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WOMEN AND THEIR STRUGGLE TO BE CONSIDERED FUNNY

AS TOLD THROUGH THE STUDY OF FEMALE STANDUP COMICS

By

JEAN KIM

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in the Liberal Studies Program in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York 2019.

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As told through the Study of Female Standup Comics

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Jean Kim

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in the Liberal Studies Program in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Abstract

Women and Their Struggle to be Considered Funny

As Told Through the Study of Standup Female Comics

by

Jean Kim

Advisor: Linda M. Grasso

In the history of comedy in America, women standup comics have taken a backseat to their male counterparts. Females have struggled against an inherent societal and male bias alleging that women cannot be funny. Even Sigmund Freud offered a medical explanation of this phenomenon in his 1905 book titled *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* stating that it was physiologically impossible for women to be funny because of the way their brains were structured. In 2007, intellectual British journalist Christopher Hitchens reinforced this theory in a *Vanity Fair* article titled “Why Women Can’t Be Funny,” claiming that women did not have the motivation to be funny because they did not need to employ humor in order to attract the opposite sex. Regina Barreca, in her book *Snow White and Why I Drifted...Strategic Use of Women’s Humor*, says that women joke tellers were considered an affront to traditional definitions and concepts of what society expected of their behavior. She stated that “while men are assumed to be funny, women must prove they are funny.”

Since the 1950s when Phyllis Diller, largely acknowledged to be the first female stand-up, came to the stage, female comics have been pigeonholed in certain roles such as the

prostitute, brothel madam, zany screwball, or matron. Female comics are often referred to as being subversive and masculine, so I researched the material and performance of female standups including myself to see if this was really the case.

This thesis examines Joan Rivers, Margaret Cho, Amy Schumer and me, Jean Kim, as case studies of the challenges that women comics face. I chose these women because they were not only successful in becoming comics on their own terms and represented different time periods in history, but they also challenged stereotypes and refused to follow the established rules of the white boys' club. I use episodic footage from Amy Schumer's "Inside Amy Schumer Show," performance videos of Joan Rivers, Margaret Cho, and Amy Schumer's standup performances, as well as secondary historical sources about these comics and interviews with them to study the types of topics they chose for their performance material and the path they took to bring it to the stage or screen. By shining a light on women's struggle in the male-dominated industry of standup comedy, I bring to the forefront common gender struggles that women face in patriarchal societies and the need for females to write their own narratives.

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Chapter One Introduction) Why Can't Women be Funny Too?

Joan Rivers, a new comedienne of ripening promise, who opened at midweek for a two-week run at the Bitter End, is an unusually bright girl who is overcoming the handicap of a woman comic, looks pretty and blonde and bright and yet manages to make people laugh.

New York Times Review, 1965

So began a 1965 *New York Times* review of a debut woman comic by the name of Joan Rivers. It appears that the *Times* was on point about the fact that she had a lot of promise, yet the reviewer seemed surprised that an attractive blonde woman could be humorous to the point of eliciting laughter from audience members. The kicker was that the *New York Times* stated that the fact that Rivers was a woman was a handicap which raises a host of other questions and issues. If being a woman in standup comedy was really a handicap and disability, shouldn't she have been able to register for a handicap parking placard? Did this mean she needed to be assigned to special classes or receive remedial homework? Or was it really a male-created handicap on women because comedy was supposed to be strictly an all-male preserve? Also, we must remember the review was written over 50 years ago when Rivers was the first female doing the modern style of confessional standup comedy. At the time, Rivers was the only woman comic on the West Village comedy club circuit, persisting day after day and refusing to take no for an answer. Of course, women like Moms Mabley and Phyllis Diller had been doing standup for years before, but they were performing the old-school style comedy of set up punchlines and one-liners.

Rivers was the first female comic to follow in the footsteps of the style of current day standup that we are familiar with today – confessional, autobiographical, and observational

humor mixed in with social commentary. She did not start out with this style but found inspiration in Lenny Bruce who spoke out about religion and politics and was a modern-day town crier who rattled government and clergy, often leading to him being thrown in jail for his irreverent style. Yet it was Bruce's straight to the core frank style that inspired Rivers to shift from a canned, scripted performance to open discussions of her private life ranging from an abusive childhood to making fun of her looks and lack of domestic abilities. In the 1960s, this type of openness was not embraced as it was considered anti-authority, anti-traditionalist and threatening to the status quo.

Ironically, it was a male who spoke out to tell the truth opening doors for the first confessional female comic. Bruce did not set out to be a trailblazer for women, but because he was the "martyr" for first amendment rights and vocalized his opinions on taboo topics and social commentary, more women and minorities were able to start speaking out about their lives and the human condition. Fast forward fifty-four years later to 2018 where I can convey that as a female comic in the clubs in New York City, women are still considered the "other" in the standup comedy world. We are still often introduced as "lady comics" and white males are considered the industry standard.

As a Korean female standup comic who first tried out the amateur standup circuit in 2000 for a year when virtually no women or minorities existed, to now performing regularly nearly 20 years later, I can attest that the standup circuit is still white-male dominated but more women comics are present. More "lady open mics," women's comedy night and networks of women exist now. It is difficult to discover how many female comics there actually are because there is no official comedian registry, but if before we could count the number of female comics on one hand, now they are too numerous to count. Among the females, I notice that most of them are

white, a few are black and I know of only two other East Asian women from my vantage point of performing very regularly for three years in the amateur and professional circuit throughout New York City.

Another reason why there are more women is because now standup comedy in general is a booming business with more clubs, more standup classes, Netflix specials, and Showtime specials: Comedy is trending and a big moneymaker. In 2000, there were not many aspiring comics on the scene but now there are about 10,000 amateur comics in New York City alone, so the diversity has grown as the numbers have grown, albeit the definition of a comic is just anyone who has performed once on stage. Often standup comedy is a bucket list item for many, so trying it a few times is easy but having staying power is hard. Most shows are still overwhelmingly male and white dominated, yet there is more thought to having a woman help “fill out” a show. Also, the audience who enjoys comedy has grown and become more diverse as well. This environment is a marked improvement for women who were not welcomed in these spaces before at all. I believe that much of the change is due to social media outlets, cable channels and podcasts that have democratized standup comedy and help make it more mainstream for the masses, which in turn has created more women comedy fans, women audience members, and opportunities for women. To give an example of an audience’s perceptions of female comics just a few years ago, in 2010, I cite a UK Poll that was run through their local Channel 4 station, asking its audience to vote for the 100 greatest stand-ups of all time. Only 6 on the list were women. Thus, even as women make incremental strides in the entertainment industry, the standup comedy world has persistently remained the terrain of the white male (British Comedy Guide).

Standup comedy is a specific niche of performance art that is particularly and peculiarly reflective of male-dominated power structures and traditional male attitudes about the proper role of women in society. The female practice of standup comedy is uniquely threatening to the traditional male culture because it is a manifestation of a traditionally subjected group (women) sharing their own thoughts and stories and vocalizing them in their own words. Female comedic actors have always been obligated to rely on a pre-written script penned by men. As the art of sharing personal stories while offering social critiques, modern standup is also a powerful cathartic tool that men have tried to claim as their domain for decades. It also privileges self-identity and promotes auteurship making it incredibly empowering for a woman to get on stage and celebrate her own voice without concerning herself with the watchful eye of second-guessing male bosses and colleagues.

Males also seem threatened by the thought of female comics putting male audience members in their place and making them the butt of the joke. This power and authority could be, and often is, construed as a public threat to the established patriarchal order. It also allows the performer the opportunity to be heard as a multi-dimensional human being. Going onstage and grabbing a microphone, which is often considered a symbol of the phallic male organ, while sharing personal stories and asking questions before a captive audience, is not considered proper feminine behavior. In fact, it is considered alpha, masculine and aggressive.

In this thesis, I attempt to discover why women have consistently been told they cannot be funny and why this debate about their joke-telling abilities continues to rage on even as successful female comics like Amy Schumer and Margaret Cho have millions of social media

followers, host Netflix specials, and rake in millions of dollars. Despite this success, I have heard some club managers outright tell women to subdue their appearance and dress more casually in an effort to downplay their femininity or blend in with the men. I see women succumbing to this pressure and trying to blend in with the flannel-wearing casual style of their male peers instead of the style that looks best on them. This appears to be an effort to keep women restricted so as not to highlight their distinctiveness and physical attributes.

If we are to explore the origins of this backward thinking, we might consider tracing it back to 1905, to a psychotherapist named Sigmund Freud who published a book, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, which discussed how women have penis envy and lacked the protuberant male equipment that allows them to have the testosterone necessary to tell a joke. In general, Freud held a negative opinion of women and their capabilities and went so far as to characterize women as mutilated males who were not whole. A century later, the world has discovered that many of Freud's theories were unfounded, but in his era, his forceful and well-articulated theory largely shaped early America's view about women and their humor that has reverberated even to the current day.

In fact in January 2007, this theory was reinforced by the well-regarded British journalist Christopher Hitchens who created a maelstrom of controversy when he authored an article entitled "Why Women Aren't Funny," which was published in *Vanity Fair Magazine*. Christopher Hitchens had a long-established record as an influential intellectual journalist who had written thirty books about art, religion, and politics before he succumbed to esophageal cancer in 2011. As I began conducting my research for this thesis, Hitchens' article continued to appear in many of my research queries regarding women and comedy. Apparently, Hitchens' "Why Women Aren't Funny" article has become the modern-day touchstone for the ongoing

debate about women and humor. Why would a well-educated, well-informed journalist of his caliber write a piece that seemed not only so out of touch with the modern era, but also primarily premised on his own biased, first-hand armchair speculations, as opposed to being based on objective evidence and logical analysis? Hitchens' article incorporates all the major issues and biases that women continue to confront as standup comics. They are judged by gender, dismissed as inferior, considered interlopers, and denied their own power.

I believe that the article originated from Hitchens' personal experience of struggling to attract females. Hitchens was a mediocre looking man, by his own admission, and possibly being humorous did not come naturally to him, so quite possibly he wrote a personal essay masked as a factual piece that keyed into the visceral part of male insecurities and took off virally. The feminist movement has made it politically incorrect to discuss women as second-class citizens openly, yet the chauvinistic misogynistic spirit is alive and well. The fact that Hillary Clinton ran for President twice and lost demonstrates to me that America is willing to embrace a black or outright misogynistic racist president before a female one. Except for the more well-educated coastal states, the United States is still strongly comprised of people who embrace these ill-based beliefs, which is why I believe a president like Donald Trump thrives and also why an article of this lower caliber written by a widely regarded intellectual journalist struck such an emotional chord. As the internet now connects globally, Hitchens' article reached people all across the country and resonated with the large constituency of mediocre-looking, unfunny men in the deep red and Bible belt states. In order to refute Christopher Hitchens' and Freud's theories, I discuss the lives of successful female comics in different historical time periods who I have selected because they are strongly identified with their eras. The examination of these female comics' careers highlights the specific struggles women standup comics have faced throughout the

twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and the persistent obstacles that they all too often continue to confront today. I had originally planned to focus exclusively on female comics of color but unfortunately there was a dearth of available research regarding them, or else they did not meet the criteria of being standup performers. For instance, I would have very much liked to have included an examination of the female comic actress Mindy Kaling in this thesis, but while she is a very talented and a successful writer and actor, she has never performed standup comedy. I also deliberately choose not to include any black female comics as subjects because doing so would have brought up complicated issues of race that fall outside the purview of this thesis, and which frankly would take another study to address.

