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'The open letter to the evangelical church' and its discontents: The online politics of Asian American evangelicals, 2013-2016

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The 'Open Letter to the Evangelical Church' and its Discontents : The Online Politics of Asian American Evangelicals, 2013-2016

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Abstract

Recent treatments of Asian American evangelicals tend to focus on a shift of attention from their identity-based attempts to found autonomous congregations to online self-publications. I evaluate this new trend by considering two episodes in Asian American evangelical self-publication: the 'open letter to the evangelical church' in 2013 and the Killjoy Prophets initiative from 2014-2016 when their leader Suey Park disappeared from the Internet. I argue that while Asian American evangelical online self-publication is intended to reform evangelicalism, its discursive nature leads to debates among Asian American evangelicals about whether the cyber-discourse about them is adequately representational. This sobering analysis demonstrates that the identitarian claims of Asian American evangelicalism are not transcended by cyberspace, but are exacerbated by it.

Keywords: cyberspace, Asian American, evangelicalism, reform

Introduction

The cover story of the special issue of Christianity Today on Asian American evangelicals in October 2014 is the Asian American evangelical writer Helen Lee's 'Silent No More'. The title's reference to 'silence' is a call-back to one of Lee's previous article, 'Silent Exodus', a widely cited piece that she published in 1996 in the same magazine. The term 'silent exodus' comes from Los Angeles Times writer Doreen Carvajal's 1994 exploration of the tendency for second-generation Korean American evangelical Protestants to plant English-speaking congregations distinct from their first-generation mother churches in Los Angeles's Koreatown. Lee's 1996 piece generalised the phenomenon to 'Asian Americans' more broadly, featuring how Asians across ethnic groups who worship within the doctrinally conservative and historically Anglo-American networks of 'evangelicalism' were seeking autonomy in congregations of their own. As the theologian Jonathan Tran (2010) notes, the term 'Asian American evangelical' has become identified with this generational search for congregational autonomy, for a linguistic and ethnic coherence around which the practices of evangelical faith – Scripture reading, gospel preaching, personal prayer, corporate fellowship – can revolve (Tse 2018). Indeed, sociologists of religion have observed that the formulation 'Asian American Christian' is not only normatively evangelical, but also a reference to a new ethno-religious group that conceives of 'Christian' as almost central to 'Asian American' ethnic self-identification, which in turn serves as the basis for communities founded on a common identity (Busto 1999; Alumkal 2003; Jeung 2005; Kim 2006; Kim 2010). Lee (1996) described this phenomenon as 'silent': the congregations were quietly formed without raising a public fuss, relegating their activities to a private sphere.

Lee's 2014 sequel to her 1996 classic came on the heels of a provocation, one that suggests that 'Asian American evangelicalism' is itself morphing, emerging from private congregationalism to public voicing. The piece references Asian American Christians United's 'open letter to the evangelical church', published in 2013,[1] [1]on the site NextGenerAsian as evidence that something in Asian American evangelicalism is changing. Lee frames the open letter as the culmination of online publications by Asian Americans protesting the tendencies of Anglo-American publishing companies to render Asian Americans as 'perpetual foreigners', a classic term from Asian American studies that describes the persistent perception of Asians living in the United States as always from somewhere else besides America (Chan 1991). Her interlocutors

[1] see Park (2013)

agree: she interviews the sociologist of religion Jerry Park, InterVarsity author Kathy Khang, and the pastoral theologians Ken Fong and Daniel Lee, and they concur that the online letter was a highly visible attempt to call attention to the presence of Asian Americans within evangelical networks who were offended by the casual racism of their coreligionists. The shift between 1996 and 2014, in other words, was a digital one, moving from the physical but private gatherings of identity-based congregational autonomy to the reformation of the networks of evangelicalism on cyberspace. Asian American evangelicals, the argument went, were no longer concerned solely about their own identitarian concerns in the confines of their congregations. Lee declared that they were 'silent no more', moving out from private worshipping spaces to the worlds of cyber-publics in an attempt to change the ideology of evangelicalism writ large on issues of race and orientalism through the public space of the Internet.

