Hysterical!* marks a milestone in this discourse. As its introduction notes, scholarship on women and comedy has typically lagged behind the reality of women's pres-

ence in the genres of laughter. Yet in the past few decades, that scholarship has expanded like waves of laughter, gathering momentum rather than losing it as it has traveled along the axis of time. The editors of this collection have led the way with their own work and with the contributions they have gathered here. Some scholars in this volume have long been interested in outrageous, “hysterical” women, while others are newer to this topic. Together, they move our collective thinking into new territory by looking back to recover lost histories of women in comedy and forward to new generations of female comic auteurs and performers.

*Hysterical!* is also a timely response to a moment in our cultural history when, as its introduction notes, “women comedians have achieved an unprecedented level of visibility as performers, writers, and producers.” Female-authored comedy now abounds in film and television and on the internet, which has opened vast new possibilities for women drawn to comedy as a means of self-expression, artistic creation, and political work. Both in mainstream venues and on the fringes of culture, funny women are making themselves seen and heard more than ever, defying expectations that women cannot or should not be outspoken, angry, vulgar, and funny—hysterically funny.

In response to this surge of female laughter, a panel of feminist scholars at a recent international conference took up the question of whether unruliness, or the transgressiveness associated with women in comedy, has become the “new normal” in our post-Roseanne, post-feminist world. The question is provocative. On July 25, 1990, Roseanne unleashed a firestorm when she combined a screeching performance of the national anthem with a parody of male gestures associated with baseball. Today such a performance—or at least the vulgar aspects of it—might elicit only a shrug. For me, this is not a sign that female comedy has lost its disruptive power, but of the reverse. Women’s laughter has altered what we consider normal, and for the better.

This book was being written while Hillary Clinton was the first woman to be a serious contender for the most powerful political office in our country. However, she and other prominent women in the campaign endured repugnant expressions of misogyny, in addition to the other toxic forces that often accompany sexism. They found themselves reduced to their bodies, their voices judged as shrill and their laughter as excessive. Yet those judgments have been increas-

ingly challenged and recognized for what they are: tired efforts to protect male power by demeaning and intimidating women with the familiar suggestion that they are hysterical, crazy.

In my most recent work, I have wanted to better understand the ruptures among women across time, especially in the context of the mother/daughter relation. I’ve felt that girls and women of all ages can only benefit from resisting cultural forces that would separate us from each other and the commitments we share. In the classroom, teaching comedy has allowed me to bring a light touch to heavy subjects and to open conversations with my students on ideas that matter to me. Spanning generations of performers and scholars, *Hysterical!* testifies to the power of comedy to stimulate incisive conversations and build connections across the boundaries of time.

As time passes, I’ve also become increasingly interested in the unacknowledged personal forces that nudge us toward one research project rather than another. I’ve come to understand that I wanted to work on comedy because of my yearnings to laugh at the absurdities of life, to celebrate its simple pleasures, and above all to discover and connect with kindred spirits. Studying comedy has allowed me to spend time in the company of others, both real and imaginary, whose work has enriched my own and whose presence in my life has made it better. May *Hysterical!* bring similar connections and rewards to you.

*Kathleen Rowe Karlyn*

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Finally, we thank all the hysterically funny women comedians who continue to act up and speak out. We are fortunate that the longer we worked on this anthology, the more relevant it became.

HYSTERICAL!

CHAPTER II

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MARGARET CHO'S ARMY: "WE ARE THE  
BADDEST MOTHERFUCKERS ON THE BLOCK"

REBECCA KREFTING

*The underrepresented, unvoiced, ignored part of our population, the great many people who make up the Cho Army, are something you are unaware of, and they're pretty much the gang not to fuck with. We are the baddest motherfuckers on the block.*

MARGARET CHO, *I HAVE CHOSEN TO STAY AND FIGHT* (2005)

SOUTH KOREAN AMERICAN COMIC Margaret Cho will be the first one to tell you that she is not an authority on all things Asian or even Korean, but that does not stop people from asking her to weigh in as a comic spokesperson on matters concerning the Orient. But she also identifies as queer, as a fag hag, as a feminist, as an activist, and as a recovering alcoholic, among many other identities. While the media has a narrow vision regarding the matters upon which Cho can comment (i.e., race/ethnicity), her fans understand that she is *both/and*. She is both Korean and American; she is both queer and married to a man; she is both a feminist and a femme bottom. The reality of our lives is far messier than the organized and clearly defined identity camps served up in televisual representations. Stand-up comedy offers space to speak to the complexity of our identities; indeed, communications scholar Judith Yaross Lee argues that Cho's politicized content and comedy style—her attention to social issues relevant to women, LGBTQ folks, Asian Americans, and people of color and her adroit shifts into accents and characters representing these groups—allows her to perform “in ways that resist classification within any group.”<sup>1</sup> This kind of border crossing expands the tribes loyal to Cho, ensuring an ever-widening audience for her charged humor aimed at illumining social inequality and injustice. Cho is among one of the

savviest purveyors of charged humor, a kind of humor that intentionally educates and mobilizes audiences, creates community, and offers strategies for social change.<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly, Cho defies classification even as she claims membership to all minority groups; in other words, because she enjoys honorary membership to all minority groups, she troubles the tendency to “silo” minority groups, instead performing in ways that unite multiple marginalized communities. As she puts it: “Because I am like the members of so many different minorities, it sort of gives me *carte blanche* . . . to comment on things and not worry so much about any kind of repercussions like ‘oh you’re not supposed to say that because you’re not one of us.’ But I am, you know. Because I’m always going to be ‘one of us,’ *we’re always going to be ‘one of us,’* because I just have that kind of membership in every club” (my emphasis).<sup>3</sup> This subversive rhetorical maneuver conveys the need to recognize our similarities as *oppressed* subjects, even as minority groups experience subordination in different ways. As this chapter’s opening quote conveys, her “we” references folks based not on social identity (e.g., race, sexuality, or ability) but rather on shared experiences of being “underrepresented, unvoiced, ignored.” One joke at a time, this is one of the ways Cho builds her army—a ragtag, motley crew of die-hard fans who hail from every identity camp imaginable, many of them sharing her experiences of being cast as an “Other.”

Over the course of a twenty-five-year career in stand-up comedy, Margaret Cho has demonstrated a keen ability to maximize her visibility and exposure so that she can broadcast worldviews lauding social justice and embracing difference. This chapter will track Cho’s career over the past quarter of a century, attending to three important dimensions that combine to inform an understanding of Cho’s position as a comic diva and icon: the substance of her charged comedy (i.e., analyses of performances and writings); the cultural economy in which she crafts her art and the modes of distribution used to disseminate that art; and audience composition—the many marginalized communities that embrace her and constitute the “Cho Army.” I model this multiperspectival approach to Cho’s work on the work of cultural studies scholar Douglas Kellner, who champions a tripartite analysis of material and visual culture that focuses on the “production and political economy of culture, cultural texts, and the audience reception of those texts and their effects.”<sup>4</sup> This approach avoids focusing too narrowly on any one aspect of a cultural artifact and si-



11.1. Margaret Cho (2010).  
Photograph courtesy of  
“photognome” on Flickr.com.

multaneously recognizes that these perspectives—cultural economy, the text itself, and audience reception—are coconstitutive. For example, political and cultural events shape the content of Cho’s comic material, as when she rails against Sarah Palin for proudly declaring that she “tolerates gays”; or when she bemoans the media’s obsession with longtime coma patient Terri Schiavo (which she considered a distraction from wars in Iraq and Afghanistan); or when she vocalizes support for the Dixie Chicks, who were subject to critical opprobrium for saying they were ashamed to share lineage to Texas with George W. Bush.<sup>5</sup> Cho uses charged humor, a style of comedy with a social justice orientation, to counter dominant myths and replace cultural fictions with (her personal) truths about minorities—sexual, racial, gender, and otherwise. Her activist sensibilities inform her approach to performing comedy; in other words, the substance of her comedy seeks to mobilize those she identifies in the chapter epigraph as “the underrepresented, unvoiced, ignored part of our population.” For her, the revolution begins in unifying America’s many tribes that feel disparaged, invisible, or maligned by mainstream media, political institutions, and society. Her comic content, as with any stand-



up comic, informs audience composition. So pro-gay, feminist, liberal humor arising from a woman of color attracts fans who share Cho's social identities and/or worldviews. Furthermore, the content/text together with modes of production and distribution inform, if not altogether determine, the kinds of audiences Cho's comedy could reach at various points in her career.

