

CHO-FEMINISM: WHAT'S SO FEMINIST ABOUT MARGARET CHO?

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“I’m so excited that there are fans lined up around the block and that they’re coming to see me and I hope that I can always deliver. That kind of expectation, that adrenaline that happens when you go see a performer...I really respect that energy. I really respect that a lot because I know what it takes to go and buy a ticket and go see somebody. It’s very moving to see so many different people in my audience. It means a lot to me because it’s like I feel like I really identify with *them* too and um, we get a lot of comfort from each other. So, I don’t think that what I’m doing for some people is just entertainment. I think it’s a kind of, way of feeling like we belong in the world. That’s a kind of inclusion and it’s a way to feel validated. It’s really exciting so I don’t take their support of me lightly.”

Margret Cho's standup performance DVD *The Notorious C.H.O.* opens with an interview in which she describes her relationship with the audience, serving not only as a reflection of her goals as a comedian but also her understanding of and connection with those listening to what she has to say. As I will describe, Cho's comedy is a veritable buffet of intersectionality that allows for myriad perspectives of analysis of feminist activism through rhetoric and performance.

Margret Cho is an Asian-American queer comedian and a self-identified feminist whose career and material have been nothing if not controversial. Beginning her career in the early 1980s, Cho's hard-earned success has been steeped in personal experiences of oppression and patriarchal norms. "While Margaret Cho is now best known for her stand-up comedy, her claim to national fame was her role on *All American Girl* (1994-1995), the first television sitcom in U.S. history about an Asian American family" (Pearson, 36). Cho's sitcom was quickly cancelled after network (ABC) criticisms that Cho was too overweight and too Asian for the show to be a success (Lee). Despite Cho's failed transition from standup comedy to network television, her career was far from over. The criticisms and disapproval of network executives only fueled Cho's material and inspired her to new rhetorical platforms.

Beginning in the late 1990s, Cho began taking a more political and activist approach to her comedic material and was met with much praise for her outspoken performances. In fact, she was "named in a 2004 issue

of *The Progressive* as among an ‘insurrection’ underway among a ‘cultural front’ comprised of Michael Moore, Jon Stewart, Bruce Springsteen, Ani DiFranco and the Dixie Chicks” (Pearson, 36). Cho’s work, having been recognized by many feminist and human rights organizations, acts as more than comedic entertainment—as she has recognized. Cho’s audience is made up of an incredibly diverse group of people that might be best described as queer—heterosexual, homosexual, transgender, people of all races and ethnicities, etc. Cho is speaking to and connecting with marginalized groups of people who embrace the impact she has had through her comedic activism.

Cho has played a vital role in furthering feminist goals and “as an advocate for free speech, same-sex marriage, immigrant rights, and a woman’s right to choose, her speaking position surpasses the comic frame” (Pearson). In reaching spaces outside the comic frame, Cho has created a feminist perspective all her own, Cho-feminism, in that she blends many feminist perspectives—occasionally complicating others—and truly embodies Rosemarie Tong’s belief that “feminist thought resists categorization” (1). As her second performance DVD, *The Notorious C.H.O.* provides many examples of this type of resistance to categorization that Cho exemplifies and even offers examples of hybrid feminisms that comprise her unique approach to feminist activism and advocacy. In this performance, Cho can be seen speaking through several feminist perspectives simultaneously including, but not limited to, radical feminism, socialist feminism, women of color feminism, postmodern feminism, and queer

theory. I have selected particularly demonstrative jokes from the DVD to analyze in an attempt to display how Cho-feminism speaks to audiences and broadcasts Cho's calls to action.

Cho begins her performance with a joke that may be considered particularly controversial in that it the content combines sexuality, irreverence for national tragedy, patriotism, and national identity. Cho walks onstage to roaring applause and cheers from the audience,

“Thank you, thank you for being here. I think it's been a really interesting time for our country, a very tragic time, a very difficult time. These last several months certainly have been very hard and I have been in New York a lot and I actually got a chance to go down to ground zero and I was there, day after day, giving blowjobs to rescue workers. [Audience explodes with laughter] Yeah. [Cho makes a compassionate face, nodding her head.] Because we all have to do our part. It really shows you who you [beat] in times of crisis [beat] and I found out that I lost my gag reflex, so...”