At issue, then, is the presumption that Asian American evangelicals who are self-publishing their own writings in online space are poised to alter the ideological makeup of evangelicalism. The purpose of this chapter is to evaluate this bold and celebratory claim, especially in light of Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron's (1995) classic critique of cyber-cultures for being places that may seem free but actually are dominated by the loudest voices, reinforcing the hegemonic normativities of bourgeois white male power to the point that the presumed equality of cyberspace gives way to the circulation of ideologies that border on fascism. The publicness of online publics, in other words, tend to be undermined by their libertarianism: you can publish, but you may not be heard – or worse, you might be trolled for not abiding by the very orthodox hegemonies you are trying to change (Herrera 2014; Phillips 2015; Phillips and Milner 2017). The task, as I see it, is thus to investigate how public the Asian American evangelical self-publications really are. My emphasis will therefore be on one particular form of online publication, the blog, in which open letters and public commentary in essay form can be self-published and subsequently circulated. I am therefore less interested in forms of social media, such as the more recent creation of Facebook groups such as Progressive Asian American Christian and the Christian iterations of 'subtle Asian traits', as the status of their *publicness* is often under question because of privacy concerns (Silverman 2016). Indeed, my own participation in those social media spaces, even as someone who does not identify with or worship within the networks of Asian American evangelicalism, would render my reporting on them ethically suspect (Hine 2000, 2015; Boellstorff et al. 2012).

Instead, my focus will be on self-published Asian American evangelical blogs and open letters that are said to be reforming evangelicalism. Can online self-publication, I ask, actually alter the ideological formations of evangelicalism? What new conceptions of evangelical space have actually been imagined by public online interventions beginning with the open letter? What have these digital engagements actually produced? I argue that Asian American evangelical digital discourse ends up being just that – a *discourse* – that produces contention over whether or not these self-publishing endeavours at evangelical reformation actually speak for all Asian Americans who are evangelicals. In other words, the attempt may be to reform evangelicalism from its orientalism; the result tends to be a contest over whether the rhetoric of intervention adequately represents the sentiments of all Asian American evangelicals. I will use two episodes to draw out this argument. The first will be the open letter itself in 2013, located within the history of the nine years of online self-publication that led up to it, only to result in debate among Asian American evangelicals about whether it adequately represented them. The second episode focuses on one particular strand of disagreement with the open letter led by the erstwhile Twitter activist Suey Park and the blog essays of an online women-of-color collective that she co-founded, the Killjoy Prophets, that was particularly active from 2014-2016, until Park's disappearance from the Internet under mysterious circumstances.

Online self-publication to reform evangelicalism: The 'open letter to the evangelical church' as reformational strategy

On 12 October 2013, the site NextGenerAsian Christian[2] published the 'Open Letter to the Evangelical Church' issued by 'Asian American Christians United' as an attempt to reform evangelicalism so that they would not be seen as perpetual foreigners anymore. 'The North American evangelical church' is the network that they name as the circuits in which Asian Americans, including and especially the ones participating in it, are cast as the perpetual 'oriental' other. They claim that current initiatives in the reformation of evangelicalism 'in the area of racial harmony' have largely been reduced 'efforts' at the 'understanding and pursuit of racial reconciliation' tended to have 'largely been reduced to black-white relations, or they have

[2] see Asian American Christians United (2013)

resulted in tokenism, in which organisations or events allocate an appropriate number of spots to include voices of colour and mistakenly believe that is all that is required'. They contrast this to their vision of what an evangelical 'church' should be, conceived not only as the local congregation, but the network of organisations that represent 'North American Christians':

> We have imagined and hoped for such a different future for the church, one in which racial harmony would not be an illusion, but a tangible reality. However, as a number of incidents in recent years demonstrate, the evangelical church is still far from understanding what it truly means to be an agent of racial reconciliation. In particular, the Asian American segment of the church continues to be misunderstood, misrepresented and misjudged.