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 effectively ended an antiquated and overtly racist national-origin quota system for U.S. immigrants that had been in place since lawmakers passed the Emergency Quota Act in 1921. Alongside other previous immigration policy successes—such as the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act (1943) and the Luce-Heller Act of 1946 (which was signed by President Harry Truman and allowed southeast Indians and Filipinos to emigrate to the United States, albeit in very small numbers)—the 1965 act paved the way for the Korean-born couple Young-Hie and Seung-Hoon Cho to settle in the United States in 1964. The new arrivals' status as citizens was still in flux when Moran (now Margaret) was born on December 5, 1968, at San Francisco's Children's Hospital. With a comedy writer for a father (he wrote joke books in Korea) and a mother who is just plain funny, Cho was born with comedy in the blood and on the brain. Her father left for Korea only three days after her birth and spent several years working on immigration matters. Her mother sent an infant Margaret over to Korea, where her aunt (her father's sister) cared for her for almost three years. Reunited with her mother by the time she was three years old, Margaret Cho and her family would spend the rest of her early childhood and youth living in ethnically and sexually diverse neighborhoods in San Francisco. For a time, her parents ran a snack bar in the Japantown Bowling Alley; later they bought and operated a bookstore called Paperback Traffic on Polk Street in a famously gay neighborhood. And thus began Cho's long-standing love affair with gay men—she cites gay men first as curious objects of interest and later as best friends, confidants, and loyal fans.<sup>6</sup>

As a teenager, a natural aptitude for performance secured Cho's entrance into the San Francisco School of the Arts, even as she flunked out of her other high school. For Cho, stand-up comedy was an accessible form of performance, allowing her to capitalize on her sense of humor to work through anxieties of being a young, Asian American, female misfit. Plus, stand-up comedy was all the rage in the 1980s, and there were numerous venues in San Francisco where she

could hone her craft. Gifted comic performances got her a spot on the then-popular *Star Search* (1983–1995), a talent showcase hosted by Ed McMahon featuring dancers, singers, and stand-up comics. Talent agents selected Cho to perform on the international version of *Star Search*, wherein Cho represented the nation of Korea, despite being an American citizen. This would be the first of many slights Cho would suffer at the hands of television producers over the next couple decades. While performing comedy in the Bay Area (before she could subsist entirely on profits from her stand-up shows), Margaret Cho worked in her parents' bookstore, recorded phone sex messages, dressed up as Raggedy Ann for FAO Schwartz, and (wo)manned the counter at a boutique called Stormy Leather.<sup>7</sup> Good press and exposure early on catapulted Margaret Cho to feature-comic status, which meant she began getting gigs at national comedy-club chains to open for the headliner as well as touring on the college comedy circuit. By 1993, at the impossibly young age of twenty-four, she was already in conversation with ABC executives about using her life as the basis for a sitcom, a popular and profitable pattern for stand-up comics like Bill Cosby, Jerry Seinfeld, Roseanne Barr, Tim Allen, Brett Butler, and Martin Lawrence. In 1994 *All-American Girl*, the first Asian American sitcom, fell flat with audiences, including Asian Americans, for a variety of reasons and was not renewed for a second season. Afterwards, feeling dejected, ugly, and generally miserable, Margaret Cho continued performing stand-up comedy, writing screenplays, and making TV appearances during the next few years. In 1999, after she got sober and decided to channel her anger and frustration into her art, she set off on a national tour with the show *I'm the One That I Want*, opening at Westbeth Theatre Center in New York City. A book by the same name would follow a year after the release of her first concert film in 2000. Since the turn of the millennium, she has released seven concert films and continues to tour the nation, showcasing her stand-up comedy. She wrote, produced, and starred in her own film *Bam Bam and Celeste* (2005), capitalized on the reality TV craze with her own show (*The Cho Show*, VH1 2008), spent six seasons as a cast member of *Drop Dead Diva* (Lifetime 2009–2014), and cohosts *Monsters of Talk*, a weekly podcast that first aired in January 2013. All the while she writes: books, forewords and introductions to edited volumes, screenplays, performances, and blogs. Not everyone is fond of Margaret Cho—a tattooed avenger of civil liberties—but most people know who she is. Over the course of a career span-

ning nearly three decades, she has made an indelible impression on the American public and garnered an eclectic and diverse fan base.

For the first decade of her career, Cho pursued traditional avenues for garnering mainstream success, dutifully working the college circuit and performing in national comedy-club chains. To be clear, for a comedian mainstream success implies a few things: appearances on late-night TV talk shows, feature and headliner status in national comedy-club chains, and an hour comedy special (or more). Having achieved mainstream recognition and visibility by the late 1990s, Cho used her fame and amassed capital to take control of the means of production for her future comedy performances. Emergent technologies, such as social media platforms, proved useful to staying connected with an ever-growing fan base, offering Cho potentially successful ways of bypassing traditional pathways to branding and evading reliance on major media outlets for exposure. Social media platforms have proven a successful tool for self-promotion, and comics use a variety of them, and liberally so, to generate funny material while also promoting shows and merchandise to fans. Delighted at the prospect of circumventing media sources that routinely denigrate her, Cho cleverly shifted her approaches to promoting her work to capitalize on innovations in new media in order to maintain public visibility and continue to circulate her brand of charged humor. While these approaches are still in some ways pregnable to social and industry pressures and are supported by profit-seeking models, they offer greater freedom for comic artists to create and distribute their material. Not incidentally, Margaret Cho was the first person I followed when I created a Twitter account. About two minutes later, Margaret Cho was also my first follower. Savvy ways of cultivating connections with her fan base ensure that her ideas—radical notions of self-love, social equality, and an emphasis on shared humanity—continue to gain traction.