Ultimately, this thesis demonstrates that female comics have always faced undue adversity, ranging at best from skeptics to at worst open hostility, due to their gender and because they were, and continue to be, perceived as not only leaving their traditional domestic spheres but also invading one of the few remaining all-male spaces. This is compounded by the fact that these female comics conduct this invasion by utilizing feminine skills that are traditionally supposed to be confined to private settings. I believe the issue is one of male control. Historically, males have considered themselves the breadwinners and spokesmen of the public sphere and they relegated women to domestic duties. For instance, Frida Kahlo, a feminist artist in the 1940s and 1950s wanted financial independence but could never achieve it, but because of her marriage to a celebrity artist she was able to obtain recognition, exposure and resources and she could showcase her work in the United States and Europe (Brooklyn Museum of Art, 2019). Historically, women have needed men who control the decision-making positions and purse strings for career success.

With more women entering the standup comedy field, men have felt threatened because they want women to need them and also because women are succeeding in a field that is turning male-female gender roles upside down. Men make jokes and women are supposed to laugh. Joke telling has been perceived as a male form of communication and women have been reluctant to transgress societal perceptions of appropriate linguistic behavior for women. "Making us laugh was always the boy's job," explains Regina Barreca, and cracking jokes or even "getting" jokes labeled one a "Bad Girl" (33). Additionally, she notes that comedy itself is an aggressive act and that making someone laugh means exerting control, even power. A woman must be conscious of presenting herself as overaggressive or she will make people uncomfortable, thereby creating an environment that is not conducive to laughter.

Additionally, I maintain that the jokes of female comics are generally perceived as more subversive and anti-establishment than their male counterparts. Female humor may appear more subversive because it is labeled women's humor which signals to people that they will be talking about so-called women's issues or making men the butt of their jokes. Joanne Gilbert states that except for gynecology women generally talk about the same topics as men, so it is incorrect to assume women comics only tell jokes about women's issues. The more accurate statement is that women have their point of view and men have theirs, but the latter is not labeled as men's humor because they are the dominant group. Women must employ techniques like self-deprecation in order to not appear threatening. Gilbert suggests that women have various postures/personas to do this like the kid posture that Ellen Degeneres adopts in her comedy. Degeneres uses childlike wonderment and halting speech when trying to remember the details of a story. This style makes her audience feel very comfortable as she becomes the audience's playmate (Gilbert, 98).

It is therefore the contention of this thesis that a large part of the near hysterical reaction that patriarchal society has to female comics is nothing more than a manifestation of traditional male society's typical reaction to women leaving the domestic sphere and entering the public/professional sphere, and that such hysterical reactions are further exacerbated by the fact that women are utilizing the capabilities they are prized for in the domestic sphere (persuasion and nurturing) to obtain financial independence and success in the public sphere.

The frantic reaction of traditional patriarchal society to female comics in general is even more pronounced regarding female standup comics, and the reasons for this are obvious upon reflection. A standup comic, of whatever gender, must display verbal dominance in order to command the audience's attention and respect. Standup is the rawest, most visceral, confrontational form of comedy in existence, and therefore it is even more associated with what are considered the stereotypically masculine norms, i.e., individualism (the stand-up comic is entirely alone on stage); courage (the stand-up comic must be prepared to verbally confront and defeat hecklers and win over a hostile crowd); and resourcefulness (the stand-up comic must be able to think quickly on his/her feet and adapt to the mood of the audience and improvise based upon unexpected events). Female standups have had their share of obstacles but the empowering nature of sharing and performing their stories have encouraged them to persist. This thesis studies the myths and that females have had to overcome to break into a male-dominated field, and the female comics that have broken down some of those barriers to create a smoother pathway for those who followed.

In Chapter Two, I focus on the flawed assumptions that underpin Christopher Hitchens' infamous "Why Women Aren't Funny" article, with an emphasis on how it uses a discredited theory promulgated by none other than Sigmund Freud. This chapter also examines the puzzling

and troublesome positive reception that Hitchens' uninformed and inane article has received in far too many quarters.

The third chapter further investigates Hitchens ill-conceived and misinformed notions of the real world and how they relate to female comedic expression.

The fourth chapter focuses on the career of Joan Rivers who overcame a highly critical mother and a throng of non-believers of her talent to steamroll her way to superstardom. Her long career was even more incredible because she did not have other female comics to use as models or mentors, and she faced the most hostile situations from chauvinistic males who often refused her entry into clubs. Despite suffering these affronts, she became the first modern female standup comic widely recognized throughout the world, and as such she was a true pioneer, a trailblazer who helped make the careers of every female comic that followed in her wake possible. Rivers found success through her persistence and tough grit, but also through the support of several males including Lenny Bruce, Bill Cosby who encouraged Johnny Carson to put her on "The Tonight Show," and her mentor Johnny Carson who gave her the first big break and told her she was funny and would be a big star. Rivers was the first female comic to discuss personal female issues like birth control, private things that men and women did between the sheets, and taboo subjects of her period, like having a gay friend or going out with a married man. She was the queen of quick wise-cracking quips and caustic insults and she commanded audiences for an epic nearly 60-year career.

In the fifth chapter, I discuss comic Amy Schumer because she is currently the most widely known female standup comic in the U.S. Schumer's emergence into fame occurred in 2011 after she won the *Last Comic Standing* competition and obtained a development deal for

her award-winning television show *Inside Amy Schumer*. This show highlighted women's issues from a modern perspective, showcasing women as multi-dimensional beings who do not fit into female stereotypes and emphasizing the absurdity of many of the baseless claims and clichés evoked about women.

The sixth chapter explores Korean female comic Margaret Cho and the challenges she faced writing and starring in her own show on a major television network in the mid-1990s. Cho's brand of comedy was considered radically original, bawdy and difficult to categorize, thus her material and her show were misinterpreted and sabotaged by the established corporate power structure at the television network in question. After the executives coopted Cho's standup material to make money for themselves, they also set her up to fail by not giving her the proper tools and support to showcase her comedy talents. (Roseanne Barr's show was flying high at that time and the networks grabbed any female standup's material hoping for another bonanza.) However, Cho not only managed to survive and recover from this traumatic experience, but to learn and gain strength from it as well. Cho's mistreatment by this television network was a formative turning point in both her life and in her career that ultimately furnished her with the resolve and the courage she needed to openly express and explore her true identity as a bi-sexual Asian outsider in her comedy. Her transformation and openness created a fanbase in the LGBTQ community who show their appreciation for having their own icon by flocking to her shows.

The seventh chapter explores my own jokes and material. As a Korean female comic who has been performing regularly for three years, three times a week or more, I serve as an ethnographer who can share detailed personal insider knowledge of the standup comedy industry in New York City and its treatment of women. I share my experiences and compare my material and performance to the iconic female comics in different periods in history.

Chapter Two: Christopher Hitchens: Intellectual British Journalist Says Women Aren't Funny

It is confounding that the debate about whether women are funny continues in the twenty-first century, but it is partly because influential men like Christopher Hitchens and Sigmund Freud loudly grandstanded their positions and wrote the narrative for decades. They and other educated men wrote stories about women as if they were fact, with not much rebuttal, while society and the media eagerly joined the bandwagon and kept the controversy raging. Even though we can say now that many of their theories have been debunked, that fact seems to be lesser known. Hitchens and Freud came from two completely different fields--journalism and medical psychology—but they were both articulate men who had forceful, authoritative ways of stating their position and people listened. Therefore, it is not surprising that the short article Hitchens published in *Vanity Fair* in 2007, “Why Women Aren't Funny,” continues to have long-lasting reverberations. I spend this chapter deconstructing and trying to understand the mind of a man like Hitchens and explaining why his ideas about women and comedy remain a touchstone.

According to Hitchens, the original and still paramount motivation for humor is as a vehicle to facilitate men's successful sexual pursuit of women. In his article, he maintains that humor is the sole domain of males because men need humor in order to successfully seduce a female, while women do not have a corresponding need to be humorous in order to attract a mate. He says, “If you can stimulate her to laughter...well, then, you have at least caused her to loosen up and to change her expression.” (*Vanity Fair*, 1) He states that trying to get a woman to laugh has been one of his crucial preoccupations in life.

Hitchens appears to feel threatened by women transgressing traditional feminine roles, but he offers a backhanded compliment when he concedes that there are some funny women out there. He says, “most of them are hefty or dykey or Jewish or some combination of the three.

When Roseanne Barr invites people who don't dig her schtick -to suck her dick, know what I'm saying." (Hitchens, 1) So Hitchens invokes the issue of appearance for female comics who have been subjected to decades of degrading comments about their looks in relation to how funny they are, even while there are multitudes of chubby, mediocre and unpleasant looking working male comics who are not subjected to the same treatment. Prominent feminist theorist Carol Pateman has a theory for why men are threatened by women leaving their domestic sphere to participate in activities such as running for political office. She states that "women's domestication implies that she cannot participate in public sphere with any great efficacy...and that operating in the public sphere requires rationality and objectivity and since women are not represented as thus, she cannot participate properly" (Mambrol, 1). When we place Hitchens' article in such a context, as both the manifestation of long-standing patriarchal anxiety over women's evolving and changing roles and their increasing infiltration of spaces previously reserved for men, as well as a reaction to specific events involving females and comedy that were occurring at the time, we can better contextualize his viewpoint. Standup comedy has always been known as specifically alpha male territory and when women try to invade that sanctified domain, their presence threatens male emasculation.

A common theme in the approval of Hitchen's article was an underlying, even unconscious acceptance of centuries old stereotypes regarding the different functions and abilities of men and women that was reminiscent of the nineteenth-century Victorian belief that there were separate female and male "spheres," and that comedy was a field of endeavor that lay firmly within the sphere reserved for males. What underlies the contentions that Hitchens makes, and also informs the world views of people who accept his assumptions, is that females who seek to practice comedy professionally are "cultural intruders" who are impinging upon, indeed even

infiltrating, a profession that has rightfully and historically been the preserve of males. Hitchens also bases his opinions on a limited worldview of solely heterosexual relations where men's primary focus is to attract females, and he pronounces that mediocre looking men can only achieve this through successful joke telling.

Like Freud, Hitchens asserted that women were incapable of being funny, but neither provided actual data or evidence to support their bigoted opinions. For example, as in the passage below, Hitchens asks a rhetorical question and then proceeds to answer it without giving any evidence to support his contentions. He writes:

Why are men, taken on average, and as a whole, funnier than women? Well, for one thing, they had damn well better be. The chief task in life that a man must perform is that of impressing the opposite sex, and Mother Nature (as we laughingly call her) is not so kind to men. In fact, she equips many fellows with very little armament for the struggle. An average man has just one, outside chance: he had better be able to make the lady laugh... If you can stimulate her to laughter—I am talking about that real, out-loud, head-back, mouth-open-to-expose-the-full-horseshoe-of-lovely-teeth, surprise and a slight (no, make that a loud) peal of delight—well, then, you have at least caused her to loosen up and to change her expression. I shall not elaborate further. Women do not have any corresponding need to appeal to men in this way. (1)

Hitchens bases his entire argument on his own preoccupation with sexual fulfillment, and by his own admission, because he was not adequately equipped with the right physical armaments, he had no alternative but to try to become as funny as possible. His description of the ideal woman's laugh is sexist and degrading when he compares her mouth to a "full horseshoe of

lovely teeth,” connoting horsey looking women and comparing them to animals. He appears to be alluding to a woman’s facial expression commonly referred to as her O face, meaning orgasm face.

Hitchens may have considered himself an intellectual, but this article demonstrates his innate Neanderthal-like soul and the fact that he had a low opinion of women who he considered sexual objects and not multi-dimensional beings. In that sense, he and Freud appeared to have a similar view of women. The only inexplicable aspect is that Hitchens lived one hundred years after Freud so it seemed he should have been better informed. Hitchens consciously or unconsciously dovetailed onto Freud’s theory and re-ignited the dormant but seemingly never-ending debate about the different attitudes and spheres for men and women. Even if he did know better, he appeared to be nostalgic for the past when women were more firmly ensconced in the private domestic sphere. Frankly, this article makes him appear desperate and pleading for attention and it should have been called out as nothing more than his dating profile.