At the beginning of the joke, Cho speaks to a unifying national event and immediately places herself in the scene of tragedy performing a sexual act.

Cho further describes the sexual act as her contribution to humanitarian work. Cho's use of her sexuality communicates not only her comfort with it but her agency as well. This may be seen as a radical-libertarian perspective of sexuality, while radical-cultural feminism may see the sexual act itself as serving male sexual needs and dominance. Moreover, juxtaposing this with the events of 911 shifts the focus to being centered on Cho as a sexual being rather than remaining in identification with tragedy. Cho then shifts directions once more to reestablish a unity through national identity:

“I call that a triumph of the human spirit.
[Beat] But the bottom line for me is that no matter what the terrorists do, I refuse to be terror-ized. They can't take away my security. They can't take away my piece of mind. They can't take away my freedom. I am a fucking AMERICAN goddamnit.”

I find this interesting in that by complicating expectations of female sexuality and placing it in the context of ground zero, she has created a wonderful metaphor of patriarchal oppression of female sexual agency. It is as if she has replaced patriarchy as national terrorism with 911 as international terrorism as if to say, “I'm a patriot (person) and my contribution (sexuality) is my choice.” Her refusal to be “terrorized” seems a reply to sexual oppression to the same degree it seems a reply the events of 911. The

same way Cho queers gendered expectations of women, she queers patriotism, enacting an empowered sense of identity; empowering the sense of diverse identities is something Cho seems to do with almost every joke.

Perhaps one of the most unique qualities of Cho-feminism is the intersectionality of Cho's many identities which she utilizes as gateways into many communities in order to share and advocate for multiple perspectives. In this way, Cho takes a very postmodern feminist approach to her ability to relate to and connect with her audience. Postmodern feminism's belief that "woman's otherness enables individual women to stand back and criticize the norms, values, and practices that the dominant male culture (patriarchy) seeks to impose on everyone, particularly those who live on its periphery" (Tong, 8). Cho is an example of how one's identity allows for certain critiques and in many ways she has cornered the comedic market of speaking to otherness. One of the groups she has gained the most access to is the gay community, identifying herself as queer. This outsider-within privilege is made obvious in her joke about a gay bar in Scotland:

"I was hanging out at the one gay bar in all of Scotland. They have *one* gay bar. It's called 'C.C. Bloom's.' [Beat] C.C. Bloom... is the name of the character... that Bette Midler played in *Beaches*. [Audience laughter] That is the gayest thing I have ever

heard in my entire life. [Beat] That place
should just be called ‘Fuck me in the ass’...
’bar and grill.”

I think that queer theory also offers an explanation as to why a joke like this is so successful with Cho’s audiences. “In queer theory, gender and sexuality are blended concepts, and the feminist critique of gender as a social status becomes intermingled with queer critique of sexuality as a social status” (Lorber, 284). Cho identifies her sexual orientation as queer, sometimes speaking to heterosexual experiences as well as homosexual experiences, and in the gay community in particular, her sexuality has helped her achieve her social status. This type of joke is extremely common for Cho and she creatively displays her place in gay culture as an insider by referencing and criticizing things relevant to gay culture such as her *Beaches* reference. She also uses the term “gay” in a way that is usually only acceptable to the gay community when gay people say it—that whole “it’s *our* word” sentiment. It seems she is combining postmodern feminism and queer theory in that her otherness, not only as a woman but as queer, is what allows her access to the gay community in particular in a way that gives an insider understanding of its cultural nuances. She displays this same social status within the gay community in a later joke about her two best friends from high school:

“Allen and Jeremy were tough. They were
teenage drag queens. [Beat] You have to

be tough to be a drag queen. Drag queens have to fight everything. They have to fight homophobia, they have to fight sexism... they have to fight pinkeye. [Audience laughter] Allen and Jeremy would get into fights at school every day and they would kick ass. It was like crouching drag queen, hidden faggot [Audience roars with laughter as Cho feigns a karate stance] [Cho begins imitating a drag queen in body language and voice] *I do not need nobody to tell me who I am. I KNOW who I am. 'Dis a fucked up school I hate 'dis school! I need to get my GED 'dats what I need to do. I hate 'dis school, 'dis a fucked up school. I walk down the hallway, they be callin me names, they call me 'faggot,' they call me 'sissy' and I say, 'Oh yeah? Well you forgot that I'm also a model and a actress so fuck you too!* [Laughter and applause] Allen and Jeremy believed in themselves when no one else did and I found that extraordinary. They were stars to me.”