#### THE 1990S: GETTING MAINSTREAMED

The 1990s were characterized by the rise of new media like the internet and an ever-expanding cable television palette. Entertainment corporations launched channels devoted exclusively to delivering comedy to the American public. The Comedy Channel (1989) and Ha! (1990) merged in 1991 to form Comedy Central, which featured sketch comedy shows, stand-up comedy specials and showcases, and comedy films. Having a plethora of opportunities to per-

form stand-up comedy on television and in the hundreds of comedy clubs that arose during the comedy boom of the 1980s meant more work and the promise of a living wage for professional comics. What might have appeared to be Edenic conditions for comics were sullied by the heavy-handed editing and censorship exercised against comic material. Television censors focused on removing not just expletives or sexually explicit content but also charged humor that confronted viewers with hard truths about social injustice. Many Americans were convinced that legislative changes during previous decades had all but ended social inequality for people of color, the differently abled, and women. Humor oriented towards social justice, such as charged humor, belied this faulty optimism, making it less profitable or appealing during this time. Television producers sought safe comedy that would not jeopardize advertising revenue, and, in general, the mostly white, middle-class patrons of comedy clubs did not want to pay to feel guilty about something they believed was effectively outmoded.<sup>8</sup> For someone like Margaret Cho, whose life experiences attested to the persistence of racism, sexism, and homophobia, stand-up comedy offered a forum to voice discontent, but Cho was not trafficking in much charged humor during those years. Her early comedy was autobiographical, a little raunchy and rebellious, but definitely not the biting sociopolitical commentary that punctuates later concert films. Reflecting on those days, Cho admits that back then she “never thought about the overreaching kinds of things like race and identity.”<sup>9</sup> Whether she was aware of it or not, this was a smart choice, given that her audiences were composed mainly of white, middle-class suburbanites and their college-age offspring. Mimicry of her immigrant Korean mother proved especially popular with industry gatekeepers, college audiences, and comedy-club patrons alike. Cho spent the better part of this decade working diligently to craft a likeable stage persona in order to build a following and achieve mainstream status.

It is unlikely that Margaret Cho would have the massive fan base she has today had she not followed conventional routes for success in stand-up comedy. She began performing stand-up as a teenager in San Francisco in the very late 1980s when she made her way from local open-mic comedy shows to larger commercial venues like Holy City Zoo and Punchline. At the age of twenty, she made her first television appearance on VH1's wildly popular *Stand-Up Spotlight* (1988–), hosted by a depoliticized Rosie O'Donnell. She impressed the owner of St. James Club, a gay bar in San Jose, who liked her sexual frank-

ness and ruminations on being the daughter of immigrants and bet that his gay male clientele would too. He was right, and she made her own discovery—she loved performing for gay audiences. In the early 1990s she managed to nab a few appearances on MTV, told jokes on ABC's *½ Hour Comedy Hour* (1991), and began doing regular shows at Josie's Juice Joint in the Castro district, where many queer comics came to perform. She felt at home in these clubs and in retrospect, writes:

Working for a predominantly queer crowd taught me a lot about how to be a good comic. I found the audiences at Josie's were smarter, more political, more compassionate. Josie's didn't serve alcohol, so they were way more awake too. In straight clubs back then, the late night shows where the patrons were so drunk they could barely get through a full joke without screaming were way more like baby-sitting than actually performing. I am forever grateful to my wonderful audiences back then, people who told me when I was funny and forgave me when I wasn't. Like all great divas, I owe everything to the kindness of gay men.<sup>10</sup>

From 1991–1994 Cho traveled throughout California and the country performing at comedy clubs and colleges and universities. During this time, young and adventurous amateur performers like Janeane Garofalo, David Cross, Kathy Griffin, and Laura Kightlinger sought to resuscitate comedy from what they saw as a national comedy scene saturated with hacky, predictable jokes. Alternative comedy—characterized by improvised, anecdotal, stream-of-consciousness humor—cropped up on the West Coast and lured in comics desiring to try something different on stage. In an interview with Yael Kohen, Cho addresses her relationship to alternative comedy, noting: “I always stayed firmly within the conventional comedy clubs—I never left. I didn't have the luxury of just being an alternative comic. . . . It wasn't where I learned to do comedy.”<sup>11</sup> This did not mean that she wasn't impressed by the work of these comic pioneers; rather, it was not a style of comedy that worked well for the audiences she had already committed to entertain in national comedy-club chains or Midwestern university towns. She continues:

I think it [alternative comedy] gave me a lot of freedom to expand on what I was doing, and it gave me a lot more confidence, but I had to

modify it too. You couldn't just take that into the mainstream comedy rooms at the time; you still had to have jokes. That was really important. I had to make money, which I was doing at the time, but I still wanted to be hanging out. You never make any money in alternative groups, so you would go to the alternative groups for hanging out, and go to the rest of the gigs for making money.<sup>12</sup>

Her need to earn a decent wage and her choice to perform in traditional comedy venues won her the attention of booking agents for late-night television talk shows and later of ABC producers. She won the 1994 American Comedy Award for Female Comedian and soon after landed TV appearances on shows like *The Arsenio Hall Show* (1989–1994) as well as a coveted spot in the all-lady lineup on *Bob Hope Presents the Ladies of Laughter* (1992). It was not long before producers approached her about starring in her own sitcom.

Though it seemed like a good investment—Margaret Cho was an award-winning comic and had made numerous television appearances and lapped the country several times over performing to TV's most desired demographics in comedy clubs and colleges—*All-American Girl* lasted a mere one season, leaving producers dismayed and puzzled. Audiences loved her impressions of her Korean mother on stage, so why wouldn't viewers similarly appreciate a sitcom where conflicts arose between the immigrant parents with strange customs and their Americanized children? After all, in either performance scenario otherness becomes the source of laughter. Michelle Woo, writer for *KoreAm Journal* (an online monthly magazine delivering Korean American news) recalled that the show “faded in and out faster than a thumbprint on a Hypercolor T-shirt,” but on the upside, it “was the first network sitcom to feature a predominantly Asian American cast—a milestone that brought tempered hope for a group that had for decades been reduced to kung fu fighters, dragon ladies and kooky bucktoothed neighbors in mainstream media portrayals.”<sup>13</sup> Calling it a failure, as some critics did, overlooks the monumental importance signified by a show with an entirely Asian American cast.<sup>14</sup> With no creative control and little say in the writing process, Cho watched as the network treated her ethnicity as a gimmick and trotted out stereotypes about Asians to draw in viewers. In a promotional image for the show, posted on her Facebook page twenty-two years later, she points out the inclusion of chopsticks used to underline the title, a gimmicky and insulting visual signifier of Asian American-ness.



11.2. Post on official Margaret Cho Facebook page (2016).

Such narrow, if not altogether erroneous, representations and ideas about what it means to be Asian American were all part of the network's attempt to deliver an authentic picture of an Asian American family. For Cho, attempting to achieve "an accurate Asian family" is highly problematic because "there is no such thing. . . . Another way of being racist is to ask for authenticity."<sup>15</sup> The problems that arose during production of *All-American Girl*, among other things, politicized Cho.

Although her sitcom was short-lived, Margaret Cho benefitted from the exposure. The public flocked to the comedy clubs where she had now achieved headliner status. More income (from the sitcom and from stand-up) meant she could pursue other creative projects, like writing screenplays and forming a sketch comedy troupe called The People Tree; more visibility meant additional offers for film roles and television appearances, adding bulk to an already bulging bank account. Her stand-up comedy during this time does not have the same edge, clear message points, or charged quality that her later concert films would have. Though she establishes herself as a fag hag and an ally to the gay community, this is barely a blip in *Drunk with Power* (1996). Instead, she talks more about dating fiascos with men, fears of becoming fat, and her work in the entertainment industry. Racism does come up a couple times, like when she quips:

Also when you're an Asian American actress working, it's hard to get work because whenever they have an Asian in a movie they always have to justify our existence. You know, you can't just be there. You have to be there for some reason, like you have to be either a computer expert [laughter], or some kind of Tai Chi master [laughter], or an exchange student [laughter].<sup>16</sup>

Early seeds of charged jokes told in future concert films exist, but the overall performance lacks the context necessary to situate Cho as antiracist, feminist, and pro-gay. She makes a good point about Asian stock characters, but there is simply no audience affirmation for that message. Notice that there is no audience response for the statements prefacing the recitation of those stock characters; in contrast, in specials filmed in the next decade the audience cheers, whistles, and claps when she makes similar points. Instead, when she tells this joke in *Drunk with Power*, the audience guffaws at the mention of each stock character (computer expert, Tai Chi master, and exchange student), and it is difficult to tell why they are laughing. Is it merely mutual recognition of those stock characters—that kind of chuckle often coupled with turning to your friend and smiling as if to say, "So true." The fact is we never really know, because humor is subjective. But comics who make charged humor a mainstay in their routines, like Cho would do in the twenty-first century, educate audiences early on as to where they stand on matters of social justice and equality. This kind of clarity of voice and perspective means that viewers will not be confused about the nature of the joke and what or who is under attack.