Freud and Hitchens lived in two completely different eras when women’s roles in society were much different. In 1905, when Freud wrote his jokes book, it was the waning phase of the Gilded Age in the United States, and the beginning of the so-called “progressive era” where movements to guarantee rights to oppressed groups, women, child laborers and workers were starting to make real progress in changing both the laws of the land and people’s preconceived beliefs and assumptions. In many ways, the United States was still a pre-pubescent nation at this time, as this was an era that was prior to both World Wars and before women had won the right to vote. Most women were still relegated to being wives and mothers during the period when Freud wrote this book, despite the impressive advances that feminism and other progressive

political and social movements had made by this time. Women in Freud's era were to be seen and not heard, and it was normally considered proper for their husbands to speak on their behalf. Therefore it is more understandable that Freud had a much more underdeveloped viewpoint of women and underestimated their abilities because women were almost completely relegated to the private domestic sphere in his era.

Hitchens, however, lived in an entirely different and more modern era when women were developing more boldness and vocalizing their thoughts. In 2007, women had long since won the right to vote, and many were active participants in the workforce. Indeed, more women were holding management positions, even a handful of female CEOs were heading up large corporations, so in many ways, it seems Hitchens should have "known better" as a more educated modern man.

Why has Hitchens' article taken on such a life of its own to the point that women comics are still being asked about it in 2016? Out of all of Hitchens' hundreds of books and articles about religion and politics, this article had the most widespread appeal and remains his most famous legacy posthumously. Why was there such a visceral reaction? I think it is partly the age-old story of male and female relationships where our mothers teach us that in order to get something from a man, the woman must cleverly disguise the request so that he thinks it is his idea. There is no disguise in standup. Maybe this is why it is so provocative for women to be in the field. In its very nature, standup is too brash and in your face for most men to handle. To have the idea of their sweet woman or their mother or daughter onstage making political statements or talking about private matters is too much for most men to comprehend. Women as standup comics flip the entire idea of men as the hunters and protectors and women as the nurturers and comforters. But why can't women speak their minds publicly onstage and also be

nurturing comforters at home? Men have always had dual roles as expected breadwinners as well as husbands and fathers. Why shouldn't women as well?

Frankly, it is highly insulting to both successful female comics, and the female gender in general, that the leading and hostile question about whether women are capable of being funny continues to be asked, only to be conveniently answered by the same pseudo authorities who posed the question in the first place. Both Freud and Hitchens ignored any contradictory evidence when presenting their respective arguments as to why females are supposedly incapable of being humorous. Hitchens also fails to mention the plethora of other reasons that people employ humor such as gallows humor, using humor to rally against a difficult or tragic situation, or using humor as social commentary to make a point or incite the masses.

Perhaps the truth is that while the objective state of gender relations in society had improved dramatically since 1905, when Freud wrote his book, and since 2007, when Hitchens wrote his article, many persons' perceptions and beliefs regarding gender have not kept pace with the extent of the actual societal progress that has been made. What Hitchens' article demonstrates is that the feminine display of wit is considered threatening to a lot of men because it reverses traditional societal assumptions about gender. Men are supposed to be innovative and bold hunter/gatherers and women are supposed to be dependable, but predictable, homemaker/nurturers.

The attributes of a successful comic are similar to the characteristics that have historically, and stereotypically, been ascribed to successful men. The ability to surprise others with one's intelligence and insight, to make others think more deeply about practices and traditions that they have taken for granted, the skill of articulating an imaginative, original, bold

interpretation of life and society, all of these talents have historically been considered the purview of men, and when women demonstrate their aptitude for such endeavors it inevitably creates societal unease because it undermines long-held cherished assumptions about male intellectual superiority.

Female comics who perform standup comedy are inherently subversive to societal norms and expectations, and that is why they encounter such unwarranted criticism and provoke such unhinged reactions from male critics like Hitchens. Hitchens' article is representative of a deeper societal and male unease at the evolution of gender roles in modern society, and his negative reaction to the notion that females could be funny is really the frightened response of a male from an older generation who was witnessing one of the last redoubts of exclusive male privilege, the right and privilege to be considered funny, collapsing before his aged eyes.

As the comics in this thesis demonstrate, women have more of a tendency to tell jokes that "rock the boat," and employ humor that exposes the cracks and fissures in society, which make men feel even more ill at ease. As the dominant group, they wish to maintain the status quo and do not want these inequities pointed out. Female comics utilize these subversive jokes as a platform through which to engage in a more general societal critique, as humor is a good vehicle to engage with people to shed light on complex or sensitive issues. While it is all too often assumed that men who get up on stage and tell jokes are funny, women invariably must prove that they are in fact capable of dispensing humor. Proving their aptitude is no simple matter as all too often female standup comics must overcome the patriarchal societal conditioning that their audience has been subjected to. It is against this backdrop of feeling like second-class citizens, as they also try to make men feel powerful while still seeking to carve out an identity for themselves, that female comics must practice their craft.

Chapter Three: Why Men Don't Want Women to be Funny

A more accurate title for Hitchens' article would be, "Why men don't want women to be funny." If Hitchens had been more honest, he would have admitted that the reason men don't want women to be funny is because they fear that if increasing numbers of females are capable of employing humor in an effective fashion it would detract from what they consider to be the most essential element of their worth to a woman, i.e., their ability to make women laugh.

Michael Jeffries, an associate professor of American Studies at Wellesley College interviewed many comics to get their perspective on this issue for his book *Behind the Laughs*. He quotes comedian Jeffrey Joseph who states,

Comedy and gender? First of all, there are a lot of people who think women aren't funny. And that's backwards and inexcusable and based on the fragile egos of a lot of guys. Gender is essential to comedy. Essential. Sexuality, gender – its power. It's part of somebody's identity and their potency onstage. And the people who erase that from what they do –to me they can be funny for about twenty minutes. And then there's no tension left. (Jeffries, 152)

Exactly. Men do not want to cede power to a woman and laughter is power. Many people think women aren't funny because it is a myth that has been repeated so often that people have accepted it as truth without questioning it. For example, an abundance of anecdotal evidence exists that many women not only have a good sense of humor, but also that they can be funny. However, a lot is humor inside the home or shared amongst women in small groups, out of the earshot of men. Undoubtedly, most people can think of an example of their mom, aunt, or other

female relative cracking jokes who would stop when their husbands or other men would come into the room. Throughout history, women have exhibited humor but oftentimes only around other women. As soon as their men showed up, they would go into an automatic suppliant smile mode in order to make the man feel like the king of his abode because this is what her mother did, and she followed.

Thus, centuries of closeted women's jokes never made it out to the public arena because women held back for the man's benefit. Men often thought that women were not funny because women had been taught to let them think that. Being in the assertive joke-telling mode was considered not to be ladylike or feminine behavior (Barreca, 35). Although there were vaudevillian funny women and comics such as Lucille Ball and Carol Burnett, both who created TV history by performing comedy for the masses, many traditional families still told their children that these women were not exhibiting appropriate feminine behavior. Others told their daughters that these women with their pratfalls and physical comedy that sometimes had their limbs flying akimbo were not considered ladylike.

Men and women's humor has been labeled to give the sense that men and women tell jokes differently or have a variant sense of humor. Men have perennially been the ones to revel in bathroom humor, fart jokes, and feces wisecracks, subjects that have territorially been marked as firmly in men's terrain. They feel threatened by the idea of a funny woman – one who talks back, and god forbid, who talks about her body parts.

Much of this comes from our entertainment history when the funniest women onscreen or onstage were big women or loud, goofy women like Marie Dressler and Mabel Normand, women comediennes as they were called in the 1920s, who worked with Charlie Chaplin. Or

from Phyllis Diller who downplayed her physical beauty and girlish figure to seem less threatening to men. Today, when a woman gets on stage and starts ranting about Trump or sharing racy stories about her personal life, this can be threatening to males because she is making herself the subject rather than the object by becoming a multi-dimensional human being who shares her innermost thoughts, hopes, and vulnerabilities rather than being just a physical voiceless object. For females, it is empowering to be in a position of assertive authority on stage instead of in the receivership role of waiting for the nodding approval of men and taking their lead. Oftentimes, men and the white power structure do not feel comfortable with women in those roles because it is harder to pigeonhole them and maintain control over them.

Calvin Evans, a comedy agent, comments on these kinds of gender biases when he laments,

I think women have it harder because a lot of times people don't think women are funny. And women must step outside of themselves from being women. Like, one thing that pisses me off all the time, is, like, whenever there's a show and the host says, "Are you ready for a lady's point of view? We got a female right here!" No, she's a fucking comic.

(Cited in Jeffries, 151)

Evans objects to the ways that women are marked as exceptional and "other" and how hosts and announcers encourage audiences to activate their biases against women. I have never seen a male comic introduced as "bringing to the stage a male with a unique Caucasian perspective," because most of the comics are white males. Rebecca Sohn, another comedy booker, adds to Evans' comments when she says:

White masculinity is the industry standard, and white men's voices are understood to be normal and deserving of attention; the comedy world is male identified and male centered. Women's struggle to find their own voices in a patriarchal world is not a feel-good platitude without substantive implications. It is a feminist theory of a path from objecthood to subjecthood... women have proven themselves to be adaptable as they use skills they have sharpened by living through patriarchy beyond comedy. (Jeffries, 153)

Sohn says it well: women have been conditioned by centuries of operating in a patriarchal society to function a certain way in order to survive, which includes struggling to find their own voices and empower their womanhood, without comparisons to men. Often these challenges give women the strength to operate more cleverly and creatively to obtain their goals.

Women thrive as comics because they have to adapt to a male-oriented society and find ways to share their stories so that they are comprehensible and non-threatening to males. This is something I know first-hand: as a female comic, I have sat in many open mics with all white males and some of my jokes, which are female-centered about weight, no one understands. So it is important to have a few women in the audience. Other women like Phyllis Diller came to the same conclusion when she refused to accept gigs at places like General Motors in Detroit where she knew it would be an all-male audience.

Chapter Four: Joan Rivers: The First Modern Standup Comic

Before I began this thesis, I was mostly familiar with Joan Rivers as the caustic insult comic on E Television's *Fashion Police* and as the queen of plastic surgery. I knew nothing about the decades of standup comedy performances that were the crux of her enormous talent. I was not aware of the personal and professional challenges she faced and overcame in order to blaze a pathway for others, including myself.

Rivers was born in 1933 in Brooklyn to conservative Russian immigrant parents. Her family moved to Larchmont, Westchester when she was a teenager. Rivers grew up as Joan Molinsky, the second daughter to a doctor father and a socialite mother who spent above their means to keep up the fabricated self-image of a wealthy family. To the outside world, the Molinskys were the embodiment of midcentury success – a solid family with a doctor father, a beautifully coiffed mother who gave impressive dinner parties, and two healthy children. But behind closed doors, the atmosphere was poisonous. Her mother's unrelenting thirst to elevate their social standing put undue stress on the entire family. Rivers was an awkward teenager who did not have a lot of friends but discovered that she could get attention by telling funny stories to her father's friends. Thus, she discovered the power of laughter.

When Rivers began performing in the 1960s, she was harshly criticized by both her conservative Russian immigrant parents who did not believe she had any talent and comedy club managers who thought she was canned. Regardless of the rejection, Rivers believed deep down that she was a star and never took no for an answer. When an agent named Tony Rivers told her that Molinsky was not a suitable name for an entertainer, she took his name and became Joan Rivers on the spot. She was booed off stages for seven years yet she still persisted. Slowly, she

learned how to command an audience, a masculine ability.

