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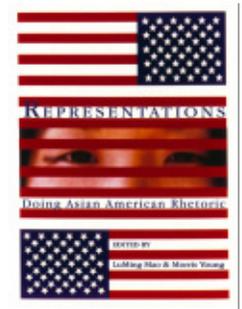
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“MAYBE I COULD PLAY A HOOKER IN SOMETHING!”

*Asian American Identity, Gender, and Comedy in the
Rhetoric of Margaret Cho*

Michaela D. E. Meyer

The genius of Margaret Cho, like Lenny Bruce, Richard Pryor and Robin Williams before her, is that she has turned the world into her own personal psychotherapist. Cho gets paid for telling audiences what mere mortals have to pay their shrinks to listen to.

James Verniere

Following her first film, *I'm the One That I Want*, Margaret Cho and director Lorene Machado filmed Cho's second major motion picture, *Notorious C.H.O.*, in November of 2001. The film grossed more than \$1 million at the box office within six months of its release on June 28, 2002, and grossed more in its video release. In Cho's ninety-minute stand-up, monologue performance, she explores the tragedy of 9/11, racism, women's issues, sexuality, and self-esteem. Cho's rhetorical subtext challenges dominant ideological constructs that proliferate racial, ethnic, and sexual oppression in American society. As an Asian American rhetorical figure, Margaret Cho is worthy of scholarly attention because she is rather open about her intention in creating her one-woman shows. Not only has she been quoted in numerous interviews as trying to change the standards for Asian Americans in the entertainment industry, she incorporates her stance on contemporary social issues throughout her performance. She offers a serious cultural critique of the representations of Asians and women in popular media, as well as comments on various social and political issues.

As she is a rhetor and cultural critic, Cho's high degree of polysemy presents an interesting rhetorical case study. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, communication scholars demanded a recognition of "the potential

for polysemic rather than monosemic interpretation” of rhetorical texts (McKerrow 1989). Leah Ceccarelli (1998) situated discussions and uses of polysemy by identifying three types of polysemic interpretation: resistive readings, hermeneutic depth, and strategic ambiguity. Ceccarelli defines strategic ambiguity as “a form of polysemy [that] is likely to be planned by the author and result in two or more otherwise conflicting groups of readers converging in praise of a text.” In other words, when rhetorical texts can contain multiple meanings for different types of audiences, the ambiguity of meaning is controlled primarily by the author. In this type of polysemic interpretation, “the power over textual signification remains with the author, who inserts *both* meanings into the text and benefits economically from the polysemic interpretation” (404).

As a result, rhetorical and media studies scholarship interested in strategic ambiguity often focuses on the political economy surrounding the marketing of mediated texts. For example, Naomi Rockler (2001) examines the use of strategic ambiguity in the film *Fried Green Tomatoes*, finding that the film transforms a fairly unambiguous lesbian relationship into a relationship that can be defined by different viewers as either a lesbian relationship or a close female friendship. Ultimately, the film became an economic success because heterosexual audiences could define the relationship between the protagonists as friendship. Similarly, Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis (1992) read *The Cosby Show* as strategically ambiguous because viewers could define the Huxtables from multiple standpoints. The show was economically successful because white viewers could define the family as financially well off, while black viewers could define the text as a statement on race relations. These kinds of studies have illuminated the intersections among rhetor, audience, and economics in mediated texts.

For the purpose of this chapter, I examine strategic ambiguity within the text of Cho’s performance rather than from the standpoint of political economy. I argue that Cho’s unique position as an Asian American, queer, female allows her a certain rhetorical voice on issues of race, class, and sexuality. By offering an analysis of Cho’s performance in *Notorious C.H.O.* from both “western” and “Eastern” rhetorical perspectives, I illustrate unique features of marginal rhetoric and provide implications for future rhetors. Most importantly, Cho’s identity is malleable as part of the comedic rhetorical situation, and as a result, her rhetoric offers us the ability to think of women’s rhetorical strategy as *intentional* rather than simply a strategic function of mediated political economy.

READING MARGARET CHO FROM A "WESTERN" PERSPECTIVE.