Stand-up comedy allows for greater control of self-presentation, but that does not mean that what we as audience members see and hear is *the* truth; rather, it is a version of the truth. Importantly, it is Margaret Cho's version of the truth, but it is also carefully constructed, edited, and choreographed to stoke interest and loyalty from others who have felt similar social pressures and likewise have felt the sting of oppression.<sup>17</sup> Cho personally attests to carefully deliberating which stories she will relay (and how), which social issues she chooses to confront, and which portions of her life she opts to make public.<sup>18</sup> For instance, despite speaking frankly about her sexual forays with many, many, many people, Cho does not include material about her husband of many years, Al Ridenour, a comic performance artist. Cho constructs a stage persona that, while bearing verisimili-

tude to her life, is still carefully crafted and re-presented to audiences in order to entertain and educate. Her books and many performances offer two modes of storytelling, presenting congruent content that “demonstrates how it is not the story itself that is of utmost importance, it is *the way that story is told*.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, a failed sitcom is not a product of Cho’s shortcomings as a performer but of her inability to attain an impossible white beauty ideal or conform to stereotypes about Asian Americans. And a rejected screenplay is less a matter of poor craftsmanship and more a result of refusing the unwanted sexual advances of a handsy producer with the capital and connections to produce the film. (Yes, that really happened.) What may look like someone candidly sharing hilarious stories is actually the product of a conscientious wordsmith.

Careful rhetorical footwork on stage in the 1990s reduced the likelihood of alienating mainly white, heterosexual audiences while also signaling identification with and membership to the Asian American and LGBTQ communities. In *Drunk with Power*, she reassures heterosexual male audience members that she enjoys giving blowjobs; moreover, she says that she is straight and sexually available. She makes stereotypically gendered jokes about feeling fat, and the entire set is punctuated with stereotypes about Asian Americans, lesbians, and people of size. These generate the loudest guffaws of affirmation.<sup>20</sup> Constructing this persona was a successful strategy for getting mainstreamed, and it ultimately conferred the name recognition and financial independence necessary for Cho to leave comedy clubs and migrate to larger performance halls and theatres. This does not mean that she does mainstream comedy now (by “mainstream” I mean comedy that would play well to the dominant culture); rather, it signifies that the mainstream status she achieved in the 1990s allowed her to delve into commercially risky material that would appeal to new fan bases. In her analysis of Cho’s body of work, gender and sexuality studies scholar Linda Mizejewski writes: “By 2010 Cho enjoyed a decidedly ‘niche stardom’ comprised of mainstream recognition and popularity centered in the LGBTQ community.”<sup>21</sup> Were it not for the sitcom or her due diligence performing hundreds of shows in comedy clubs across America and internationally, Cho would not have been able to pursue the creative projects she undertook in the twenty-first century—movies, TV shows, comedy tours, variety shows, books, blogs, music videos, and a clothing line—nor would she have had the fan base to support the biting, socially conscious, charged humor that

she became known for in *I’m the One That I Want*. Enjoying mainstream status and visibility, Cho was finally in a financial position to control the production and distribution of her stand-up comedy. The bio on her website attests to this: “After her experience with *All-American Girl*, Margaret wanted to make sure she would only have to answer to herself, making sure she was responsible for the distribution and sales of her film, taking a page from what music artist Ani DiFranco did with her Righteous Babe Records.”<sup>22</sup> This was a game changer for the composition and growth of Cho’s Army as she became increasingly vocal about social ills in ways that made minorities feel accepted and safe at comedy performances, places where we traditionally brace ourselves for attack.

#### THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: BUILDING AN EMPIRE

The internet didn’t feel new by the turn of the century, but innovations in new media—for example, blogging and wiki platforms, MOOs (online, text-based, multiplayer gaming), interactive computer and video games, and social networking sites like MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and YouTube—became increasingly popular, luring people away from print media and television sets. Wireless communication technology obviated the need for a home phone altogether, and by 2008, 52 percent of the world’s population were wireless phone subscribers. Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells summarizes these shifts as “evol[ing] from a predominantly homogenous mass communication medium, anchored around national television and radio networks, to a diverse media system combining broadcasting with narrowcasting to niche audiences.”<sup>23</sup> Astutely aware of the internet’s potential to connect her to fans without mediation or interference, Margaret Cho established a webpage, began blogging, and climbed on board when young entrepreneurs launched social networking sites. Confident in her ability to fill large performance venues, she took to the road on a series of self-funded and produced stand-up comedy tours with material that was decidedly charged. Comedy performed in the twenty-first century enlisted the support of the have-nots and the downtrodden. And existing fans were in for a bit of a surprise; compared to her older material (heard in comedy clubs, on television, and on her audio recordings), Cho’s independently produced performances and publications (online and print) clearly established her as a queer ally (and later as queer), a champion of civil liberties, and a



11.3. Cho on cover of *Ms.* magazine spring issue (2003). Photograph courtesy of *Ms.* magazine.

staunch feminist. She became a woman on a mission to fight misrepresentations of Asian Americans, unhealthy and impossible standards of beauty, and homophobia—and now she had the capital to spread the word far and wide.

During the filming of her concert show *Revolution* (2004) at the Wiltern Theatre in Los Angeles, Cho proceeded to peel off articles of clothing: a jewel-laden crownlike head covering, her stylized ladyboots, and a wig she criticizes as being too “chinky.” Doffing material signifiers of Asian-ness and femininity, Cho plays with her presentation of self, unmasking the work we all do as part of our daily performances of gender, ethnicity, class, and sexuality. Subversion of social norms and expectations via dress, comportment, speech, and behavior reveals the terrain of culture as a powerful site upon which social change can be enacted. Statements made during her show ac-

knowledge this: “I think if racial minorities, sexual minorities, feminists, both male and female, hell all liberals, if we all got together . . . that would equal power. And that power would equal change. And that change would equal a revolution [*cheering and clapping*].”<sup>24</sup> Using the exceedingly popular cultural form of stand-up comedy, Cho plays Pied Piper to a ragtag bevy of social outcasts. And like many charged comics before her (e.g., Dick Gregory, Robin Tyler, Richard Pryor, and Kate Clinton), she trusts that comedy can challenge social inequality, that revolutions can begin in entertainment venues.

Scholars analyzing the corpus of Cho’s work recognize her commitment to social justice, without calling it charged humor.<sup>25</sup> A genre of humor that has been around as long as comedians have been cracking jokes, charged humor stokes community, advocates equality for all, and offers solutions for social redress. This humor is carefully crafted by the comic to unmask and challenge the cultural fictions circulating about minority groups “with specific intentions to promote unity and equality or to create a safe and accepting space for people from all walks of life.”<sup>26</sup> After taking control of the means of comedy production, Cho punctuates her comedy with jokes that advocate self-efficacy and social agency, advice she sees as essential in a society that renders inferior anybody who is not a straight, white, able-bodied man. The power and subversiveness of self-love and the reclamation of personal beauty for social misfits are running themes in her concert film *Beautiful* (2009).