Here we see Cho using a combination of radical feminism and queer theory in her simultaneous support of the reimagining and queering of

gendered behavior while taking an oppressive experience and turning it into one of empowerment. In her story, Allen and Jeremy are representations of queer theory's assertion that in a binary world, gender "nonconformers are much more problematic. Someone whose looks are unconventionally gendered, whose body has ambiguous sex markers, and whose sexuality is fluid belongs nowhere in our constantly gendered social world" (Lorber). Cho not only supports this gender nonconformity by voicing an often silenced experience but raises it up as extraordinary and inspirational. Also in this joke Cho is again using language that she has earned social permission to use, namely the word 'faggot,' which is actually being used in the joke as an added element of empowerment in that she is using it when describing an empowered sense of identity; however, a gay identity is not the only one Cho regularly seeks to empower.

As an Asian American, Cho often speaks to the experience of being a racialized body in patriarchal society. Cho tells of her experiences as an Asian American child growing up in America. While aspiring to success as an actor and comedian, Cho was confronted by many patriarchal obstacles.

"I always wanted to do this, even as a kid, but I never saw Asian people on television or in movies. So, my dreams were somewhat limited. I would dream [Cho begins using a childlike stereotypical Asian accent]

*maybe someday...I could be an extra...on
M*A*S*H*. [Audience laughter] Maybe
someday...I could be Arnold's girlfriend
on Happy Days. [Audience laughter] May-
be I could play a hooker in something.
[Audience laughter] I'd be looking in the
mirror [continues childlike voice] Sucky
fucky two dollar. [Audience laughter] Me
love you long time!'*

Here we see Cho taking the experience of being a minority and highlights the oppressive nature of dominant white culture. In this joke, Cho is describing the experience of being racialized, the experience of “being pressured to assimilate to the dominant (white) culture; the experience of being denied ‘white privilege’ [...] and being otherwise marginalized, oppressed, or subjugated by virtue of being a member of one or more (nonwhite) ‘racial’ or ethnic groups” (Tong, 212). Cho is taking white privilege and placing it under a microscope by comically describing the experience of realizing her outsider status as a child. In a further analysis of Cho’s use of her Asian heritage to critique white hegemony, Rachel Lee states that, “Cho theatricalizes white civility—precisely what passes for whiteness everyday—by Orientalizing it, exaggerating the colored person’s response toward such civility, and holding that civility suspect” (108). In this way, Cho is employing women of color feminism in that she is pinpointing a particular experience of oppression as a woman of color, specifically an

Asian American woman. By calling attention to this experience, she is asking her audience to reconsider white privilege and names specific oppressions perpetuated by dominant white culture. Cho regularly displays this act of criticism of dominant culture throughout the performance in many different ways. Not only does she use race and sexual orientation as tools of criticism of inequality, she uses gender and sexuality as well.

Cho launches into material surrounding female sexuality that not only challenges perceptions of what female sexuality is supposed to look like, but also challenges beauty standards:

“There’s no real way for women to learn about sexuality in our culture except to just dive into a scene like [that] (referring to previous joke.) I mean there are articles about sex in women’s magazines but that’s not what I’m after. There’s this article in one magazine about how to look good in bed with your lover. [Beat] And it was these tips like one was if you put your arm under your breasts when you’re laying down, they’re higher, like ‘serve em up!’ [Audience laughter] Or if you’re laying on your back, your stomach is flat. Or if you’re having anal sex, he can’t see your cellulite! [Cho holds index

finger coyly over her mouth] [Audience
laughter] And that is so wrong! Because I
get *so...ugly* when I fuck. [Audience laugh-
ter] And I don't care. And if you *care* about
what I *look like* when you're *fucking*
me...YOU SHOULDN'T BE FUCKING
ME IN THE FIRST PLACE! [Laughter and
long applause] I get ugly, I get into it, I put
on a fucking lobster bib and I go to town.
[Applause and cheering] But I can't look at
those women's magazines anyway. I love
fashion, but I look at the pictures of the
skinny models and they're wearing clothes
I can't even fit on my fingers. And I look
at that and I think, 'If that is what a woman
is supposed to look like, then I must not be
one. I must be some kind of fat imposter.'