To a critic schooled in western rhetoric, one interpretation of *Notorious C.H.O.* is that Cho is acting from her Asian identity to provide a critique of racism in America. First and foremost, she challenges the binary associated with her Asian identity in an American context. While Cho's physical appearance is stereotypically Asian—she has dark black hair, small brown eyes, and a facial composition that is East Asian in orientation—she establishes early in her film that she views herself as American. She explains that she was rejected by the entertainment industry at first because, as one agent told her, "Asian people will never be successful in entertainment." Cho's critiques of the entertainment industry stem from her own early experiences in television. In her earlier film, *I'm the One That I Want*, Cho interrogates her experiences in the maligned and woefully mishandled ABC sitcom *All American Girl* in the mid-1990s. Media executives were unfamiliar with how to market an Asian American female as a lead character and thus forced Cho to lose weight and manage her identity in a manner more consistent with mainstream white actresses. When the show was cancelled, Cho lost her identity, drowning in a pool of drugs, alcohol, and promiscuity. As a result of her experiences and her identity searching, Cho's found that her Asian heritage could be a powerful tool for devising an argument about her subject position as created by mainstream American media. She claims, "I never saw an Asian on television or in the movies, so my dreams were somewhat limited. I would dream maybe someday I could be an extra on *M*A*S*H*. Maybe someday I can play Arnold's girlfriend on *Happy Days*. Maybe I could play a hooker in something. I would look in the mirror and practice 'me love you longtime.'"

Cho's emphasis on race in this passage illustrates how the lack of representation of Asian American women in the entertainment industry stunted her ability to envision herself in anything other than very limited roles. Similarly, Nayda Terkildsen and David Damore (1999) posit that racialized representations in the media, both visual and written, provide the viewing audience with powerful cues for identity formation, particularly when marginalized ethnic groups are rarely represented in a positive manner in mainstream media. Furthermore, the passage explains how Cho's girlhood dreams are racialized by providing her with a binary option—emulate white roles that are inaccessible to her or fulfill the stereotypical Asian roles that society deems fit for her

(hooks 1996; Orbe and Hopson 2002). Instead of accepting this binary, she immediately shifts out of the narrative by commenting that “I’m fucking American!” This statement specifically challenges the binary associations that are placed on Cho’s multiple identities—Asian *and* American. In essence, she does not understand why both identities cannot exist simultaneously. In an interview about the film she comments, “There are so few Asian Americans being presented in the media and the ones that are, are placed under so much scrutiny . . . it’s not politically correct to say this, but why does a Korean have to play a Korean? In the mainstream world, an actor of English descent can play someone who is Irish, and there are all kinds of conflicts between those two identities, but it’s okay. I think that minority performers are held to a higher standard” (Herren 2001).

Cho’s arguments mimic scholar Chris Berry (2001), who argues that minority representations in media are often created without family context, and as a result depict minority group members as “loners without kinship ties of any kind.” In other words, Asian actors are often cast as Asian characters amid the white American cultural standard. However, Cho’s argument about white actors, while valid in pointing out that minority actors are often more heavily scrutinized than white actors, fails to recognize that Asian actors are typecast across identity barriers almost as often as white actors. While white actors can cross identities among British, Irish, and other European identities, recent casting decisions in Hollywood suggest that Asian actors can play any Asian role—Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Taiwanese—without addressing the potential conflict between those identities. For example, the casting of Chinese actress Ziyi Zhang as a Japanese geisha in *Memoirs of a Geisha* caused controversy given the historical relations between Japan and China, yet the fact that Zhang was at least “representative” of Asia allowed the studio to produce the film successfully. Although this certainly does not address the issues of visibility inherent in Asian American representation in media, it does serve to illustrate that the political economy of entertainment media is reductionist with regard to racial and ethnic identity.