I’m really into complimenting myself and you should do the same. . . . We gotta compliment ourselves because we get enough shit in the world. Like I did this radio show and the deejay asked me: “What if you woke up tomorrow and you were beautiful?” [*Audience laughs as she makes a shocked face*] What do you mean, what if? [*Laughter*] He said: “What if you woke up and you were blonde and had blue eyes and you were 5’11” and weighed a hundred pounds and you were beautiful? What would you do?” And I said: “Well, I probably wouldn’t get up because I would be too weak to stand.” [*Laughter*] And I felt very sorry for him because if that’s the only kind of person you think is beautiful, you wouldn’t see very much beauty at all in the world [*cheering and clapping*]. And I think everybody is beautiful. . . . I think it’s very important to feel beautiful. I think it’s very political to feel beautiful, especially if you’re queer, because if you’re

queer you have to take on the world every single day of your life. So you have to feel beautiful [*clapping begins*] to survive [*clapping swells and the audience cheers*].<sup>27</sup>

This joke locates people of color, queer folks, and women who do not fit the description of beauty proffered by the deejay as the groups most commonly subjected to unattainable social norms and ideals—a distanciation that results in self-loathing, body dysmorphia, and, at its extreme, suicide. Cho cleverly makes each of us the sole determinant of beauty, wresting that power from the media and placing it back in our hands, empowering us to not only feel beautiful ourselves but to reject dominant beauty ideals as a matter of survival. In this way, her charged humor uses personal experience to reveal the logics of social subordination and construct new ways of interpreting the world around us.

Intentions to foment social change are a critical component of charged humor. It signals the author's desire for more than just a laugh and makes the performer's objectives clear to audiences (and scholars), which helps circumvent the penchant to attribute resistance to performers whose motives are not congruent with interpretations of the performance text (for instance, if I tried to argue that misogynist comedy is feminist). Scholars studying the body of Cho's work vary in their approach to and readings of her performances. These studies range from examinations of Cho's autobiographical mode of storytelling, to rhetorical constructions of Asian American identity, to the way beauty and the body factor into the experiences of women comics; yet, at the heart of these analyses lies a shared admission that Cho intends to use comedy to advocate on behalf of minorities in the service of social change.<sup>28</sup> In a phone interview with Gary Kramer, author of *Independent Queer Cinema: Reviews and Interviews*, Margaret Cho describes her comedy as "a kind of myth-making and myth-breaking" that is "very political and motivational in its own way."<sup>29</sup> She goes on:

It's about being a woman of color and stepping into power—wearing my greatness on my shoulders and being ostentatious and outrageous. . . . To step into our political power is essential. . . . I realized that I had the ability to combine my need to be funny with my desire to help people. And by that, also help myself. I think it was just

discovering the ability to combine the two that made me the artist I am now.<sup>30</sup>

Not only does this intentionality show up in her performances but also in writing projects like her two autobiographies: *I'm the One That I Want* (2001) and *I Have Chosen to Stay and Fight* (2005), which Linda Mizejewski describes as "follow[ing] the pattern of consciousness-raising narratives that rally readers and audiences toward social change."<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, in keeping with a black feminist epistemology advanced by Patricia Hill Collins, Cho's writings use personal experience to advance cultural critique, emphasize the importance of dialogue and action, champion empathy to create intercommunity coalitions, and encourage individual accountability for our actions and beliefs.<sup>32</sup> Cho writes: "We have no idea how powerful we actually are. We were never considered part of the general, 'respectable' population. This land is your land, but this land isn't my land—that is what so many of us thought. This second-class citizenship has sunk in so deeply that we have barely any awareness of it. We had no idea that this is the enemy we are truly fighting."<sup>33</sup> The enemy lies without and within, according to Cho, making it a battle waged against oppressive forces both external (e.g., government, media, religion, education) and internal (e.g., the ways in which we view and treat ourselves). Stoking social equality through authorial intent, fostering cultural citizenship among minorities, and using humor to unite and mobilize minority communities are all the core ingredients of charged humor.

It is not enough to offer cultural critique exposing social ills. Charged humor goes further and offers possible solutions to those ills—something Margaret Cho does in her stand-up comedy, blogs, and published writings. In her second book, *I Have Chosen to Stay and Fight*, an autobiographical call-to-arms to the repressed and oppressed, Cho peppers the pages with action-oriented directives: "We need to wake up. It's time to start some shit. Alarm clock = Revolution"; "What is needed now is action, not hopelessness"; and "It is time to hold fast to our beliefs, to create new standards for our elected officials, to continue to commit our acts of civil disobedience."<sup>34</sup> This manifesto includes suggestions like descending on city hall and demanding marriage licenses for gay unions, unseating politicians who interfere with women's reproductive rights, and exercising empow-

erment by being selfish at times—in other words, attending to your own needs, desires, and dreams can be a wholly radical act for minorities. She expounds on this latter point in her concert film *Notorious C.H.O.* (2002):

And if you are a woman; if you are a person of color; if you are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender; if you're a person of size; if you're a person of intelligence; if you're a person of integrity, then you are considered a minority in this world [*cheering and clapping*]. And it's going to be really hard to find messages of self-love and support anywhere, especially women's and gay men's culture. It's all about having to look a certain way or you're worthless. . . . When you don't have self-esteem, you will hesitate before you do anything in your life. You will hesitate to go for the job you really want to go for. You will hesitate to ask for a raise. You will hesitate to call yourself an American. You will hesitate to report a rape. You will hesitate to defend yourself when you are discriminated against because of your race, your sexuality, your size, your gender. You will hesitate to vote. You will hesitate to dream. For us to have self-esteem is truly an act of revolution and our revolution is long overdue [*cheering and clapping*]. I urge you all today, especially today in these times of terrorism and chaos, to love yourselves without reservation and to love each other without restraint, unless you're into leather [*laughter*] then by all means, use restraints.<sup>35</sup>

For minorities, the lack of economic resources, cultural capital, and political access is compounded by internalized oppression that leads to self-contempt and complacency, a documented psychological state that makes people believe that any supposed inferiority is biological or natural and ultimately results in underperformance. Social psychologist Claude Steele studied this phenomenon, for which he coined the term “stereotype threat,” and conducted a series of social experiments among college students that demonstrated the grave impact such beliefs have on the success of women and racial/ethnic minorities in education, athletics, job performance, and other social interactions.<sup>36</sup> Without a call to action and a clear path of action, charged humor might simply be mistaken for satire or sociopolitical commentary.<sup>37</sup> This also happens to be the characteristic of charged humor that makes people the most uneasy, particularly those comfortable with and benefitting from America's current social order.