The stage is therefore set: evangelicalism is problematic, and an online letter will be the next step in reforming it. In publishing it, the letter-writers also reveal their imaginaries of why this cyber-reformation is so urgent. The main vision is that of a racially diverse evangelicalism that is not just representative of the American 'black-white' binary, but also includes Asian Americans as a part, a 'segment'. The purpose of this inclusive vision of 'racial harmony' is so that the church as such can be an 'agent of racial reconciliation' in the world outside of it, as that is where racial disharmony still persists. That the church is not able to even get its own proverbial act together negates this ultimate mission. A digitally self-published open letter will open the door to ecclesial salvation.

Detailing the ways in which the 'evangelical church' has failed to consider the 'Asian American segment' in the midst of 'North American Christians', the letter-writers outline a history of online Asian American evangelical self-publication in attempts to reform evangelicalism. The timeline includes both a longer nine-year series of events beginning with the 2004 publication of Vacation Bible School curriculum titled 'Rickshaw Rally', as well as problems in evangelicalism that had been raised 'within just the past month alone'. It is the latter that provoked the letter. On 23 September 2013, the Southern Californian evangelical megachurch preacher Rick Warren, the senior pastor of Saddleback Valley Community Church, posted on his public Facebook page a Chinese propaganda poster of a Red Guard from the Cultural Revolution with the caption, 'The typical attitude of Saddleback staff as they go to work each day'. As the religion journalist Sarah Pulliam Bailey (2013) noted at the time, the timing for a reference to China was odd, as it was precisely the next week that Saddleback would launch its Hong Kong campus, though Warren never connected the two. By all accounts, Warren intended the post to be funny in an off-hand way, oblivious to how Asian American evangelicals with family history in China and the surrounding regions that had experienced geopolitical conflict related to communism might have their memories of traumatic war triggered by this image.

Trouble began as comments rolled in on his post about the insensitivity of his post. One memorable one asked whether Warren really thought of his staff 'as a group of youngsters who stormed through their lives, destroying people and culture without restraint'. Warren responded in a comment:

> People often miss irony on the Internet. It's a joke people! If you take this seriously, you really shouldn't be following me! Did you know that, using Hebrew ironic humor, Jesus inserted several laugh lines – jokes – in the Sermon on the Mount? The self-righteous missed them all while the disciples were undoubtedly giggling!

As the Seattle pastor Eugene Cho (2013) noted shortly as the contentiousness escalated from that point, three 'articulate posts about why that photo was offensive and painful' were quickly published, mostly as efforts to point out orientalising tendencies within evangelicalism so that it could be reformed. The first was written by Sam Tsang (2013), who at that time was still Associate Professor of New Testament at Hong Kong Baptist Theological Seminary but had freshly moved to the suburbs of Seattle where he had started a blog titled 'Engage the Pews' as a way of commenting on contemporary culture as a homiletic exercise. Described by Cho (2013) as 'one of the best and thorough (and pastoral) explanation' of the situation, Tsang implored Warren to 'imagine […] the Chinese in your congregation both here in the U.S. and in Hong Kong':

> Do you know what narrative is behind this picture you just posted? Has any Red Guard ever raped your mother? How about having your joints dislocated and quartered by horses? Oh, this is a great one. How about having your arms hung up in an awkward position until they're dislocated while being beaten merciless with all sorts of torturous devices? How about being made to stand near naked in freezing temperature outside? If Mr. Warren is trying depict the Great Leap forward by Mao, does he know that

> more than 40 million Chinese died in that campaign? I can go and on but I won't belabor my point. From the above images, Mr. Warren needs to think about just the Chinese descent members of his church. Why did they immigrate to the U.S.? They did to get away from that image you just put up, Mr. Warren! You just reminded all of them the nightmare they left behind and for what? For a joke on Monday? I know your intent is not to make light of suffering but the effect of your post has done exactly that, because you have no idea (Tsang 2013).