Cho directly names the problem of being held to unrealistic standards of beauty while also demonstrating her agency over her own sexuality by claiming it, celebrating it, and defending it against qualification by another. Her approach to sexuality is in many ways very radically feminist but also resists being categorized as either libertarian or cultural in that she has not specified whether the sexual partner is male or female which changes the

conversation of sex as power relation between men and women; however, if the sexual partner is assumed to be a man, then Cho is redefining the power relation according to her own standards and not those of society which is advocating for all female sexual empowerment while resisting unrealistic beauty standards.

Throughout the DVD, Cho makes jokes (not all analyzed here) that challenge, through a radical and postmodernist perspective, gendered expectations of what is appropriate for female comedians to discuss (menstruation and colon cleanses) and challenges perceptions of female sexuality (pornography and demanding sexual satisfaction.) Though most of her material may seem to be made of witty observations, comedic critiques, and irreverent reflections, each is actually a subtle call to action, all of which culminate into a broad and deliberate call to action at the end of Cho's performance:

“You know who should get married, are gays and lesbians. [Audience cheers] That's who should get married, because for gays and lesbians, marriage is not about romance, it's about equality and having our relationships regarded in the same way, with the same kind of reverence as straight people's relationships. It's about being equal in every way. It's such an important political issue.

We need to recognize that a government that would deny a gay man the right to bridal registry is a fascist state. [Audience cheering and applause] As far as marriage for myself, I don't know. I continue to love myself until I love another and I have self-esteem which is pretty amazing because I'm

probably somebody who wouldn't necessarily have a lot of self-esteem as I am considered a minority. 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 a person of intelligence, if you're a person of integrity, then *you* are considered a minority in this world. [Audience cheers] And it's going to be hard to find messages of support anywhere especially women's and gay men's culture. It's all about how you have to look a certain way or else you're worthless. You know when you look in the mirror and you think, 'ugh I'm so fat, I'm so old, I'm so ugly,' don't know you that's not your authentic self? But that is billions upon billions of dollars of advertising.

Magazines, movies, billboards, all geared to make you feel shitty about yourself so that you will take...[Audience begins cheering]...so that you will take your hard-earned money and spend it at the mall on some 'turn-around' cream that doesn't turn around shit. [Audience applauds] If 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. [Audience explodes into cheers and applause] 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. [Audience laughter] Then by all means, use restraints.”

In this powerhouse call to action, Cho basically defines her feminist stance. By naming social and political inequalities and calling for a revolution, Cho sums up her entire performance into a particularly Cho-feminist list of demands. What I find particularly interesting about this call to action is her use of the word “us” and her rhetoric of inclusion. At no point does she deviate from a tone that signifies and sense of “we.” She rhetorically unifies every group of people she names into a collective fight for equality. Cho specifies marriage equality, gender discrimination, discrimination based on sexual orientation and race, beauty standards, national identity, employment and pay inequality, sexual violence, and agency. In this one call to action she is speaking to liberal feminism, socialist feminism, radical feminism, postmodern feminism, queer theory, and women of color feminism. Cho uses all of these forms of feminism throughout her performance, though not always in congruence with each other, and, at times, in ways that complicate the different lenses and/or places them in seemingly conflicted proximities; however, by closing her show with this call to action, she exemplifies the ways in which Cho-feminism is a constantly shifting and pairing type of feminism that utilizes multiple lenses freely and indiscriminately.

Throughout her career, Margaret Cho has earned the reputation of being a fearlessly outspoken advocate for women’s rights, gay and lesbian

rights, racial equality, gender equality, and political reform. Cho takes an approach to her comedy and uses her social status and access in ways that allow her to voice the experiences of the marginalized. Not only does Cho take this type of activism seriously, she stays engaged with current social and political issues, spreading awareness and empowerment with every performance of every new standup show she writes. Though controversial and often criticized, Margaret Cho continues to be a major representative voice for many victims of oppression and remains an important contribution to the conversation of feminist rhetoric.

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