Greater artistic freedom came when Margaret Cho produced and distributed *I'm the One That I Want* and, two years later, *Notorious C.H.O.* (The latter was also distributed as an independent film.) According to her bio, “Both films were acquired by Showtime Cable Networks, and produced by Margaret's production company, a testament to the success of Margaret's bold business model.”<sup>38</sup> It breaks down like this: Cho's production company finances each stand-up tour and the filming of the associated concert film, thus earning tour proceeds and owning the rights to distribute the film as desired. Premium network channels like Showtime must pay to air the special, usually a fee for the first airing of the film and residuals each time the film repeats. This model continued with future concert films like *Revolution* (2004), *Assassin* (2005), *Beautiful* (2009), *Cho Dependent* (2011), and *PsyCHO* (2015). It eliminates payouts to industry producers and networks who otherwise control creative content and distribution. (They determine whether and where to sell the rights, not the performer.) The performer walks away with a flat fee for services rendered—no residuals, no royalties, no difference in pay if the special airs one time or a thousand times. It also means that the owner of that content determines what gets included or cut prior to airing or distribution. To avoid these issues, Cho joined forces with Karen Taussig to create Cho Taussig Productions Inc., and both women became executive producers for the concert films distributed. In an interview, Karen Taussig remarks: “Everybody is owned by something and there's only so far they can go. And maybe if Margaret was also owned by a corporation we'd be cutting stuff out or whatever, but she's not.”<sup>39</sup> Even powerful and provocative comedy performers like Stephn Colbert and Bill Maher can only go so far because they are still subject to network producers kowtowing to advertisers. Strategic professional moves like creating a production company, writing books, and using blogging and other social networking to communicate with fans sans outside interference means that Cho arbitrates the messages and material she brings to the public; as a result she can exercise self-determination in making appeals to particular niche audiences.

Margaret Cho's writings published during the early aughts mirror the charged comedy she disseminated during the same time. Following the release of *I'm the One That I Want* (the concert film), Cho published a book by the same name that expands on the autobiographical material she delivers in the former. Her second book, *I Have Chosen*



to *Stay and Fight* (2005), compiles blog posts (and some new writing) into a politicized feminist manifesto, a call-to-arms to the disenfranchised. For example, she writes:

I am fighting when I'm sleeping. In my dreams, I must slay the dragon of European heterosexual male society, then I wake up in the morning and must be an activist. I have to watch the news and movies about the people who I am not, then translate my struggle in order to make it palatable for those people who don't have to march but are sympathetic to my voice. This is a major part of my audience, an easy ear to bend—yet I still must bend that ear myself. I make the effort and that makes the difference, and this is what I'd like a break from. What if I didn't have to bend anyone's ear? What if the playing field really was level? I'd love to see how far I could go. What if all I had to show off were my mad skills? Wouldn't I really be able to fly then?<sup>40</sup>

If it was not already clear who Cho targets for her army, the book is divided into chapters that address specific social identities to which she belongs/identifies/allies herself; these are: LGBTQ folks, women/feminists, liberal Christians, Korean Americans, sexual “deviants” (specifically those into bondage and sadomasochism), antiracists, and Democrats.<sup>41</sup> Ian Harvie, a transmale comic who went on the road with Cho for a stint in the early aughts, described their audiences in the following way: “The people who would come to see her big shows were largely GLBTQ folks and extreme liberals. These were basically the same people I was performing for back in Boston . . . : wildly diverse, liberal, and queer.”<sup>42</sup> Cho's writings published and comedy performed during this time brought the clarity of purpose and context lacking in her earlier stand-up comedy, though it is highly doubtful that she could have become a household name in the 1990s performing and writing in ways that challenged social inequality, condemned bigots, and mobilized minority communities. No longer subject to regulation, her control of the means of production and distribution gave Cho carte blanche to speak truth to power.

Blogs (a shortened term for weblogs) rose in popularity in the late 1990s alongside the creation of new blog tools like Open Diary and SlashDot and social networking programs that housed blogs and connected bloggers to each other. Such programs allowed for proliferation of commentary on culture and politics without the requisite pedigree expected of journalists, reporters, and pundits. On one hand, readers

may discount such commentary or information as lacking credibility, but on the other it gives voice and visibility to the people because “the global digital communication system, while reflecting power relationships, is not based on the top-down diffusion of one dominant culture.”<sup>43</sup> Put differently, bloggers can disrupt the traditional production and flow of information that privileges white masculinist perspectives and works on behalf of powerful multinational corporations that heavily influence governance. As a regular contributor to *Huffington Post* and *xoJane* as well as maintaining her own public blog on her webpage, Margaret Cho invests a great deal of time in blogging. Blog posts offer periodic updates about her work (upcoming shows, podcasts, benefits) and share photos of her in addition to personal reflection and commentary on her own experiences (living in Los Angeles, vacations, etc.) and social commentary on popular culture and politics. It proves a surefire way to communicate with her fan base without heavy mediation and is more expedient than writing a book, which can take years from pen to press. According to her, it is also subversive in the following ways:

Bloggers have altered the way we view the news. Censorship and propaganda cannot go undetected in the blogosphere. Through the steady devotion of bloggers to tell the truth, to make their stories known, to communicate, to exist, loud and clear, we are blessed with an entirely new way to experience media. The news sources we relied on, the ones we feared would betray us with lies to protect their corporate allies, are no longer needed. . . . Without freedom of information, we have no freedom. Without access to the truth, we are powerless. . . . I trust the bloggers more than the nightly news because even though everyone has an agenda, theirs are closer to mine. In these times, we must just try to get closer to ourselves, get back to who we are. Identifying ourselves in the unrelenting storm of false information is one way bloggers can help. Protecting the truth by becoming bloggers ourselves, instead of retreating into lies and twisted political posturing, needs to become our way of life. Choosing to stay and fight for ourselves is the only way we can survive.<sup>44</sup>

Activist in their orientation, Cho's blogging efforts mirror the messages she includes in her stand-up comedy and epitomize the famous feminist dictum: “the personal is political.” For example, during a visit to Aroma Spa and Sports in Los Angeles, where clothing is op-

tional, spa attendants asked Cho to cover up her tattooed body because it offended some of the older Korean/Korean American female patrons. Reflecting on the experience, she vents her frustrations, writing:

Their intolerance viewing my nakedness—as if it was some kind of an assault on their senses, like my ass was a weapon—made me furious in a way I can't really even express with words—and that for me is quite impressive. This bitch always has some shit to say. I guess it comes down to this—I deserve better. I brought the first Korean American family to television. I have influenced a generation of Asian American comedians, artists, musicians, actors, authors—many, many people to do what they dreamed of doing, not letting their race and the lack of Asian Americans in the media stop them. If anything, I understand Korean culture better than most, because I have had to fight against much of its homophobia, sexism, racism—all the while trying to maintain my fierce ethnic pride.<sup>45</sup>

In this instance, Cho turns rejection and public shaming into an opportunity to illustrate that she can be both Korean American, and a proponent of gay rights, and a champion of racial equality, and accepting of differences whatever they may be. These positions and identities are not and do not have to be mutually exclusive. It is credo and mantra in defense of alterity, and blog posts like this one not only remind existing and potential fans that she exists to rally on their behalf but that subordination takes many forms and affects many groups, not just their own. Racism should matter to the LGBTQ community and likewise homophobia should matter to communities of color, because as the saying goes: no one is free when others are oppressed. The same activist mentality that informs Cho's blog posts governs her regular usage of other social media platforms, while her command of such platforms ensures consistent contact and engagement with a diverse fan base.