Tsang (2013) frames his blogging as a process of reformation, then: Warren may only be guilty of ignorance about the trauma of Chinese geopolitics, but because being ignorant may still cause psychic pain to those who look to him for evangelical leadership, Warren needs to change. Tsang continues with the stakes of reform: Warren is planting a church in Hong Kong, and he needs to realise that what is funny in Anglo-American evangelicalism is not as humourous in a local context where the historical trauma of the Cultural Revolution is intimately connected to contemporary Hong Kong politics. 'HK has been dealing with China's dominance since 1997', Tsang (2013) writes, pre-dating but ominously foreshadowed the tone of the 2014 Umbrella Movement. 'It would not be too harsh to call what China is doing cultural rape. Every holiday, the People's Liberation Army bring their tanks and armor personnel carriers across for a show of force to demonstrate that they can easily turn HK into another Tiananmen like they did on bloody 4 June 1989. As I'm blogging today, the PLA has sent its four high power destroyers to practice in the harbor of HK accompanied by the Chinese marine vessels to practice landing'. The function of Tsang's blog, in other words, is to point out Warren's geopolitical blindspots; His objective in selfpublication is to change his view of Chinese politics away from one centred on an Anglo-American world so that a global sense of evangelicalism can emerge. The Asian American InterVarsity staff worker Kathy Khang, the second author on Cho's (2013) recommendation list, resonated with Tsang's (2013) comments, though her vision of reformation focused more on racial inclusivity than evangelical globalisation. In a post entitled 'Dear Pastor Rick Warren, I Think You Don't Get It', Khang (2013a) posted a poster of the Hitler Youth and asked Warren whether he found that 'funny'. The 'racial implication', Khang (*ibid.*) then wrote, was that perhaps Warren found the Red Guard image 'easy to use', either because he did not have any staff who were Chinese or maybe he had 'someone of Chinese descent on your staff and he/she didn't think it was a big deal'. The suggestion, in turn, is that it takes a blog, a self-publication in online public space, to point out the shortcomings of Warren's institutional location when it comes to racial integration.

The third of Cho's (2013) recommended posts, one by Chinglican at Table on the group blog 'A Christian Thing*'* (which I have since revealed on my current blog at Patheos Catholic was actually me, though I wrote anonymously at the time), situated the contentiousness in the trajectory of Asian American online protests since 2004, the very history that the open letter also locates itself as positioning cyber-publication as the method to evangelical reformation. Titled 'It would not be funny if I said that Rick Warren was the "Rick" in "Rickshaw Rally"', Chinglican (2013) pointed out that 'this is not the first Asian American challenge to orientalisation in American evangelicalism'. Recounting a story that is also in Soong-Chan Rah's (2008) *Next Evangelicalism*, Chinglican (2013) outlined the tale of how the Southern Baptist Convention's book outlet, Lifeway Christian Publishers, published a set of Vacation Bible School curriculum (a summer church programme for children to learn the Bible) that featured imagery from the popular 1990s movie series 'Karate Kid' as well as chopsticks, rickshaws, fortune cookies and kimonos, all designed to create an exotic parallel universe to America that would compose an imaginary Bible school classroom. Asian American evangelicals, led by Rah and the blogger Angry Asian Man, quickly put up a Yahoo GeoCities site titled 'Reconsidering Rickshaw Rally' (2004) to contest the publication of this curriculum, urging its readers to send individual letters detailing how they were 'appalled at the racial injustice that is being perpetrated by Lifeway' through 'use of stereotypical music, images and themes' that 'shows an insensitivity and blatant disregard for the unique range of culture found in the Asian community'. The possible preponderance of self-publication, in other words, is positioned against institutional evangelical publishing. 'To consider that this racist material may be the first exposure for many young children', they continued, 'is a chilling and disturbing thought', and therefore the curriculum should be 'immediately pulled from Lifeway Resources' in order for the ideology of evangelicalism not to be cast as normatively racist. The site then follows the back-and-forth of the saga, including a news report from EthicsDaily on 24 November 2004, as well as an update on 9 December detailing how 'Lifeway has now resorted to misrepresentation in their desire to protect the Rickshaw Rally curriculum' with public statements saying that for 'every concern raised by an Asian American, we are receiving dozens of positive responses from Asian Americans that tell us we are fulfilling our intent to lift up another culture and share the message of hope for all people in Jesus Christ'.