To control an audience of hundreds meant that she must be audacious and undaunted by silence, rejection, or even heckling. If audiences were tough, her cohorts were even more judgmental. In 2016, Leslie Bennetts wrote a biography about Rivers called *Last Girl Before the Freeway* where she says of Rivers, “Comedy was a man’s world, and the men wouldn’t let her in, but she continued to bulldoze through previously impenetrable barriers as if they were made of toothpicks, crashing her way into multitudes of clubs run by hostile men who didn’t want her” (4). Rivers started a comedy career in a time when women were supposed to remain angelic on their pedestals, impersonating untarnished mannequins – the perfect but impossible image of thin, beautiful women. Women were considered madonnas or whores, so she closed her show with a startling come-on: “I’m Joan Rivers, and I put out.” (Rivers, *Piece of Work*, 2010)

Rivers credits her breakthrough to when she watched Lenny Bruce, the father of standup comedy, who was the first comic to share deeply personal and politically sensitive material onstage. Prior to Bruce, comics practiced more of the standard setup punchline joke structure. Bruce was the first to get up on stage and talk naturally in an uncensored fashion often cursing and instigating people to question current religious, political, and sexual mores. As a result, he was often arrested for his provocative commentary that threatened authority and the status quo. But Bruce was also charismatic and developed a strong following; he was partly so mesmerizing because he combined masterful personal storytelling and social commentary in the style of jazz and poetic syncopation: He was a great admirer and student of the great jazz musicians Louis Armstrong and Miles Davis. Rivers admired Bruce’s no-holds approach to blurting out his innermost thoughts on stage and she thought it was amazing to be so uncensored and unedited and to be able to share that effectively and compellingly with the audience.

Once Rivers witnessed Bruce's groundbreaking style of standup, she tried out the same style with her material. She often performed in Greenwich Village houses like The Bitter End and The Duplex and she often said that Bruce's note to her saying, "You're right and they're wrong," kept her hammering away at perfecting her standup and not giving up. Even when she was told to give up for lack of talent, she said she always believed that she was destined to be a star. As a pioneer and forerunner woman comic, Rivers did not have female comic role models but she was inspired by Lenny Bruce who told her to keep on going when she was told to quit. She says that Bill Cosby called Johnny Carson and encouraged him to put Rivers on *The Tonight Show*. Johnny Carson recognized how funny she was and invited her on his show nearly a hundred times, thus making her a guest host and recognized celebrity. Without the help of these mentors, Rivers might not have become a household name. Lucille Ball, another pioneer female comic genius, albeit not a standup comic, credits Charlie Chaplin and Groucho Marx for helping to develop her physical comedy, as she did not have many female role models either. She went on to star in the iconic *I Love Lucy* show that co-starred her genius husband Desi Arnaz who also directed the series.

Rivers passed away in September 2014 after an epic sixty-year career. In a tribute to Rivers at the Glamour Women of the Year Awards, Amy Schumer spoke fondly of Joan Rivers. She recalled one of her favorite Rivers jokes about body image, "My birth control now is just to leave the lights on." Schumer also shared one of her own jokes, "I'm at that age where my friends take me to brunch to tell me about their pregnancy, they say I'm keeping this one," and then compares her joke to the jokes Rivers made when she tried to talk about abortions in the early 1970s and was told to stop. (Dailymotion video clip, 2017) Schumer highlights how

Rivers' jokes still resonate forty years later as women are still fighting to exercise the right to make reproductive decisions about their own body.

As Schumer and others who regard her as a path-breaking female mentor know, Rivers was the consummate comedian – she had a rapier quick wit, funny relevant material and she was able to make audiences of every stripe and gender laugh, an impressive feat for any comic. So how did she do it? I will answer this question by analyzing a Rivers performance in England in 1983 when she entertains a sold-out theatre of men and women and “kills it,” comedy jargon for achieving a performance in which all the elements come together and the comic elicits a great response from the audience. In the clip that I analyze, I try to give a good sense of why Rivers was such a successful comic. Female comics that followed her all mention her as a role model, although Rivers was too busy knocking down barriers to groom any of them personally.

In a video clip of Rivers' 1983 performance in London, she glides on stage to a packed theatre of about five hundred well-dressed white men in tuxedos and women in evening gowns (*An Audience with Joan Rivers*). A trim well-coiffed fifty-year-old Rivers strides onto the stage wearing a long-sleeved form-fitting black dress that reaches down to her black high heels. The dress is adorned with a white glittery V-neck lapel that stretches halfway to her belly button to highlight her cleavage. She accessorizes with diamond drop earrings, a glittery ring and a bracelet, and her nails are perfectly manicured. Her appearance conveys an elegant, ladylike presence that came from her background as the daughter of a doctor and a socialite. Her choice of clothing appears to be a generational decision as well, when everyone dressed to the nines to go watch live performances. Cho and Schumer do not follow that style of dress – they are much more informal, which seems both a personality choice as well as the increasing casualization of fashion.

Choosing to fashion herself this way, Rivers takes the opposite approach of comics such as Phyllis Diller and Moms Mabley who disguised their femininity in big housedresses and downplayed their beauty, femininity, and sexuality in order to get the audience to focus on their jokes rather than their looks. In contrast, Rivers was the first female comic to showcase her femininity and not kowtow to society's perceptions of what was proper for a woman. She did not downplay her sexuality or the fact that she had a vagina. Her conservative long dress with a sexy cleavage line brought attention to her female appearance, without taking away from the content of her material.

Rivers begins her set with a very friendly opening statement: "I love England but only two things disturb me about you in regard to America: we don't have national monuments like you except Joan Collins and we'll talk about that later and 1776, because that's the year America broke away from England and it's also Elizabeth Taylor's dress size. The audience responds with laughter and groans to which she says, "Oh please, Elizabeth Taylor put on a red dress and thirty kids tried to board her." (An Audience with Joan Rivers, 1983) This is a funny joke that men and women appreciated because it referred to a famous celebrity. The audience howls with uproarious laughter and the camera cuts away to two gentlemen in tuxedos who are laughing with their mouths open while looking at the people next to them. As the clip progresses, the video's male editor seems mostly focused on white-haired gentlemen audience members, which allows us to see how male reactions were prioritized in 1983.

This is a strong opener that guarantees that the audience will be captivated from the outset. Rivers starts by saying positive things about the city where she is performing and customizes her set by changing the joke about Elizabeth Taylor from a yellow dress in America to a red dress in London because of the red double-decker buses. She also mentions well-known

movie stars and the audience is looking forward to hearing her raw unedited opinions about England and celebrities. Although Rivers was often criticized for making fun of other women, Rivers' friends say her scathing critiques of Taylor were complicated. They claimed that Rivers did not personally dislike Taylor, but she was so disappointed that the "most beautiful girl in the world," as Taylor was often hailed in the 1950s, had let herself get fat. She felt Taylor owed it to women and the world to maintain her beautiful woman status, since Rivers herself had never been blessed with good looks.

In this regard, Rivers played both sides: She is the mean-girl archetype of the popular girl making fun of the fat girl in the lunchroom, but in this case the fat girl is a popular, well-paid movie star so she considers her fair game. Yet in the next breath she steps back to presenting herself as the victimized "fat girl" where she is the unloved one in her family and talks about how her husband of seventeen years doesn't find her attractive in bed anymore. This latter technique of self-deprecation helps bring the audience back to Rivers' side as she makes fun of herself. An important aspect for comics is likeability; if the audience considers a comic likeable, they have more leeway to say "unlikeable" things, but the commentary must be based on some truth.

The first time we see a female audience member is when Rivers banters with a young attractive pregnant woman wearing a mink stole and a diamond necklace in the front row and Rivers asks her if she is going to have a natural childbirth. As noted above, the video prioritizes male reactions so it is significant that when a woman is finally showcased, she is pregnant, which highlights her femaleness. "I'd like to," the woman responds. "Why?" Rivers asks. "Don't be afraid to ask for help. When I was having my child, I was screaming" – she lets out a loud

shrieking curdling scream and then adds without skipping a beat “and that was just during conception.” (An Audience with Joan Rivers)

Rivers was considered crass and vulgar, and discussing issues that were considered fiercely in the private domestic sphere as women did not discuss private matters such as conception and the birth process in public. Rivers’ jokes about childbirth were cutting edge because they touched upon topics that had not previously been discussed or explored in public by men or women. Since Rivers herself was a mother, it gave her more credence as she spoke to the visibly pregnant woman, sharing squeamish feminine details. She continues by asking the woman, “So I hope you’re not planning to nurse.” The woman nods her head and says, “I was hoping to. “Why?” Rivers asks. “You’re not from Beverly Hills then, are you? In Beverly Hills, they don’t nurse because the kids are allergic to plastic.” This evokes a wave of laughter that grabs the audience’s attention and ensures their continued participation. Rivers makes fun of Californians while simultaneously aspiring to be more like them and the celebrities she criticized onstage. (An Audience with Joan Rivers)

As this video performance suggests, it is not necessarily the content of Rivers jokes that is female or gender specific, but rather the way she assertively shares her stories. Even though she often made caustic cutting remarks about celebrities and other women, she was able to deliver these jokes with panache and the audience always seemed to appreciate them, even if against their will sometimes. She always maintained a good feeling in the rooms where she performed. I think this is partially a female characteristic, but more one that showcases the qualities of a good host and comic. When I perform, for example, I am conscious of maintaining a good feeling and vibe in the room. It is important to “keep the audience on your side,” because then they will laugh at anything.

Most talented comics like Rivers agilely move from topic to topic and shift gears based on audience reaction. This is apparent in this 1983 video performance when we see a male audience member state that Rivers seems to enjoy embarrassing people, and then proceeds to ask her what she finds embarrassing. Rivers responds with her trademark self-deprecating humor, saying “everything embarrasses me...like when you have a piece of toilet paper stuck on your heel and you don’t realize...and you think you look so damn hot.” She acts out strutting with a dainty look on her face. She adds, “When a dog makes out on your leg, ohhh don’t you just want to die? You’re standing there at your friend’s house.” Then she leans on the stool shaking her left leg and says, “some people say you should take this as a compliment.” Then she puts her knuckle in her mouth and makes a face that evokes “Could you just die?” (An Audience with Joan Rivers)

Rivers is a master storyteller and the exuberance with which she shares her stories resonates with the audience. She is highly skilled in her quick-witted timing, authenticity, and sharing of her real-life stories in a self-deprecating fashion. She is especially endearing when she shares embarrassing moments such as: “When you flush the john hoping it goes down and you flush again and it starts to rise and you’re like – don’t overflow, don’t overflow – and she shrieks when she says overflow the second time. “And it starts to rise, and you walk outside with a big watermark on your chest, could you just die?” (An Audience with Joan Rivers)

Here, Rivers is sharing embarrassing moments that many people have experienced, but she is verbalizing them in such an endearing manner that she transfixes the audience. Her performance builds to a growing crescendo, like an orchestral climax. We see this when the camera cuts away to a female audience member who is throwing her head back in riotous laughter. Rivers does not seem self-conscious at all. She does not speak at the audience as if

addressing a large congregation. Rather, she speaks to them like they are her friends and she feeds off the positive affirmation.