A savvy user of social media, Margaret Cho stays connected with her fans by maintaining accounts on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Pinterest. She syncs many of these accounts—meaning that a contribution to Instagram will show up on Twitter and Facebook—and by doing so can appeal to various networks/groups, including family, friends, acquaintances, fellow comics and artists, and the many fans that constitute the Cho Army. Not content to sim-



11.4. Margaret Cho Twitter post (2016).

ply tweet about her professional projects, Cho frequently (as in daily) retweets numerous messages to support and boost turnout for her fellow comics, to share information about her favorite entertainers and bands, and to endorse causes like animal adoption and helping the homeless. Always attentive to her fans, you can witness Cho bantering back and forth with them on Twitter—retweeting accolades of her work, favoriting their tweets, and even responding directly to them. Posting on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook is relatively quick and painless; however, YouTube requires more work in order to film, edit, and then upload to this online video-sharing site. Undeterred by the greater time commitment, Cho used YouTube to stoke interest and enthusiasm for her MOTHER! Tour (the U.S. portion of the tour began in Atlanta and Athens, Georgia, in August 2013), which she describes as “an untraditional look at motherhood and how we look at maternal figures and strong women in queer culture.”<sup>46</sup> As she made her way across the United States (again), she uploaded video updates from various performance destinations across the country (e.g., St. Louis, Denver, San Francisco, Austin, Boston, and D.C.). There are a dozen such updates wherein Cho, dressed casually and usually without makeup, talks to the camera (that is, her fans) about her stay in that city, much like she is talking to an old friend. She details her fish egg birthday dinner in San Diego, shows everyone her new boots bought in Dallas, and reminisces about the last time she performed in San Francisco's Nob Hill Masonic Theatre. But she is still promoting her shows. The brief videos (one to two minutes each) show clips of her singing her original hit “Fat Pussy,” introducing musical

guests that rotate in and out of her tour, and urging fans to come out for a great show. This combination of the personal and professional employed on social media platforms collapses traditional hierarchies and boundaries between fans and celebrities and maintains a public image of Cho as “one of us.” Such maneuvers align with Cho’s personal worldviews of shared humanity and signal mutual allegiance between Cho and her fans. It is a win-win situation. Fans support Cho’s work and in return she advocates on their behalf, championing civil rights in political and cultural spheres.

On an episode of HBO’s *The Green Room with Paul Provenza*, fellow funnyman Jeffrey Ross calls Cho’s comedy “the outsider’s act,” and on her website bio Cho acknowledges that many “people who come to my shows don’t necessarily consider themselves traditional comedy fans. I seem to be a safe alternative for people who don’t think they’re being represented in society.”<sup>47</sup> Cho does not just offer a safe alternative for the underrepresented; she also provides a safe space to laugh without fear of being made the butt of the joke. Going to comedy clubs or shows can be a scary thing for many of the groups drawn to Cho’s comedy—you never know if you or the communities to which you belong will be thrown under the proverbial bus, targeted in a way that forecloses certain identities as inferior, as in Henny Youngman’s famous one-liner, “Take my wife . . . please!” Margaret Cho elaborates on this:

As a queer Asian American feminist, I am always at risk, as my existence, or whatever, is perceived to be some kind of fodder for bad jokes from hack comedians. The homophobia, racism, and sexism I hear and feel constantly is taken as trivial. I have been told time and time again, it’s just a joke. Who cares? Well, I care, and it hurts me. It dehumanizes me and adds to the invisibility I already feel, which also doesn’t make sense. How can being singled out and abused make you feel like you aren’t even there? In the alchemy of bigotry, it does. Safety is important to people like me, and my shows are where people can truly feel safe and visible and real and I am grateful I can do that. It’s better than magic. It’s relief. The burdens of race, sexuality and gender are lifted. It’s OK to be you and me when we are together.<sup>48</sup>

Attending one of her shows offers respite in an otherwise inhospitable culture, and this is clearly intentional. Cho’s performances—what Ernesto Javier Martinez calls “faggot pageantry,” because she identi-

fies with gay male subcultures and often invokes gay mimicry in her stand-up—are “unique instantiations of bearing faithful witness to queerness, not because she claims to represent gay men accurately or in their full complexity and diversity, but because she highlights the fractured (compromised) locus from within which gay men negotiate active subjectivities, and from which she herself negotiates survival as a racialized, queer woman.”<sup>49</sup> In her charged comedy and writing, valuation of the complexity of identity and group heterogeneity functions as a clarion call for her fans to do the same; in this way she embraces her audience for *all* of who they are and enjoins fans to reject reductive representations of Others. By using multiple mediums to distribute her comic material—performances, books, blogs, and social media—she has been able to capture the adoration of an extensive fan base. She routinely sells out shows in venues that seat thousands, and her books have been national bestsellers. And with nearly half a million Twitter followers, four hundred thousand Facebook friends, and over a hundred thousand Instagram followers, it is clear that a loyal army of admirers have elevated Margaret Cho to status of comedy icon. She curries favor among the disenfranchised, celebrates their shared humanity, and then reminds them they have work to do as members of the Cho Army.

#### CONCLUSION

The media transmits representations of various social identities—gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, ability—continuously on television, on film, and in the glossies beckoning us as we check out of stores. It is a formidable challenge to ignore what mainstream media says we should look like, how we should act, what we should buy, and what/whom we should believe. The struggle for self-definition collides and often competes with the constant barrage of information and images that constitute our culture, making it a battleground where identity formation plays out.<sup>50</sup> It is true that exclusion from the political process—whether by force, wealth, or circumstances—and lack of financial clout present major obstacles to individuals and communities seeking to create social change. But if we are produced through culture (in other words, if our identities are shaped by music, literature, performance, film, and fine arts) then this also becomes a valuable site to contest misrepresentations and protest relegation to second-class citizens. Margaret Cho’s stand-up comedy is a cultural form she



11.5. Margaret Cho in her music video "I Wanna Kill My Rapist" (2015).

can use to set the record queer about who she is as an American citizen, a woman, a feminist, a Korean American, and a member of the queer community.<sup>51</sup> Unlike television producers, writers, or reporters, when Cho authors her life experiences—whether through comedy, books, blogs, or tweets—she disrupts the ways she herself has been shaped and mediated by the media. This reimagining of the self points toward the ludic possibilities for future reimaginings of minority communities. If we can see Cho as a dynamic, complex, and even contradictory woman, we begin to reject gross generalizations and stereotypes about any single person or community.

There is no doubt that Margaret Cho is a busy lady. Whether she is touring with Cyndi Lauper to raise money for the Human Rights Campaign, accepting a "Korean of the Year" award, strutting her stuff on *Dancing with the Stars* (ABC season 11), canoodling with the cast of *30 Rock* as a gender-bending Kim Jung Il, performing in "Weird Al" Yankovic's music video "Tacky" (a remake of Pharrell Williams's "Happy"), making cameo appearances at the Golden Globe Awards, or a contestant on *@midnight*—Chris Hardwick's popular game show centered around social media—you can be sure that these are only side projects that take a backseat to self-funded creative ventures like mounting new comedy tours, cohosting *Monsters of Talk*, and writing. She worked hard in the 1990s in order to be in a financial position to exercise control over the production and distribution of her work, bringing a social justice sensibility to her twenty-first-century creative projects, from blogs to books to comedy to acting. On seeing Cho perform, humorist Emily Levine gushed:

When I first saw Margaret Cho—with all credit to Sandra Bernhard—I was like, "Oh my God. This is like the quote from Muriel Rukeyser, the poet: 'What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? The world would split open.'" To have that kind of bravery and just put it all out there. I was blown away. I still am.<sup>52</sup>

Levine's reaction is not uncommon, particularly among the minorities and allies to whom Cho targets her charged comedy. During Cho's 2004 Assassin Tour, her chauffeur, an African American woman named Kewana, said: "When I see her, I see myself. I see another aspect of a person of color that, you know, I didn't realize." During the same tour, black filmmaker and assistant professor at Temple University Michelle Parkerson extolled the values of Cho's humor: "It is heartening. It lets you know you're not alone. It lets you know that someone speaks the same language as you."<sup>53</sup> For minorities or anyone who sympathizes with those experiencing social and political exclusion, Cho's performances offer assurance that they are not alone or crazy and provide a safe space in which to celebrate diversity and difference—theirs and others. After all, if it is a numbers game, the members of Cho's Army—all the sexual deviants, the unfavorably complected, the poor, the cult members, the disposable people, the bitches and gender truants, the evil-doers, the undocumented, the foreigners and the freaks—would certainly win.