The online self-publishing campaign at the time resulted in LifeWay stonewalling the Asian American writers; the curriculum was not formally removed from sale until the publication of the open letter in 2013.

But as both Chinglican and the open letter detail, what 'Reconsidering Rickshaw Rally' did do was to catalyse a series of online self-published writing protests about evangelical publishing over the next nine years whenever white evangelicals used orientalising imagery. 'From VBS curriculum', the open letter reads, first referencing 'Rickshaw Rally', 'to youth skits, to general Christian trade books, Asians have been caricatured, mocked or otherwise treated as foreigners outside the typical accepted realm of white evangelicalism'. The second of the two examples is also found in Rah's *Next Evangelicalism* (2008), where he speaks of an incident in 2007 where the evangelical publisher Zondervan's teen outlet Youth Specialties published a book titled *Skits That Teach*. One skit featured a Chinese delivery person named 'Mee Maw', which Rah (2008, p. 204) recounts giving him 'flashbacks' of his 'experience with the Southern Baptist Convention and the Rickshaw Rally VBS Curriculum'. After a series of email exchanges, Youth Specialties issued an apology and pulled the book. Yet in 2009 – a year after Rah's book detailing the Mee Maw case – Zondervan was at it again, this time publishing a book by Jud Wilhite and Mike Foster titled *Deadly Viper Character Assassins: A Kung Fu Survival Guide for Life and Leadership*. Resembling in tone Quentin Tarantino's 'Kill Bill' movie couplet where the plot revolves around a collective named the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad, Wilhite and Foster cast common moral failures and temptations as cartoonish Asian foes to be fought off with martial arts. The text is also replete with random and meaningless Chinese characters, as well as a killer named 'Zi Qi Qi Ren', who is described as a 'funky Chinese word' instead of as a 'disease'. This time, Eugene Cho and Kathy Khang took the lead in calling for the removal of this book from Chinese publishing, this time using regular blog posts to demonstrate that the portrayal of Asians as exotic as best and evil at worst was offensive and to keep the pressure on Zondervan. It worked, Zondervan pulled the book, and Cho (2009) wrote on his blog that he had done all of this work because, 'We are part of the larger body of Christ. We are your sisters and brothers and while Asian-Americans are not a monolithic group, many of us shared our pain and hurt over the presentation and marketing (not the content) of the book and curriculum'. Khang also echoed the campaign with a post on how her involvement in blogging about Deadly Viper elicited heartfelt apologies from white evangelicals who came to understand their own cultural insensitivity. 'If Deadly Viper needs any more examples of leadership and character', she wrote, 'take note. This should be one of them'. Poetically, Wilhite and Foster rebranded themselves the People of the Second Chance, both asserting their claim to evangelicalism while implying that their apology should be taken as part of a growing process of understanding that requires forgiveness. Structurally, Asian American evangelicals had established a strategy for reformation: racist publications in Anglo-American evangelicalism should be opposed by blogging campaigns, positioning online self-publication against evangelical publishing houses.