This technique reveals how an element of Rivers' brilliance is how she brings people together into her experience and makes the large theatre feel smaller and more intimate. She shares her stories as if she is at a small intimate soiree and she speaks with commitment and passion. By using physical act-outs to reinforce her stories, facial expressions to soften the harshness of a taunting critique of a celebrity, or inserting an "oh please," she truly conveys her story to the audience. One of the aspects of comedy that is so important is what Stephen Rosenfield, a renowned comedy instructor in New York, calls "joyous communication," which means the sheer energy that the comic transfers to the audience by the power of their personality that makes the audience respond. (Rosenfield, 153)

Rivers continues to establish intimacy by pulling up a stool and while sitting on it she says, "Can we talk? This is your chance to ask me questions and I will do my best to answer them and we'll see what happens." She adds, while smiling and laughing, "Remember we helped you during the war, so don't be vicious." Her manner is casual, friendly, conversational, and inviting. Even for such a large room, she makes each audience member feel like she is speaking to them in their living room. She partly achieves this effect by sitting on the stool and bringing it closer to the audience and leaning in. She looks at ease and as if she is genuinely enjoying herself. (An Audience with Joan Rivers)

Another element of Rivers' success is how she interacts specifically with the women in the audience, forging a bond based on shared gender identity. During the performance, she asks women to show off their rings, telling them she will be able to know if they are a first wife or

second wife. This bit is definitely from the female perspective, especially when she says, “First wives are polite and don’t say anything even when they get a crummy ring.” Rivers then does an act out by squinting closely at her finger. Continuing she says, “Second wives look at a tiny, indiscernible diamond ring and say, ‘What’s this? Does it tell the weather or something?’” Rivers’ razor sharp quick wit and silly mannerisms elevate her jokes and make women in the audience feel more comfortable with her. The way she shares this joke shakes up people’s thinking about the traditional ways that women are supposed to celebrate motherhood and being a wife. (An Audience with Joan Rivers)

But Rivers also addresses heterosexual couples, thereby including men. It was probably the first time men and women had been called out to answer questions about their marriage. Rivers points at a woman and says, “How long have you been married? Two years. You are still in the honeymoon stage.” She then goes on, “Oh don’t get me wrong, my husband and I still run around and play little nightgown games. Catch me, catch me but after nine years of marriage – it’s more like we walk and it’s even better if it’s tomorrow because then I can take a bath.” (Rivers Standup 1974)

In 2015, sexual mores were more open and Margaret Cho says in an online interview with *Race Forward* that Rivers’ joke about avoiding sex, or just doing it because you have to, to please your husband was her way of showing a woman trying to get control over the situation by ignoring the man trying to have sex with her. Cho adds,

“I always thought what she did was funny, but that’s a definite generational joke. I wouldn’t make the same joke. I think you should really enjoy the sex you have. If

you have sex, it should be for you, not for the other person. That joke is assuming that sex is always in service to men, which I think I wanna flip that, and make it all about the woman. Or me.” (Race Forward,1)

Cho, who came to fame thirty-five years after Rivers, was making jokes about enjoying pre-marital sex while Rivers was reprimanded by her agent for alluding to abortions as “appendectomies.” But Rivers came of age in a different time period and those statements were considered cutting edge in her era. As it was, she was one of the only females on stage who was shining a light on what happens between a man and a woman between the sheets in the 1960s and 1970s.

Rivers also broke barriers by talking about sex and bodies openly. At another point in the video, she asks the audience if anyone’s parents told them about the facts of life growing up and no one raises their hand. She says, “Me neither, I blame my mother for my poor sex life. All she told me was that the man goes on top and the woman underneath. For three years my husband and I slept in bunk beds.” She continues to make jokes about condoms, tampons and diaphragms that are so-called women’s jokes, but everyone in the audience is included, so they feel obligated to understand and laugh because Rivers has engaged them and proven that she is funny. (An Audience with Joan Rivers)

As a standup comic, Rivers exudes confidence and power; she moves comfortably onstage with a commanding presence and holds a central position in the performance space, refusing to fade from view. She also exhibits courage by fielding questions from the audience

unrehearsed. When the conversation did not lead to a potential punchline, she would switch to her arsenal of “tried and true” tested standup material. It was the ballet between improvisation and structured standup material that led to her successful set. In these ways and more, she contested preconceived notions of masculine parlance and behavior that dominated in the standup comedy world.

No subject was out of bounds for Rivers. She put all her vulnerabilities out on the stage. She used humor to deal with painful issues – humor theorists call this gallows humor, which is a type of humor used to deal with a hopeless situation like when she talked about her husband’s suicide. She used humor to talk about her abusive childhood. She began her career making jokes about how she was a fat, ugly kid whose parents didn’t love her. She had always felt that her parents favored her older sister Barbara who became a wife and a mother of two children. She says, “All I ever heard when I was a kid was, ‘Why can’t you be more like your cousin Sheila?’ And Sheila had died at birth.” (The Wrap, Funniest One-Liners, 2014)

Additionally, Rivers consistently used self-deprecating humor to make jokes about her appearance. Her husband killed himself after she took the bag off her head during sex, she quipped. She also mastered dark comedy by making jokes about the Holocaust saying about model Heidi Klum, for example, who was dressed in a cleavage baring, curve hugging dress at an awards ceremony, “The last time a German looked this hot was when they were pushing Jews into the ovens.” (YouTube, 2013) Some people were offended by her insult jokes, but Rivers told people not to buy tickets to her show if that was the case. The only criteria for Rivers was to make people laugh and she constantly pushed the boundaries, especially for women.

When Rivers was interviewed in 2010 on National Public Radio's (NPR) "Fresh Air" show, she said "by making jokes about it, you brought it into a position where you could look at it and deal with it. It was no longer something that you couldn't discuss and had to whisper about. When you whisper about something, it's too big and you can't get it under control and take control of it." (Audiotape Interview NPR YouTube, 2010) Her intention behind joking about controversial topics was to clear the path to talk about these issues, rather than joking in a way that makes the audience merely accept the punch line without engaging with the joke's content. By talking about a sensitive topic like her husband's suicide, Rivers believed people did not have to dance around the issue awkwardly. She considered it a form of therapy. She thought talking about issues that were really embarrassing, but vocalizing them affirmatively on stage, gave the performer power and enabled the audience to respond because they felt the emotional truth behind the words that resonated.

Many people go to comedy clubs not only to laugh, but also to hear commentary that they might think but never put into words. A successful comic must be able to articulate their "take" on a situation and vocalize what others are thinking but are unable to say. Joan Rivers successfully accomplished this brash in-your-face social commentary. Her performance style involved a complex combination of elements and melded characteristics that are regarded as traditionally masculine, such as aggression, with features frequently used by other female stand-up comedians, such as self-deprecating and confessional comedy.

Rivers accentuates and relishes her non-traditional role, throwing verbal darts as she crisscrosses the stage. She is the ultimate alpha female who disdains female domains who, at the same time, talks about intimate female topics like vaginal dryness and the death of excitement in a long-term marriage. She is equally upfront and confessional about all the shortcomings in her

personal life. Rivers' brash, anti-female persona and material are ironic for a woman who privately wanted the trappings of the good girl that her mother could love – one who was reserved, married, had children, and kept a beautiful home. Perhaps it was this irony that made Rivers' performances so powerful and enabled her to become such a cross-over star.

Rivers' jokes reflect the period of the 1960s and 1970s, yet they still resonate today. In a performance in 1964, she said, "I used to be an ugly flat-chested girl...now I'm an ugly flat-chested woman." (Joan Rivers-Standup, 1974) Rivers uses the technique of self-deprecation effectively to disarm the audience. She charms the audience and smiles and laughs a lot to gain likeability. She points to her chest and says, "I got a new brassiere. Don't worry it's made out of rubber, if I fall down, I'll bounce right back up." (1974) These jokes were considered risqué in the 1960s because no one was talking about the inner thoughts and personal challenges that women – single or married--were facing. Rivers put them out there and even men were laughing.

In her 2010 documentary, *Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work*, Rivers recalls an agent walking out after her set because she ended with a bit about the Hollywood casting couch, saying, "I'm Joan Rivers and I put out." Rivers said a nice girl didn't say things like that in 1960, but today it would be no big deal. The documentary also featured a clip of Rivers performing in 1965 where she talks about a girl who got fourteen appendectomies, after which she gives a knowing wink. Rivers says that her agent pulled her to the side and said that she couldn't talk about things like that - abortions. We can appreciate how much Rivers paved the way for contemporary standup female comics when we compare what she was doing to what Amy Schumer is doing today. In 2017 Schumer talked about taking Plan B, a contraceptive pill and going to yoga class. "Do you think everyone can tell I'm mid-aborsh?" she asks innocently. (Schumer, *Mostly Sex Stuff*)

Chapter Five: Amy Schumer: Sex Comic from Long Island

In this chapter, I analyze Amy Schumer because she is the representative female comic of this millennium, thus far. In a 2016 article in the Irish Examiner, Suzanne Harrington describes her as such, “Think Joan Rivers without the misogyny, more confidence than Miss Piggy, absolute fearlessness, lacerating self-awareness, and the ability to sweetly articulate everything you’ve ever thought but were too chicken to say out loud.” (Irish Examiner, 2016) Schumer’s explicit discussion of breakups, sexting, weddings, women in the military, child-beauty pageants, lying about being over your ex, third-date disclosures (“I have AIDS”), make up, ageism, one-night stands, couples counselling, sex tips and more were possible because of the comedy of Joan Rivers and Margaret Cho who preceded her. They suffered the blatant mistreatment and hostility of the male dominated industry and broke ground in discussion of sex, race and other taboo topics that created the environment for Schumer to be able to discuss these topics without the similar backlash they suffered of being reprimanded and pulled off the stage for mentioning women’s issues of pregnancy, sex, one-night stands, abortions and the like. In some ways, she was a more modern Joan Rivers who wore sexy dresses and talked about private sex issues openly onstage. Because she came to fame more than forty years after Rivers, she was able to push the envelope and be even more sexually explicit than Rivers. Schumer began standup at the age of twenty-two and hit comedy pay-dirt a decade later when she won “The Last Comic Standing” TV competitions and secured a development deal for her own show “Inside Amy Schumer,” which was based on her standup. Each show includes segments of her doing standup where she is dressed in body hugging dresses with high boots. Schumer highlights her physical attributes with her short dresses that showcase her legs.

Like Joan Rivers, Schumer highlights her femininity by exhibiting her bare legs and wearing a dress that shows off her figure. Although their fashion styles may be different, they both are gender insiders and embrace their feminine heterosexuality. Cho, on the other hand, began her career dressing more feminine to fit in but later took on a more gender fluid style that spoke to her queer fag hag identity. Appearance for a woman is always an issue, but as a performer it is even more important because everyone's eyes are focused on them onstage. Schumer and Rivers show that women do not necessarily have to dress in a frumpy style, downplaying their good looks and natural endowments to tell jokes. Like Rivers, Schumer, and Cho, I believe women should dress the way that makes them feel most comfortable and brings out their best qualities.

On her show, Schumer tackles socially relevant issues like rape and body image head-on. In one of the controversial episodes spoofing "Friday Night Lights," for example, she takes on the issue of football players and rape by depicting the new head coach trying to instruct his players that rape is wrong. But the players continually question this new policy by asking a range of questions about possible loopholes and instances when rape could be allowed. Schumer satirizes their questions. For instance, one of the players asks, "What if my mom is a DA and we know she is not going to prosecute?" And another says, "What if it is Halloween and the girl is dressed like a sexy cat?" All the while, the coach's wife, who is played by Schumer, is an alcoholic, which is demonstrated by the size of her wine glass that gradually gets bigger throughout the episode. By show's end, the wine glass barely fits through the doorway. The townspeople taunt the coach and his wife for this ridiculous new policy and two elderly female neighbors walk by and say, "How do you expect our guys to celebrate or blow off steam when they lose?" and spit on their driveway. The episode ends disturbingly when the team is shown

losing and the coach asks the quarterback what he was thinking. The player answers, “I was thinking about rape,” and the coach gives in by reinvigorating the team with a pep talk stating, “You guys are gods, you go in there and take what is standing between you and what is rightfully yours.”

Schumer showcases current issues of football players and the preponderance of domestic violence amongst them by parodying the locker room environment that is so prevalent in male-dominated sports. In other words, the message here is that the code is so rigid and long established that it is hard to change the mentality and shake up the status quo even when it seems logical. Schumer has won critical acclaim for her directness and willingness to talk about these sensitive issues. Unlike Joan Rivers, she is a self-proclaimed feminist like Margaret Cho.

Schumer tackles stereotypes about women and women’s heterosexual experiences by highlighting their preposterousness on her show. For example, in one episode, Schumer shows a female president of the United States while she has her period. She depicts the female POTUS as a woman wearing her comfortable jogging outfit reluctant to get out of bed on her menstruation day. In actuality, Schumer was a huge supporter of Hillary Clinton’s Presidential Campaign. In another episode, she highlighted how long it takes for a guy to give a woman an orgasm by depicting a spelunker with light equipment struggling to navigate through a woman’s vaginal cave, while she settles in with a good book. These are issues that were mostly discussed behind closed doors or with good girlfriends over cocktails.