#### NOTES

1. Judith Yaross Lee, *Twain's Brand: Humor in Contemporary American Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 47.
2. For further explication of charged humor and the socially conscious comics who perform charged humor, see Rebecca Krefting, *All Joking Aside: American Humor and Its Discontents* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).
3. *Margaret Cho: Assassin*, directed by Kerry Asmussen (Cho Taussig Productions, 2005), video.
4. Douglas Kellner, "Cultural Studies, Multiculturalism, and Media Culture," in *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Critical Reader*, ed. Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2011), 10.
5. These references come from the following concert films (respectively): *Margaret Cho: Beautiful*, directed by Lorene Machado (Clownery Productions, 2009), video; *Margaret Cho: Assassin*; *Margaret Cho: Revolution*, directed by Lorene Machado (Wellspring Media, 2004), video.
6. Margaret Cho, *I'm the One That I Want* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2001).

7. Ibid.
8. Further information and evidence supporting these claims regarding censorship and shifting public sentiment during this time can be found in chapter 2 of Krefting, *All Joking Aside*.
9. Michelle Woo, "20 Years Later Margaret Cho Looks Back on 'All-American Girl,'" *KoreAm Journal*, Sept. 15, 2014, <http://iamkoream.com/20-years-later-margaret-cho-looks-back-on-all-american-girl>.
10. Margaret Cho, "The Kindness of Gay Men," introduction to *Out on the Edge: America's Rebel Comics*, ed. Mike Player (New York: Alyson Books, 2008), 2.
11. Yael Kohen, *We Killed: The Rise of Women in American Comedy* (New York: Sarah Crichton Books, 2012), 221.
12. Ibid., 234–235.
13. Woo, "20 Years Later."
14. *Fresh Off the Boat* (ABC 2015–) is the first Asian American sitcom since *All-American Girl* premiered twenty years ago.
15. "Margaret Cho, Jeffrey Ross, Richard Lewis, and Kamil Nanjiani," *The Green Room with Paul Provenza*, season 2, episode 5, Aug. 11, 2011, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=bmr1khDeah4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bmr1khDeah4).
16. *Margaret Cho: Drunk with Power* (San Francisco: Uproar, 1996), audio recording.
17. Performance studies scholar Dan Bacalzo writes, "By taking control of the production of truth through autobiographical performance, Cho positions herself as being able to intervene in existing discourses around representation." Bacalzo, "The One That She Wants: Margaret Cho, Mediatization, and Autobiographical Performance," in *Embodying Asian American Sexualities*, ed. Gina Masequesmay and Sean Metzger (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009), 44.
18. See her personal interview in the bonus features included on *Margaret Cho: Assassin*.
19. Bacalzo, "The One That She Wants," 48.
20. *Margaret Cho: Drunk with Power*.
21. Linda Mizejewski, *Pretty/Funny: Women Comedians and Body Politics* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), 130.
22. "Margaret Cho: Bio," <http://margaretcho.com/bio>, accessed June 12, 2014.
23. Manuel Castells, *Communication Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 62, 127.
24. *Margaret Cho: Revolution*.
25. Jeffrey Carroll describes Cho's performances as a "hot-voiced look at inequality and prejudice that is overcome through a rhetoric of self-delineation and pride"; and Michaela Meyer argues that "Cho's rhetorical subtext challenges dominant ideological constructs that proliferate racial, ethnic, and sexual oppression in American society." See Jeffrey Carroll, "Margaret Cho, Jake Shimabukuro, and Rhetorics in a Minor Key," in *Representations: Doing Asian American Rhetoric*, ed. LuMing Mao and Morris Young (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2008), 269; and Michaela Meyer, "'Maybe I Could Play a Hooker in Something!': Asian American Identity, Gender, and Comedy in the Rhetoric of Margaret Cho," in Mao and Morris, *Representations*, 279.
26. Krefting, *All Joking Aside*, 2.
27. *Margaret Cho: Beautiful*.
28. Interestingly, the scholarship on Margaret Cho focuses on stand-up comedy performed in the twenty-first century, and scholars neither cite nor mention the comedy albums released in the 1990s. I suspect that the incongruity between the content of her performances in the 1990s and those self-produced in the twenty-first century would trouble some of the arguments made in those publications.
29. Gary M. Kramer, ed., *Independent Queer Cinema: Reviews and Interviews* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2006), 109.
30. Ibid., 108–110.
31. Mizejewski, *Pretty/Funny*, 131.
32. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 251–271.
33. Margaret Cho, *I Have Chosen to Stay and Fight* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 154.
34. Ibid., 18, 153.
35. *Margaret Cho: Notorious C.H.O.*, directed by Lorene Machado (Wellspring Media, 2002), video.
36. Claude M. Steele, *Whistling Vivaldi and Other Clues to How Stereotypes Affect Us* (New York: Norton, 2010).
37. For a lengthier discussion on the characteristics of charged humor and the ways charged humor can be distinguished from satire, see Krefting, *All Joking Aside*, 25–35.
38. "Margaret Cho: Bio."
39. *Margaret Cho: Assassin*.
40. Cho, *I Have Chosen*, 43.
41. Ibid., n.p.
42. Ian Harvie, "Funny Boi," in *Out on the Edge: America's Rebel Comics*, ed. Mike Player (New York: Alyson Books, 2008), 279.
43. Castells, *Communication Power*, 136.
44. Cho, *I Have Chosen*, 237.
45. "Aroma Smells Like Bigotry," *Margaret Cho* (blog), Mar. 25, 2013, <http://margaretcho.com/2013/03/25/aroma-smells-like-bigotry>.
46. "Margaret Cho: Bio."
47. "Margaret Cho, Jeffrey Ross, Richard Lewis"; "Margaret Cho: Bio."
48. Margaret Cho, "Margaret Cho Talks about Her Pride in Being Called a 'Queer Icon' in Light of Michelle Shocked's Anti-gay Rant," *xojane*, Mar. 21, 2013, [www.xojane.com/issues/margaret-cho-talks-about-her-pride-in-being-called-a-queer-icon-in-light-of-michelle-shocked-s-anti-gay-rant](http://www.xojane.com/issues/margaret-cho-talks-about-her-pride-in-being-called-a-queer-icon-in-light-of-michelle-shocked-s-anti-gay-rant).
49. Ernesto Javier Martinez, *On Making Sense: Queer Race Narratives of Intelligibility* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), 138.
50. Recognizing culture as a key site for negotiating identity, Americanist scholar Lisa Lowe writes: "Struggles for empowerment are often exclusively understood within the frameworks of legal, political, and economic institutions. . . . Yet an important link in this relation is the *production of individual and collective subjectivities through cultural forms*" (my emphasis). See Lowe, *Immi-*

*grant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 155.

51. According to Lowe, these kinds of personal testimonies evident in stand-up comedy work to "connect subjects to social relations"; thus, "culture is the medium through which alternatives to liberal citizenship in the political sphere are narrated, where critical subjects and collectivities can be reproduced in new configurations, with new coherences." *Ibid.*, 156.

52. Emily Levine, quoted in Kohen, *We Killed*, 234.

53. *Margaret Cho: Assassin*.