The stage was set, then, for the open letter in 2013, in terms of the usage of Internet self-publishing to dispute orientalising imagery in white evangelical publications, the formulation of evangelicalism writ large as the 'church' and the 'Body of Christ' that had failed to be inclusive toward Asian Americans, and the problem of insincere apologies from white evangelicals who might say they are sorry for their racism and then turn around and do it again. Rick Warren apologised for his Red Guard post by removing it and offering the words, 'If you were hurt, upset, offended, or distressed by my insensitivity I am truly sorry' (Khang 2013b). Khang (*ibid.*) responded:

> There is no 'if'. I am hurt, upset, offended, and distressed, not just because 'an' image was posted, but that Warren posted the image of a Red Guard soldier as a joke, because people pointed out the disconcerting nature of posting such an image and then Warren then told us to get over it, alluded to how the self-righteous didn't get Jesus' jokes but Jesus' disciples did, and then erased any proof of his public missteps and his followers' mean-spirited comments that appeared to go unmoderated.

Indeed, Khang (*ibid.*) offered another example – again, positioning online self-publication against evangelical hegemon – of apologies should be made. Reviewing her original post, she found that she used the word 'Red Army' to describe 'Red Guard', but instead of deleting 'Army' and replacing with 'Guard', she put in strikethroughs through the former, keeping the record consistent while offering correction. Saddleback, on the other hand, did not seem to follow suit. On 8 October – less than two weeks after Warren's conditional apology – the megachurch played host to the church-planting conference Exponential. According to a record kept by Khang (2013c), Rev. Christine Lee, incidentally the first Korean American woman in the United States to be ordained an Episcopal priest, had voiced to the conference organisers her concerns about a skit using Asian accents and kung fu moves, and when her concerns were disregarded, she

tweeted about it, saying that she had had a 'Kathy Khang moment' – a realisation that by making her objections to evangelical orientalisation public through Twitter, she was participating in the campaigns of self-publication herself. In light of this second offence at the same site within two weeks, Khang collaborated with Helen Lee, the same author who had written 'Silent exodus' and later wrote 'Silent no more' in Christianity Today, to write the 'open letter to the evangelical church' and had it published on NextGenerAsian Christian, with a list of 82 original signatories, the crystallisation of nine years of this self-publishing strategy against evangelical institutional hegemonies (see Khang 2013c).

As perhaps the most comprehensive statement of how Asian American evangelical online writers viewed white evangelicalism, the open letter outlines both the theology of the Asian American evangelicals about the church, following that vision with a call for action. Their ecclesial vision is broad, going beyond evangelicalism: 'Take a moment to notice the breadth and the depth of the individuals who have assented that they, too, are tired of continuing racial insensitivity in the church' (Asian American Christians United 2013). With mainline pastors and theologians who would hardly be considered evangelical such as Bruce Reyes-Chow, Kah-Jin Jeffrey Kuan, Wonhee Anne Joh and Rita Nakashima Brock, the list is capacious indeed; in parentheses, the writers note this fact and observe that 'subtle and blatant forms of racist actions are prevalent through the entirety of the body of Christ regardless of theological or ecclesiastical tradition' and therefore the letter 'reflects this desire of Asian Americans both within and outside the evangelical tradition to strive for racial harmony in the church' (*ibid.*). The church, then, transcends the networks of evangelicalism, but the focus of the reformational intervention remains evangelical. 'And embrace the truth', they say, after pointing out the inclusiveness of the letter, 'the evangelical church in America needs a reality check to honestly assess how it relates with its Asian American family members' (*ibid.*). The church, then, is conceived as family: 'We highly value the concept of family, and it deeply distresses us when our non-Asian brothers and sisters do not seem to recognise or embrace that we are called to be one united body' (*ibid.*). Speaking through the medium of online self-publication to white evangelicals whom they accuse of denying them their place as fellow family members, the authors argue that this familial phenomenon encompasses 'your churches, your communities, your workplaces' and therefore the actions of any of these organisations whenever 'you marginalize, ostracize, or demean us through careless and ignorance in print, video, or any other medium, you are doing more than just ruffling the feathers of a small group of online activists' (*ibid.*). Each individual evangelical organisation thus has the capacity to address the public, and it is this faculty that networks them as the 'Body of Christ' insofar as they are barometers of the state of 'the very cause of Christ' in whether they maintain or bridge 'fissures within the church' as a 'reconciled body' (*ibid.*).