Cultured women of good bearing like Rivers did not discuss these issues in public in the 1960s, but why not? But Amy Schumer pushes the envelope by talking about enjoying sex outside of marriage in the 2000s because Rivers and Cho had created a smoother walkway, allowing her to delve even deeper to discuss the more even intimate details about sex. In the

1990s show “Sex and the City,” the four best female friends are seen discussing their love lives and often in a raunchy fashion, especially when the sexpot Samantha Jones dives into the conversation. Samantha was seen as a beautiful female but one who also aggressively chased after men for sex and not just for relationships. This concept was considered groundbreaking television, because women were raised to believe in the fairytale weddings and happily ever after. But it was also groundbreaking because premarital sex was not previously considered proper topics for a single girl to discuss. Before her marriage in 2018, Schumer was known as America’s bachelorette because she talked so openly and in detail about the swinging sex life of a partying single girl, which was new ground for women who were supposed to be chaste ladylike beings before marriage.

Schumer, being a product of the millennium, did not face the same challenges of needing males to succeed like Rivers and Cho. Instead, she benefited from them paving the way and from the advent of the internet, cable channels, podcasts and social media that allowed her to find other venues for success. She got her big “break” through a nationwide TV competition “Last Comic Standing,” although she recounts in her memoir that the male comics who were upset that she beat them, taunted her claiming that the competition was rigged. On the other hand, Rivers had to depend on Johnny Carson’s approval to “make it” and Cho had to suffer the patriarchy of white male corporate America. Schumer had the advantage of her predecessors River and Cho ironing out the bumps in the road before her. Indeed, all the women comics who came before her created more opportunities for pottymouthed women to get onstage and be accepted. One thing all the women had in common was their tough work ethic and persistence.

Amy Schumer has been universally celebrated for almost singularly focusing on these kinds of issues and she is often called the sex or vagina comic. In 2012, she performed to a sold-out theatre audience, where she opens her show wearing a deep pink colored short feminine dress. She begins her set by saying, “This is such a big night for you. I finally slept with my high school crush and now he expects me to go to his graduation, like I know where I’m going to be in three years.” In her 2017 memoir, *The Girl with the Lower Back Tattoo*, Schumer dispels the myth that she has had many one-night stands; she claims it was only one. Despite this, her stage persona is of someone who enjoys sex and talks about her female genitalia ever so casually, as if she is discussing what she ate for breakfast. For instance, she says, “A little bit about me, I took Plan B. It’s the morning after pill; I take it the night before because I’m smart...I’m like you good people. I believe birth starts at conception, so I’m like beat that shit.” (*Mostly Sex Stuff*)

At a Glamour Women’s event in 2014, Schumer says that she believes her jokes about a woman’s right to choose are important because “We are living in a time when those rights are still being debated.” (Glamour YouTube 2014) These jokes are edgy because they are talking about issues from a woman’s perspective, and they are revealing what used to be considered inappropriate fodder to discuss on stage. This point is dramatized in an episode of the television show “The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel” when a club booker jumps on stage and literally shuts down Mrs. Maisel’s act after she discusses the birth process as a woman growing a six to twelve month baby in her stomach, then “giving it an escape route the size of a change purse, not the going to the market size change purse...but a tiny I’m going out for the evening, I just need lipstick change purse.” (The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel, 2018) In *Last Girl Before Freeway*, Leslie Bennetts notes how Rivers, the inspiration for Mrs. Maisel, was prohibited from discussing her pregnancy when she came on the Ed Sullivan show in 1967.

Unlike men, women have had to overcome gender expectations for proper feminine behavior in order to find career success. This episode of *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* demonstrates that a woman's first duty should be as a homemaker and mother and only when that idea is shattered, or the woman comes to the realization that this is not for her, that she is able to pursue her own dream. Men do not have the issue of having these multiple barricades to finding an identity outside the domestic sphere.

We have a long way from those Neanderthal-like days in the 1950s to current day where Schumer openly discusses sexual exploits and makes jokes about out-of-wedlock relationships. For example, in one act, Schumer says, "My mom told me she still fits in her wedding dress. I'm like, oh my god who cares, right? I mean it is weird that she's the same size now as she was when she was eight months pregnant." (Schumer, *Mostly Sex Stuff*) This joke has a two-fold meaning: Schumer is addressing taboo topics of promiscuity and pregnancy out of wedlock, which were considered not socially acceptable, especially during the 1980s when her mother was first pregnant. Next, she is insulting her mother by saying that she is very overweight now. In the next breath, she continues to use her mom as the butt of the joke and she uses a transgressive curse word. "My mom's a cunt," Schumer says. "Hear me out. Not everyone is comfortable with that word. The other half of the room is like oh my god, what a coinkydink." (Schumer, *Mostly Sex Stuff*) Unlike Cho who imitates her mom but does not denigrate her, Schumer is a modern American woman who talks about her mother like a girlfriend. She insults and trash talks her mother, whereas Cho as an Asian daughter, is more deferential to her elders.

Some of Schumer's jokes are meant for shock value because "cunt" is, for many people, a word that is considered taboo. Lenny Bruce said that the more people use these kinds of words,

the more they lose their shock value. Schumer may be using taboo words casually in conversation for that effect.

Schumer's distinction is that she addresses these topics directly and unapologetically. In an earlier era, women's conditions were not talked about so openly and frankly. For example, in the 1960s, Lucille Ball became pregnant during her show "I Love Lucy" and she was barred from saying the word pregnant. The proper terminology was "expecting" and the episode was called "enceinte," the Spanish word for pregnant, which was a tribute to her Cuban husband Ricky Ricardo. Just as Rivers discovered in the 1970s when she tried to talk about appendectomies or abortions, these subjects were not considered proper talk for a "lady." Yet, male comics were onstage all the time discussing their male genitalia, masturbating, and smoking pot. Schumer's standup affirms that it is cathartic for women to feel empowered, to believe that through their voices as modern women in a time when medical advances and technology make it possible to choose, they are making decisions unabashedly about their bodies.

Chapter Six: Margaret Cho: Corporate Suits Messed up My First Network Show

In 1999, Margaret Cho was onstage discussing the need for more diversity, representation and treatment of women which have become mainstream issues now but back then these concerns were more on the margins of pop culture. Cho was on her “I’m the One That I Want Tour,” discussing her mistreatment from corporate executives and this tour was her comeback after going through rehab and overcoming drug addiction and depression. Her new material was sharp and prescient focusing on the need for more diversity and better treatment of women. Cho’s cutting-edge comedy was not in the mainstream then, but her foresight in advancing the then taboo race and feminism topics paved the way for comics like Amy Schumer to openly discuss her vagina constantly and current hit shows like “Fresh off the Boat” and “Blackish” that feature an Asian and black family respectively on network TV. Cho said, "We really needed that kind of comedy at the time. We just didn't have the language yet. Now we do, and it's really a great time for minorities and women in comedy. We have people that are brilliant and talking about feminism, race, and equality in an important, exciting way." (Vox, 2015)

Cho started comedy at the age of fourteen in 1982, performing professionally soon after as a popular comic on the college campus circuit, winning comedy contests and appearing on the Bob Hope primetime special. She hit mainstream success when ABC selected her to star in a network show “All American Girl” in 1994 based on her standup material. At the time she thought she had hit the lottery, but the experience involved a lot of heartache and loss of control that she was not prepared for. The networks tried to manage every aspect of the show by telling her what to wear, and they told her to lose thirty pounds in a week, which led to kidney failure and a hospital stay. This traumatic experience became a seminal moment in Cho’s life that transformed her comedy performance for years to come.

Cho became depressed and addicted to substances after the shutdown of her “All American Girl” show. At the tender age of twenty-three, she thought the show was the biggest accomplishment of her life and when it ended, she believed she had failed as a human being and as a comedian. In her 2001 memoir, *I’m the One that I Want*, Cho discusses how she came to terms with the failure of her show and body image issues. Like Amy Schumer, body image became a major theme in Cho’s standup material. Schumer tackles it by showcasing the absurdity of how it is addressed in our society. In one of the “Inside Amy Schumer” episodes she goes to a women’s clothing store and asks for a size 12 upon which the saleswoman looks at her disdainfully and says that they do not carry her size but she knows a place that does and sends her to a field pasture with grazing cows.

Cho, on the other hand, addresses body issues more from a personal perspective of a former substance abuser who was heavily bullied in school for being Asian and bisexual. She speaks about it as a painful period she had to overcome yet continues to struggle with it. In her 2003 show *Revolution*, Cho discusses the “fuckit diet.” She says, “If you want to eat something fatty or high calorie, go to a place within yourself and say fuckit. She adds, “Then do it six times a day. It goes really well with the fuckthatshit exercise plan.” The corporate suits experience exacerbated her drug and alcohol use, drew out her queer sexual identity into the open, and led her to embrace a completely anti-establishment brand of comedy for the rest of her life.

(Revolution Show, 2003)

Cho continues to address women’s body issues when goes on to say, “I get really upset when I see girls getting liposuction and breast implants, how is that different from foot binding? Plastic surgery is supposed to make people feel better about themselves but to me it is no different than mutilation, manipulation and brainwashing of women. Long pause. I mean I’m still

going to get it.” Here Cho points out the ridiculousness of women cutting off body parts, otherwise called plastic surgery, in order to meet society’s idea of perfection, yet she misdirects us at the end when she says she will also be participating. In the first part of the joke, she says she will completely disregard a good diet plan when she encourages the fuckit diet. She is discussing women’s obsession with dieting and exercise in order to meet the often-unrealistic standards that media and pop culture have set up for them. (Revolution Show, 2003)

Discussing these issues must be cathartic for Cho, who felt such disappointment and trauma from authority figures she trusted who forced her to jeopardize her health by instructing her to lose thirty pounds in a short period of time. Now she is able to make fun of these guidelines that she thought were so important for her career success; she uses comedy to flip the script and make fun of the people who make these rules. This time she is saying that if she listens to other people’s instructions, it is with her full knowledge and consent. Cho sounds regretful about how young and naïve she was during that period. She felt that she was being taken advantage of and that the worst part was that she didn’t know at the time that she had more control than she realized, but she didn’t know to speak up.

Now she does and the transformation is clear: In 1994’s “All American Girl” show, she is very feminine and dressed in skirts and stockings and she plays a good girl who at times rebels against her parents like a typical teenager. While the show presents an all Asian cast, the issues and the way the show is written are very mainstream and conventional and never delves into anything controversial. If the same show was made in 2019 with the availability of cable channels like Netflix and social media, Cho would have had many more options to design the show to tackle issues of homosexuality, bullying, alcoholism in a more honest way that would not have made her feel so powerless about telling her own story.

Now twenty-five years later, Cho is on a Fresh off the Bloat tour playing the dictator Kim Jong Un in full military uniform, looking very masculine. Her audience consists of mostly queer and transgender people, drag queens and those who identify as outsiders. This experience led her to become more activist in her feminism and politics and incorporate body positive messages in her act. She also has a statement about feminism on her official Margaretcho.com website:

All I know is that as a woman, in my work, and in my life, I have been treated as if my achievements were less valuable because they were borne from my body. I only know this because I have worked closely, been intimate with, risen and fallen with men of all kinds. I have done the same with women of all kinds — and my assessment, of all the humanity I have experienced: Women get the short end of it. So therefore, my feminism — it’s kind of necessary.” (Margaretcho.com, 1)

Cho is an intelligent, self-reflective woman who has come full circle in learning from her pain and uses her standup performances as a rallying cry to marginalized peoples. She has been transformed by that experience and rebels against conformity embracing her true multi-dimensional being as a queer, homosexual, Korean, and multi-outsider minority. It is interesting that while Joan Rivers refused to call herself a feminist, Cho proudly waves the label from every stage. Cho says on her website that women who do not want to call themselves a feminist just want to be closer to men. Amy Schumer also proudly calls herself a feminist. These comics’ choices appear to be a generational sentiment for when women are actively being attacked, they band together more and call themselves feminists. During the suffrage movement, women collectively worked against the enemy who would not allow them the right to be treated as full US citizens and allow them to vote. Now in 2018, with the second year of the Me-Too Movement firmly in place and a federal administration led by a president who openly talks about

“grabbing women’s pussies,” women have once more found a purpose and a common enemy to advocate against. As basic women’s rights that had been taken for granted are threatened, women have once again grouped together to fight as modern day “suffragettes.”