Cho seems to embrace these challenges, however, by embracing her Asian American identity and using it to expose problems she perceives as important to the Asian American community. The film begins with a cartoon challenging stereotypes of Asian and blacks. The skit is based on physical stereotypes such as overemphasized lips, cornrows, slanted eyes, and broken English. The setting is a small market owned by a

Korean woman. A black man comes into the store, and their encounter displays mistrust in their interaction. The scene includes drawing guns, live bombs, and cannons on one another. A moment later, we see them in group therapy, where they engage in words that reveal the larger issues of representation: the black man calls the Korean woman a "broke-down, slanty-eyed, Ching-Chong ho!" and the Korean woman sarcastically criticizes the black man for using too many words to insult her and includes the message "Korean people and black people don't get along. This needs to end right now!" Using this kind of skit opens up space for Cho not only to deconstruct misrepresentations of blacks and Koreans in general but also to draw attention to a particular kind of intergroup struggle in America. Scholarly research exploring interactions between black and Asian cultures in America has shown that these groups entered into competition in order to make societal gains that would elevate them in the social hierarchy (Brah 2000). Historically, Korean immigration in the 1980s displaced many urban black communities, contributing to the hostility between the two ethnic groups (Waldinger 1999), and was further confounded by the possessive investment in whiteness that American culture espouses (Lipsitz 2000). Thus, Cho recognizes that even economically oppressed groups engage in contributing to the reproduction of patriarchal ideologies—it is not simply an issue of political economy restricting access to the means of cultural production.

Cho further complicates the audience's perception of race and ethnicity by presenting a segment on September 11. Within this discussion, she pushes the envelope by indirectly focusing on the relations between East and West: "It's been an interesting time for our country, a very tragic time, a very difficult time. These last several months have certainly been very hard. I've been to New York a lot, and I actually got a chance to go down to Ground Zero. And I was there day after day giving blow jobs to the rescue workers . . . Yeah . . . Because we all have to do our part." Cho's attempt at humor here could be considered morally reprehensible in the wake of such tragedy, but Cho quickly defends her comic choice by adamantly refusing to be terrorized. Cho's linking of Ground Zero to sexual acts transports cultural critics back to the wars in both Korea and Vietnam. In these wars, terrorist acts, including the rape and murder of women in these countries, occurred conjointly with conflict between the East and West (see Chalk 1998; Hyun 2001; Matsui 2001). Considering this history, one must ask whether Cho's link between war

and sex was meant to be a political statement on the mistreatment of Asian women during periods of war? Scholars note that media representations of Asian women as prostitutes are prolific, and that this practice “perpetuates a colonial group fantasy, in which the Asian woman embodies ‘service,’ especially for the white man” (Ling 1999). Cho’s use of this stereotype is then transformed into several arguments. First, after her commentary about going to Ground Zero, she justifies her (hypothetical) sexual action by saying “because we all have to do our part” and then argues strongly against the victimization mentality propagated by terrorism. Thus, by using the term “we,” along with an earlier reference in the monologue to “our country,” she creates a sense of patriotism and American identity in the face of terrorist acts. Moreover, she later returns to this stereotype of Asian women as prostitutes to discuss Asian representation in American media. She discusses the fact that while she was growing up, she thought “maybe I could play a hooker in something,” but then uses this observation to critique the entertainment industry. Before one can question her intent, she again boldly declares, “I am an American!” Just as the audience recognizes the positioning of herself as Asian, she quickly repositions herself as American. Thus, her “playfulness” with her own identity allows her access to rhetorical options that would perhaps fall flat if utilized by white comediennees.

Similarly, in the example of the cartoon, Cho utilizes stereotypes of black men and Korean women to further the argument that ethnic groups should be uniting against common oppressors rather than struggling with one another. During the skit, Cho frequently interrupts the narrative with a voice-over that provides a kind of flashback that allows the characters to play the interaction over again. Each time the interaction is replayed, it is resolved a way that dispels the traditional stereotypes of blacks and Koreans. Obviously, Cho uses these stereotypes in a transformative way to critique the dominant ideological structure. Therefore, Cho’s conscientious use of strategic ambiguity allows her to create a space from which to critique the structure of racism in American society, and invites audience members to share in this critical thinking process.

READING MARGARET CHO FROM AN “EASTERN” PERSPECTIVE.