In Margaret Cho’s 2002 Notorious Cho performance video clip, signs of her transformation from being a feminine “good girl” to being her own person are strongly on display. Her physical appearance is sloppy - her potbelly stomach can be seen through her flannel shirt as she does not try to camouflage it or wear a fancy outfit that would enhance her looks. She wears minimal makeup and no jewelry. In stark contrast to Rivers, she does not dress up in sequined dresses nor does she take pains to look feminine. The video highlights a focus on her face and how she contorts and scrunches it up when she does her mom impression. She imitates her mom looking at a book about homosexual sex in their family-owned San Francisco bookstore. At first her mom says, “Too much ass in these books . . . nice boys but too much ass...the books are no good.” But then Cho playacts taking out a pair of glasses and perching them on her nose and she says, imitating her mother, “This book is no good oh, but it picks up on page fourteen. Maybe I take home to show Daddy.” (Notorious Cho, 2002)

In this performance, Cho subverts her femininity in order to desexualize herself as a faghag and highlight the content of her jokes. She is wearing a simple black turtleneck and jeans to neutralize her appearance; her clothes could be worn by a female or male. She keeps the microphone in the stand freeing up her hands to gesticulate and this brings more attention to the face. More than Joan Rivers, she relies on impressions and facial expressions to bring the focus to her face, rather than her body. Her neutral appearance is logical in a set where she does a lot of

mom impressions, which involves squinting eyes, exaggerated mouth shapes and drawing out of words – movements that draw attention to the face more than the body.

Cho's choice of clothing and joke material are not what would be accepted in her Korean community. The subjects she tackles, like homosexuality, are very taboo, especially for a Korean girl from a traditional family. Traditionally, the Korean family is very insular and prizes a reserved girl with ladylike traits who will be good bride material for a man from a good family. Cho resists those prized female values in her community and instead performs on stage looking very tomboyish and flashing her many tattoos. The Korean community had a mixed reaction to Cho because she was not feminine and she talked about sex and being a faghag, which were not "Korean" things to discuss, yet they were proud that one of their own had become so famous. Cho demonstrates these transgressions in her act by discussing homosexuality and family in the same breath when she imitates her mom saying, "You are gay. You are big gay. You know when I first know you gay – when you a baby and I hold you in my arms and I say she is big dyke." (Notorious Cho show, 2002) Cho reinforces discussing her mother and homosexuality – two of her biggest topics. Unlike Schumer, when Cho talks about her mom it is with endearment that gives a peek into the closeness of their relationship; she never insults her. Maybe because her mother is as an immigrant in a foreign land, Cho understands the extra hardships she had to endure. Also, Cho is appreciative because her mom accepted her homosexuality and attends her shows. Like Cho, when I do impressions of my mother, I do not denigrate or insult my mother; I find her immigrant behavior unique and amusing.

The best comics, like Cho, are effective storytellers who passionately share stories with theatrics, expressiveness, impressions and sounds. But when the storytellers are of Asian descent

and they use humor about their ethnicity, their job becomes more complicated. I also tell jokes where I play on Asian stereotypes, having grown up as an outsider in the Midwest. I relate to this aspect of Cho where she is female and Korean and does Mom impressions. But in her memoir, Cho discusses the backlash she experienced during the filming of her ABC show “All American Girl.” The Asian community was upset that the show was not Asian enough and that the accents were all wrong. Cho then makes an interesting point, when she shares a story about a Korean female reporter who was telling everyone that Cho had a clause in the contract that other Koreans couldn’t be hired on the show. She didn’t understand why this woman was being so vicious and spreading this lie but she does later. Cho finally realizes that, “People of color making strides in a field run by the dominant culture tend to persecute others of their own background, because anyone else’s success makes their own achievement seem unspectacular. It is a way to perpetuate the idea that race is unimportant, that it means so little that one attacks one’s own kind to prove it” (*I’m the One that I Want*, 127).

In 2013, Cho appeared in an interview on Joan Rivers’ new weekly internet TV show called “In Bed with Joan Rivers,” which featured Rivers chatting with comics and entertainers on a bed in her daughter Melissa Rivers’ house in Malibu. Watching the two comics with nearly a forty-year age difference was like watching two kindred cross-generational souls because of their unabashed styles. In the episode, Rivers interviews Margaret Cho and she asks her about fellow female comedian Sarah Silverman. Cho, who is a self-professed and widely known bisexual, says that Silverman is beautiful and a genius. She says that she thinks Silverman is underrated as a comic because she is so beautiful that people do not take her comedy seriously. Rivers agrees that Silverman is very cute.

As a female comic myself, I do not agree with this assessment because I believe if a comic is funny that ultimately shines through. Why do male and female comics feel threatened by good-looking female comics? In the acting world, it is widely accepted that good looks are integral to being a successful actor, but why is it that successful comics are supposed to be mediocre looking or that they should downplay their looks? I believe some of the critics are haters or other threatened comics, but I think it is more than that. People seem to have an issue with pretty female comics possibly because, unlike actors who are playing a role, comics are playing themselves and sharing their innermost thoughts. The idea that women who have admirable physical features should be seen but not heard persists for female comics. It is simpler to relegate attractive, capable actresses as being that way because a powerful male director and writer wrote their scripts and they are playing roles that were given to them. But when female comics get on stage and share their own stories using their own words and voices, they threaten the comedy decision makers who are mainly men.

In addition to appearance, Rivers and Cho also discuss her comedy influences. Rivers asks Cho who her comedy mentors were and Cho answers, “I think it was you Joan, when I saw you on ‘Saturday Night Live’ dressed like Elizabeth Taylor. You were so hysterical that I wanted to be like you. You said I know Elizabeth Taylor’s blood type – ragu and I was in love.” (*In Bed with Joan Rivers*). It is a poignant moment and one that points out that Margaret Cho and all female comics consider Joan Rivers as a mentor and role model. Rivers did it first and she did it well.

Chapter Seven: Jean Kim: Up and Coming Korean Comic

I was first introduced to Margaret Cho when I tried out standup comedy in 2000. I had just arrived in New York City from Ohio and was onstage talking about my immigrant Korean mom and her strange quirk of hanging everything on the wall including bags, newspaper clippings, and stuffed animals. After the show, one of the white male comics said, “You know, there is a Korean woman already doing mom jokes.” I responded by saying, “Where, where is she?” I didn’t even realize he meant Margaret Cho. Afterward, I began to do some research and asked my mom if she had heard of Cho upon which my mom said she was often mentioned in the Korean newspapers as telling dirty jokes. She told me about Cho’s “I’m the One that I Want” show and I bought myself a ticket, which was the first time I went to a famous standup comic’s show.

It was interesting to watch how Cho commanded the stage and talked about her mom. I had not seen much standup other than the open mic’ers or Seinfeld’s opening segments on his show so I did not have much to compare. Ironically, Cho’s early influence was forced upon me, at a time when I did not even know how to process it as I was brand new to the city and to standup comedy. Doing research for this thesis made me appreciate Cho’s sacrifices to her craft and how she is a master of facial expressions. Cho paved the way for me because she helped audiences and club managers to visualize an Asian woman successfully performing standup comedy.

In my standup classes, I was encouraged to watch more standup, which became possible with the advent of YouTube and Netflix. I gravitated towards watching Amy Schumer because she was easily accessible and considered “the female comic” of my generation, and it was harder for me to visualize and emulate techniques of male comedians.

When I first tried out standup comedy in 2000, it was a barren landscape peopled by testosterone-ridden comedy junkies, and there were hardly any female or minority standup comics. I was twenty years old and had just moved to New York City from Ohio. Working the standup circuit in New York City was a revelation, and not a pleasant one. In those pre-Netflix days, standup comedy was still akin to an arcane form of the mystical arts, one that was only performed after dark when most people had gone to sleep. I performed late at night in numerous smoky bars, which was something of a culture shock.

Fortunately, while no one was directly hostile, the atmosphere was tense and characterized by a general reluctance to have a woman enter the hallowed insular boys' locker-room like space of the comedy clubs. I discovered that most of the males in the comedy open mic rooms did not have the trappings of success in the manner that would attract women, so it appeared they used comedy to rant and unleash their anger. With such a dearth of females or minorities, I found safety from potential predators by sticking with one of the only females on the circuit - a very large German woman. She and I used to do open mic nights together because we shared a love of comedy and both had vaginas, but beyond that we had nothing else in common.

Fortunately, I have no stories about comics who flashed themselves in front of me, or of sexual groping episodes, but nonetheless I became submerged in a deeply white male environment where I spent hours listening to men tell jokes about masturbating, smoking weed, and the difficulties of getting laid – most of whom were unfunny. When I got up to share stories about my mom and do impressions of her, I got comments like, "You know there is another Asian woman out there doing mom impressions; You know that's been done before." I didn't even know at the time that they meant Margaret Cho. Apparently, mom impressions had been

done before, but what of the jokes about the same three topics from the fifty white male comics that I was subjected to? The only other women I heard about "making it" in comedy back then were hardworking "girls" who slept with comedy club managers and bookers.

At one open mic in Times Square, I was one of the last comics waiting to go on at the end of a long evening when one of the male comics pointed to me in the audience and said, "So what do you think about dry humping?" Previously, I had no clue what that meant but picked up on it from the context of his story. I looked up and said, "Dry humping, yah" very loudly and he momentarily looked at me and continued doing his set. It was a surreal "This isn't Kansas anymore" kind of moment. The environment was was not welcoming to females and the ones who did continue to come to open mics were the "cool" ones who could hang with the boys. The feeling was that male comics reluctantly put up with women. The only other female comic I remember in that time period is Tina Kim, a short tomboyish young woman with a baseball cap who would get up on stage and ask, "Where's my peeps, where's my peeps?" (Short for people) but there was never a response, because there were never any Asians in the club audience. Being in that environment really desensitized me to the point where it was very hard to offend me. I accepted the reality that it was just a negative seedy environment that promoted many unfunny men because acquiescence and silence were the expected behavior to get along, and anything to the contrary could trigger alienation and hostility. It was truly a depressing dead-end pursuit for someone like me, so after a year of trying out comedy, I left to get a "real" job and experience the brighter joys of the big city. In hindsight, I realized it was in my blood because I was drawn back in nearly two decades later on my own terms. As I discovered, standup comedy is a lonely solo journey and difficult to pursue without a support network.

The comedy scene has made some incremental strides since 2000 when it was very much anti-female and difficult for women comics. Indeed, in 2019, the comedy landscape has much improved from when I first dipped my beak into the standup comedy world. Women are now at least invited to comedy rooms and asked to help “fill out a room.” And now, there are ladies’ mics, women’s comedy night, and organized women’s comedy panels. However, most of the rooms are filled out with mostly white female comics, a smattering of black female comics, and a couple of Asian female comics, but it is certainly a big improvement from twenty years ago. Another change I notice is that there is more openness and more of a support network among women, whereas previously there were not enough women for that to happen. Comedy is a cut-throat environment in general as comics are begrudging about each other’s success.