An important component of the polysemic nature of a rhetorical text is the ability of the text to convey multiple meanings simultaneously. While a western critic can read Margaret Cho as a statement on racial

discourse in the United States, there is an Eastern alternative for reading her rhetoric. On stage Cho is American culture: she speaks fluent English without an Asian accent, she talks about the social phenomena of race relations, gender identity, and sexuality in the United States, and screams that she is "fucking American!" In other words, while American audiences might view her as speaking from an Asian perspective, she is not necessarily representative of Asian culture. She violates the expectations and norms associated with Asian identity, thus making her rhetoric appealing to both western and Eastern audiences.

For western audiences Cho might be "Other" (hooks 1992) simply because she looks Asian. However, Cho's knowledge and experience within American society, coupled with fluency in a language familiar to western audiences, simultaneously positions Cho as both insider and outsider. For Asian audiences, this same standard applies. Cho's ethnic identity may make her part of the Asian group, yet her performance is potentially foreign to Asian culture. Thus, in many ways she is not Asian. Instead of claiming either Asian or American identity as primary, she rejects the binary definitions of what it means to be Asian and American. From an Eastern perspective, the people of Asia have often been viewed as a cultural entity offered up in ratings by the European colonial community (Foss, Foss, and Griffin 1999). Moreover, postcolonial theory stresses that Asian women in western subjectivities are often used as exotic images constructed for the imperial gaze and ultimate conquering. Therefore, cultural representations of Asian women often construct them as oppressed victims in racialized patriarchal structures. Even in feminist studies, western feminists tend to legitimize an implicit western agenda of white feminists "saving" their non-western, nonwhite sisters (Ling 1999). Cho, however, situates herself in between the extreme of westernized domination and Asian subjectivity, thus disrupting the western gaze (Minh-ha 1991).

For example, Asian women have been traditionally stereotyped as diminutive and passive. As a result, Asian women have historically been robbed of voice. Cho's performance challenges these traditional Asian stereotypes, because she uses her voice to critique western ideologies. Cho is also larger than Asian women "should be," but she uses her size as a way to disrupt the colonizing gaze. She wears clothing that is too small for her, talks about herself as part of a "chubby gang," and criticizes western culture for continually emphasizing thinness as a prerequisite for beauty. Scholars Katherine Frith, Ping Shaw, and Hong

Cheng (2005) conducted an analysis of advertisements for women's beauty products in both the United States and Asia, ultimately finding that Asian advertisements contained a large proportion of cosmetics and facial beauty products whereas American advertisements were dominated by clothing. Their findings suggest that female beauty in America may be constructed more in terms of "the body," or physical weight, whereas in Singapore and Taiwan the defining beauty factor for women is a "pretty face." Applying these findings to Cho, her Asian body, coupled with American social mores, becomes a rhetorical site of embodiment, opening a space for discourse. As Raymie McKerrow (1998, 319) observes, individual "bodies are trapped inside cultures, and exhibit those acts promoted within the culture," which ultimately allows or prohibits our ability to know the "Other" in an embodied, corporeal way. Thus, Cho exercises a unique "cultural rhetoric" in her everyday performances.

Cho further uses an Eastern style to critique western cultures' claims to intellectual superiority. In one passage, Cho describes a conversation with her mother about gay people. She recounts, "I always thought my mother was conservative but she had a really interesting attitude toward gays: *Because, I think everybody a little bit gay. You know, if you have a friend and you like your friend so much you don't know what to do, that's kind of gay.*" When Cho speaks as her mother (italics), she employs an "Asian" accent and does not use her fluent English. She also uses her facial expressions to convey a stereotype of Asian women with slanted eyes. This particular example deals with the representation of Cho's mother, a stereotype premised on the representation of Asian women as unintelligible when given voice. In essence, Cho positions herself as American by contrasting her position with her mother, who becomes the typical "Asian woman." Just as the audience is associating Cho with Asian ideologies, she redirects the narrative to position herself as an American in relation to her conservative Asian mother. This move, however, is still a subversive strategy. From a postcolonial perspective, western people tend to think about Eastern countries as noncivilized, barbaric societies (Gandhi 1998), and Cho's commentary about her mother thinking everyone is "a little bit gay" resists colonial ideology. Cho's characterization of her mother is stereotypically Asian, yet her mother is portrayed as more open-minded than contemporary western culture regarding homosexuality. Thus, the portrayal depicted by Cho is one that privileges *Asian cultures* as more sophisticated and intelligent than western cultures. In essence, she is

able to renegotiate stereotypes of Asian women by repositioning them as individuals capable of critiquing social domination. Similarly, Cho's representation of herself as "a person of size" challenges not only Eastern stereotypes of diminutive and submissive Asian women, but simultaneously critiques western cultures' insistence on thinness and beauty in the entertainment industry.

THE PERFORMATIVE RHETORIC OF MARGINALITY AND GENDER

Cho's comedic choices offer implications for the rhetorical construction of gender, marginality, and identity. Through a close reading of Notorious C.H.O., it is obvious that Cho's identity is central to the content of her performance, and that she explicitly uses her subject position as Asian American to shape her comedy. In this sense, Cho's performance is not unique. Joanne Gilbert observes that "marginal comics often construct themselves as victims. In doing so, however, they may subvert their own status by embodying the potential power of powerlessness. Their social critique is potent and, because it is offered in a comedic context, safe from retribution as well" (1997, 317). In other words, marginalized subject positions related to race, ethnicity, class, gender, or sexuality can be powerful rhetorical tools within the context of comedy. Joseph Boskin and Joseph Dorinson claim that ethnic humor is intrinsically subversive as a means of surviving the difficult political economy that surrounds comedy. When examining the rhetoric of African American comics, they describe their routines as "inwardly masochistic, indeed tragic, externally aggressive, even acrimonious" (1987, 174). Cho's rhetoric functions in a similar capacity—trading on ethnicity, gender, and sexuality in order to level scathing social critiques. Elsewhere, Boskin argues that "American humor of the twentieth century is the humor of the urban, alienated minority groups whose experience has largely been that of outsiders" (1979, 49). As a rhetorical "outsider within" (Hill Collins 1990), Cho successfully performs marginality through self-deprecation.

Although Cho's ethnicity clearly contributes to her rhetoric, it is important to consider self-deprecation and perhaps autobiographical sketch comedy as its own rhetorical form. Cho's use of her own experiences with sexuality, gender, and mediated reality provide an autobiographical context to her humor. By referring to herself as a lifetime member of the "chubby gang" or saying she needs to check out the sadomasochist scene because women need to "throw themselves into a scene like that," Cho challenges our cultural standards for women.

In many ways, this self-deprecating humor is a safe choice—it does not abuse or offend the audience, but rather *appears* to reinforce the hegemonic values of American culture (Gilbert 1997, 327). In other words, as a polysemic rhetorical text, Cho’s performance can resonate on different levels with audiences. If an audience member is offended, s/he can simply dismiss Cho’s message because of her marginality. If an audience member identifies with the performance, s/he may identify through a number of subject positions: Asian, American, woman, queer. Scholars have noted that the backlash to the feminist movement has created a hostile environment for feminists who wish to speak in a public sphere (Faludi 1992). Since marginalized groups, particularly women, have often had limited access to the public sphere, more often than not they enter the sphere as *debatable* speakers (Calhoun 2000; Meyer 2003). As debatable speakers, women often use ambiguity within their arguments because ambiguity affords women a space from which they can address dominant epistemologies (Dow and Boor Tonn 1993). On one level, then, Cho’s comedic ambiguity regarding her identity opens a discursive space from which she can challenge contemporary American culture. Thus, self-deprecation becomes a strategy of the marginalized rhetor, not simply an economic tool.