In her book, *Performing Marginality*, Joanne Gilbert says that “examining women’s humorous performance as a potential site of resistance cloaked in the guise of entertainment can teach us about the power of telling one’s story in a culture that continues to marginalize women. Having people pay to hear them perform their own marginality, strategically presenting themselves through potentially subversive discourse, female comics are important synecdoches of oppressed groups in our society” (17). I was certainly drawn to comedy because it enabled me to tell my own story. My interest in the field stemmed from the experiences of my immigrant mother who came to a foreign culture with no mastery of the language, dealt with my father’s passing, and raised three young daughters on her own without a family network. She handled these traumatic challenges and adversities with humor and irony, entertaining us and keeping us laughing even through the hardships. I found her old-school immigrant behavior frustrating at times during my childhood because it was so different from the American culture, but I still loved to regale my friends with stories about her.

Now I make jokes out of these experiences. For example, one of my jokes is: “When I first moved to NYC, I did not have a steady job, so my mom was worried that I did not have enough money to pay my bills, so she’d call me every night to check up on me and one of the nights she said, ‘Jean, I so worry you have no money? Even I sell my underwear I don’t want you become hooker.’” And I said, “I don’t think you can sell enough of your used underwear to keep me out of the sex trade.” And she replies, “Jean, you be very surprise, vintage items very popular on E-Bay.”

This joke conveys the struggles of the life of an immigrant family in America. The dialogue that the mother shares with her daughter emphasizes the extent to which the mother would go to provide for her family. Sometimes the dominant group in the audience does not understand the joke, since, to them, it appears to be a bizarre statement from a mother. But through the joke I am suggesting that the panties are emblematic of the mother’s love and sacrifice for the daughter and should not necessarily be taken literally. My mother says she is somewhat embarrassed by this joke when I tell it on stage. She says, “Not funny.” I think she has contradictory emotions about her daughter performing standup: On one hand she is proud of me, but on the other hand, watching me onstage is antithetical to her views about how a proper lady should act. Her old-school, post-Korean-War mentality also makes it uncomfortable for her to give compliments and she is embarrassed but also secretly pleased to be getting attention onstage.

Whether a performer has a Korean, Russian, Jewish or Italian mother, the annoying actions of mothers is a universal theme for any culture. People love impressions so whenever I get a chance to do mom accents, I do. It draws the audience into a slice of Korean culture and my

relationship with my mother. I tried to explain that I keep a foundational set of jokes that work and that I keep adding new ones so she will probably hear the same joke again.

I have always had a proclivity to share stories and information with others: I write incessantly in my journal, take memoir classes, and majored in journalism. A story my mom shared with me helps me to see how the desire to tell stories was formed in my early childhood. She told me that when I was two and we had first moved to America, she was writing a letter to her family back home and I asked for a piece of paper and sat next to her. When she turned around fifteen minutes later, I had meticulously created dots equally spaced out across the page trying to mimic what I thought she was doing. Hearing this story, I realize I was trying to share stories even before I knew the alphabet or how to write. I think it was this innate need to tell stories and the DNA of my mom's humor that launched my interest in comedy, since I did not grow up watching any standup comics in the pre-internet and cable era.

Many of the stories I share now were once embarrassing childhood anecdotes that I wanted to erase from who I was. But now I am finding a home for them on the comedy stage. One such story is about the shame of living in public housing while attending a private school when all my classmates lived in big houses.

Comedy affords me an outlet where I am not an outsider; I am not perceived as a second-class citizen; and I am in control of telling my story instead of having someone else telling it for me. I share the details of my story with my words and with my voice. I am the active initiator of my story not the receiver. Comedy has the power to overturn racial bigotry and stereotypes as in my following joke. For example, in one of my opening joke lines I says:

“When I first met my Italian boyfriend’s mom, she asked me if I could do her nails. At first, I was so offended but then I thought hey it’s my boyfriend’s mom, so I gave her a mani pedi and I dry-cleaned her sweater.”

By making a joke about being perceived as a stereotypical Korean nail technician or Korean drycleaner, two industries that are predominantly run by Koreans, I flip control of the situation by initiating a story that makes fun of me and telling it in my own words. I am saying you cannot put me down, because I took initiative and am making fun of myself while bringing to the foreground a stereotype about myself. So, as in this case, joke-telling has the power to overturn racial bigotry and miscast stereotypes.

Here is another example. In this joke I discuss my outsider status living in the “borderlands” in Ohio. The borderlands are the academic term for the space between two worlds for a marginalized person.

“I grew up in Ohio where I was one of only four Asians in my entire high school, so I spent a lot of time doing white people activities. I wore a lot of flannel and listened to tons of country western music. I auditioned for the drama club for four years, but I didn’t get one part, until they put on a production of Miss Saigon. Then I got three parts.” This joke emphasizes that it took a situation of pain and loneliness of trying to fit in and when I finally had an opportunity, it is because the school had decided to put on a production based on an Asian experience.

I tell many jokes derived from my outsider Asian experience. Here is an example: “Just last week someone asked me if I’m from North Korea. Ok folks, this is the way you can tell the difference between a North and a South Korean. If you’re talking to a Korean in the US, they’re South Korean, because all North Koreans are trapped in North Korea.” This joke takes a

frustrating experience and makes it a teachable moment. It seems like such a factual statement, yet it always gets a huge laugh. I think it's because one of the responsibilities of a comic is to vocalize what people are thinking before they realize they are thinking it. Here's another example: "I came to America from Korea when I was two, my sister was three. My sister was supposed to come here but at the last moment at the airport, my grandma said, "Jean so loud, she cry too much, take her, I take quiet one so I ended up coming here on my sister's passport."

This is a deeply personal story that haunted me during my entire childhood. I always felt guilt about being brought to America instead of my older sister, but now I use comedy to put it into a humorous place. When telling the joke, I state that I "bawled" myself to America and that, apparently, I was a natural-born comic who knew how to manipulate an audience even at birth.

Sharing experiences such as these has helped me articulate pain and has allowed me to move forward. Here is another example: "It wasn't until I moved to NYC, the land of the Asian fetishists that I finally felt truly appreciated and properly objectified." This joke not only plays on Asian stereotypes; it is also a way of sharing my stories of growing up as an outsider in Ohio in a humorous way. It was a shameful, embarrassing chapter in my life but now it is cathartic, getting laughs and sharing these experiences onstage.

Recently, an audience member gave me the biggest compliment by telling me that I reminded him of Joan Rivers. Before I embarked on this master's project, I had not watched any of her standup, but now after studying her performances and researching her life story, I believe she is one of the top best five comics of all time. Rivers mastered every aspect of being a consummate performer and commanding an audience. She was quick, had excellent timing, and most of all, she was always funny. I will always remember her on the 1986 appearance of "The Tonight Show" with Johnny Carson after he asks her why she considers a woman's appearance

to be of paramount importance, as there are other important qualities like intelligence that men look for in a woman. She responds, “Really Johnny, when’s the last time a man put his hand under a woman’s skirt looking for a library card.” She makes this quip without missing a beat and Carson flips back in his chair dying of laughter and has water streaming out of his nose. (The Tonight Show Full Interview YouTube, 2014)

Other women comics in addition to Rivers have paved the way for me as well. I relate to Margaret Cho for the obvious reasons that she is a Korean and female, but I appreciate the way she contorts her face and uses theatrics to share a story that really enhances the impact. A priceless moment is when she shares her mom’s first moment of discovery that Cho is gay. She says in her mom’s voice, “You know when I first think you gay? When you born and I hold you in my arms and I say she so beautiful, she so – what a dyke, what a big dyke.” (Comedy Margaret Cho, 2013) She puts her arms in baby cradling position to maximize the effect of the story and it is hysterical. Cho performs around the world in shows and lgbtq audiences have responded by selling out her shows. As for Amy Schumer I have always been a big fan, but I gravitate to her earlier material when she shared more relatable stories about relationships, like this one: “You know what they say about dating a black guy. Once you go black, your parents never talk to you again.” (Schumer, Mostly Sex Stuff) Now it seems she has resorted to stories about bodily liquids, being super-famous, and hobnobbing with celebrities, which makes her seem out of touch with mainstream America.

I returned to comedy because of an innate need to tell stories was always in my blood, but twenty years ago, I was too green and unestablished in my personal life to forge a career. I was new to New York City; I did not know anyone; and I needed to find a revenue stream to support myself. These challenges temporarily stymied my standup, but I always knew that I would

return. In 2016, after having worked for more than a decade as a successful political lobbyist, but getting burnt out, I had more time and money to pursue other creative interests so I re-started standup classes at the American Comedy Institute. Today in 2019, I am so gratified that I returned to standup comedy because I now perform at least three times a week with a lot of positive reception.

Other than humor, the business of comedy is all about money, especially in New York City where the real estate is so expensive, so while getting stage time is always the holy grail for a comic, if performers can bring paying guests, they can always find stage time. That is why these shows are called bringers, so whenever I can be on a show without bringing guests it is a huge treat. I have been doing that more and more by going through auditions, winning contests, and landing “residency” spots, which means a set tenure of free guest spots.

Now I am being treated like a comic among men and women. I have a network of supporters like my boyfriend, mother, sisters and friends who I can count on to support me at my shows and emotionally. I have a select network of up and coming comics that include many women, but also men, who are supportive and we share information about shows with each other. *Facebook* has made it possible to keep better in touch with different comedy networks and to be in the loop of more opportunities as well. I know that if I want to make a career of standup comedy, I must have TV exposure, but I also know that now the corporate boy’s club can be somewhat bypassed through *YouTube* and other social media venues so I can potentially avoid a lot of the trauma Rivers, Cho and Schumer had to endure. My biggest compliment is when audience members, whether they are male, female, Asian, black or white, tell me that I am funny, and they enjoyed my performance.

Conclusion

So, what is the future of women in standup comedy? I think it is positive because of social media like *YouTube* and *Facebook*, cable channels that familiarize and cultivate new audiences, and the Me-Too movement that does not show signs of abating even a year and a half later and which is holding men increasingly more accountable for their predatory actions. The Me-Too Movement has had a significant impact on how female comics are perceived because it has given women's voices more credibility as well as a larger platform from which to be heard. For decades prior to cable and the internet, all comics had to go through Johnny Carson and "The Tonight Show" to be tested. Comics had to wait with bated breath for Carson to "pick" them.

Now there are so many alternate channels that make women less dependent on the white man to "make" it. Yael Cohen, the journalist who wrote about the history of women in comedy, puts it well. She says:

Since 2008, it has been a good time for women in comedy and this positive outlook has been driven by a couple of things: The first is the rise of identity politics, which has reinvigorated feminism and created a demand for points of view beyond those of white men. Arguably more important, however, is that media has caught up. Mass culture is in decline, and niche audiences are the goal. Social media has democratized the entertainment world by letting audiences directly express their approval with likes. And YouTube and podcasts have made it possible to create and disseminate work without a middleman (*We Killed*, 74).

To add to Cohen's assessment, I have noticed more bookers who are women and who like to work with women, which minimizes sexist experiences. Also, I like to have a woman help hone

my female perspective, since sometimes the male teacher does not quickly “get” my female, immigrant perspective. But in 2019, I have the luxury of these options to advance my comedy, as well as venues like Instagram, Facebook and YouTube to promote my video clips and gain a wider audience.

All these factors are leading to an increasing number of women and minorities performing standup comedy. While men still hold most of the keys to the comedy club locker rooms, women have discovered different rooms and different keys to pave a pathway to success as joke tellers. Through this study of female standup comics, I have noticed that the gender challenges we face are similar to other male-dominated preserves such as the restaurant and entertainment industry. In comedy, intellectuals like Freud and Hitchens were allowed to control the narrative about women that was degrading and sexist, which emphasizes the necessity for women to grab those reins. Female comics vocalize their stories on stage, but we need women in all industries to speak up even more loudly and broadly to share their stories instead of letting males speak for them.

In 2019, with technology, Me-Too, and an environment where women are starting to be believed and taken more seriously, I feel optimistic about the future. Perhaps most importantly, women need to support each in all the ways Rivers, Schumer, and Cho have done, through example, inspiration, camaraderie, networking, and even more. The future of women’s comedy is so bright, we need to wear shades.

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