The larger implication here is one between the intent of the rhetor and the political economy of the entertainment industry. While the use of strategic ambiguity as a frame for analyzing Cho is beneficial, we must ultimately question whether the use of the term “strategy” is appropriate for marginal rhetoric. The problematic nature of using the term “strategic” as a polysemic rhetorical device is that the word itself has a long history of cultural assumptions in rhetorical discourse that associate it with masculinity. For example, the term “strategic” connotes cunning, trickery, and war—discourses that we culturally associate with masculinity, and specifically *white* masculinity. Ceccarelli defines strategic ambiguity as “a form of polysemy [that] is likely to be planned by the author and result in two or more otherwise conflicting groups of readers converging in praise of a text” (1998, 404). In Ceccarelli’s assessment, the goal of strategic ambiguity is to “win over” as many audience members as possible by diluting the message enough that it appeals to the lowest common denominator. This certainly parallels arguments about the political economy of public discourse, particularly in mediated contexts; however, it is then problematic to explain ambiguity as a strategic device, particularly when discussing feminist messages. While on the

surface women rhetors may seem to employ strategic devices, the use of the terminology "strategic" in relation to women allows the dominant ideology to dismiss the message on the basis that it is coercive and/or manipulative. As Helene Shugart notes, "submerged groups take a significant risk with regard to challenging their oppressors on the latter's terms because those terms have been used historically to oppress them; that history may carry more weight, ultimately, than innovative, irregular use of those terms" (1997, 211). Thus, Cho's use of her own identity as a strategy for opening discourse is conceptualized by many feminist critics as simply reifying the status quo and lending power to dominance.

In terms of strategic ambiguity, Cho's choices as a comedienne are constrained by her ethnicity and gender in such a way that even her comedic choices are regulated by the larger political economy of comedy: her message is a direct result of what she can *sell* rather than what she *actually wants to say*. By focusing almost exclusively on the political economy of a message, strategic ambiguity as a rhetorical category erases the potential for rhetorical intent, particularly from marginal rhetors. One way to perhaps resituate our discussions of agency with regard to rhetorical intent is to adopt the term *intentional ambiguity* instead of the popular term *strategic ambiguity* in rhetorical criticism (Meyer 2007). The overarching goal of intentional ambiguity would be not to *dilute* the message, but rather to purposefully *use* ambiguity in a way that *creates a space for discourse that did not exist before*. In creating that space, the ambiguity delivers an invitation to audience members to participate in the newly created discourse. In this sense, intentional ambiguity would allow the rhetor a degree of control over the message that is not necessarily present in the way scholars conceptualize strategic ambiguity at this point. Intentional ambiguity provides rhetors a way to begin a dialogue from marginalized social positions—and comedy seems to be a ripe context from which rhetorical alliances between groups can be built. Forming alliances between oneself and others with different cultural knowledge is one way to recognize that "challenging domination *without* means identifying the dominator *within*" (Johnson and Bhatt 2003, 241). In other words, through these rhetorical forms, individuals unfamiliar with specific racial, ethnic, gender, or sexual histories can participate in a nonthreatening environment—and hopefully learn something in the process.

Therefore, the greatest advantage intentional ambiguity brings to our rhetorical discourse is that over time skilled rhetors will be able to

successfully challenge and invite audience members into their worldview in ways that allow audience members a sense of agency in the message itself. Cho even expresses this desire when she observes, “If there are straight white male millionaires who want to get into Asian-American women’s queer culture, they are invited too” (Fowler 2000). Instead of alienating dominant groups as the problem, she rejects the idea that men (particularly straight white men) are to blame for the ills of society, “I don’t criticize anybody for being straight. It’s not even as if I think anything is wrong with it. . . . To just blame everything on straight [white] men is to simplify it” (Mervis 2003). Cho’s work provides scholars with an example of rhetorical discourse that clearly marks the progressive intent of the rhetor while also adhering to traditional comedic rhetorical forms such as self-deprecation. Cho herself seems to recognize the intentionally ambiguous nature of her rhetoric, noting, “I write it all in advance. It may seem improvised, but it is very structured” (Savage 2002). As Joanne Gilbert observes, “Female comics negotiate myriad selves as they commodify both insights and insults, reminding audiences that to be human is to be involved in power relationships—a reality that shapes and defines who we are, what we believe and even why we laugh” (1997, 328). Cho’s stand-up routine offers a clear example of polysemic rhetoric, one that enlightens audiences about Asian American identity, gender, and comedy.

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