The relationship between online self-publication and the church, then, lies in the capacity of the individual organisations of evangelicalism to network by publishing in a way that tells of the state of the 'Body of Christ'. Over the nine years from Rickshaw Rally in 2004 to the open letter in 2013, the Internet operated for Asian American evangelicals as a space of selfpublication, mobilised to contest hegemonic evangelical publishers who published in more institutionally official venues, such as in educational curricula, institutional theological programmes, magazine periodicals and organisational hiring cultures. It is precisely those venues at which the self-publication strategy takes aim. The open letter demands attentiveness to Asian American theological programmes at Seattle Pacific University, Fuller Seminary, and the Institute for the Study of Asian American Christianity. It calls for special issues of *Christianity Today*, which is how the October 2014 issue featuring Lee's 'Silent no more' was published. It asks for a place at the table by hiring Asian Americans at mission agencies, publishing houses and educational institutions. In this way, it is the various *publishing* institutions of evangelicalism – publishers, conferences and schools – that are being said to exclude Asian Americans in the publishing practices that are equated with doing harm to the larger 'Body of Christ'. Self-publication on the Internet is the strategy for rectifying the wrongs done to that broader family, a cyber-pathway into institutional inclusion.

The problem, however, is that it was also in cyberspace that other Asian American evangelicals contested this strategy of online self-publication for failing to represent the identities of all Asian American evangelicals. In a forum curated by Grace Hsiao Hanford,[3] some Asian American evangelicals took issue with the open letter on the very grounds that it would harm the church, not heal it, though each of them prefaced their critiques by saying that they recognised the pain behind the words. Tommy Dyo (2014), the National Executive Director of Cru's Epic Movement (a ministry for Asian Americans in the organisation that used to be named Campus Crusade for Christ), said, for example, that 'there were some statements and

[3] see Asian American Christian Org (2015)

wording that did not reflect my personal stance and that were originally delivered in a harsh tone that could have reduced my ability to be heard and lead change'. Likewise, the Fuller Theological Seminary student Daniel Lowe (2014) spoke about his feelings of affection toward a white Baptist church that hosted his childhood Chinese congregation and therefore that the his 'experience indicates that the divide among Asian American Christians about racial harmony is greater than the divide with white evangelicals'. So too, a Chinese American pastor anonymised as 'Bob' (2014) observed, 'while you can mandate laws, behavior and action, it is very hard to change people's hearts or motives', while an Asian American 'intercessor' pseudonym as 'Jo' asked the writers to 'next time, be less forceful' because 'shoving our frustrations down their throats won't help them understand' (Jo 2014). Taken together, these critics argue that it is the tone of the letter, as well as its claim to speak for 'Asian American Christians United' (Lowe 2014), that might harm the 'Body of Christ'. What they are challenging, then, is not the concept of the church that is evoked in the letter; indeed, they are in remarkable agreement that it is constituted as a network of publication. However, they are saying that the result of the self-publication is not just an Asian American evangelical intervention into the publishing institutions of evangelicalism through the geographies of cyberspace; the engagement relies on a cyber-representation of Asian American evangelicals, and it is with that discursive formation that they feel uncomfortable. It is in this vein of accidental representational discomfort that a more sustained form of criticism that radically undermined this notion of church, heralded by the Twitter activist Suey Park and a group calling themselves the Killjoy Prophets. It is to their critique and ultimate demise that I now turn.

Fashioning 'women of color' in #NotYourAsianSidekick: Suey Park, the Killjoy Prophets, and the Internet as evangelical callout space

On 6 July 2014, a manifesto appeared on the personal website and blog of the Twitter superstar Suey Park titled 'Killjoy Prophets, Asian Americans, and Racial Reconciliation'. Authored by Park, the indigenous scholar-activist Emily Rice, and the Presbyterian minister Rev. Mihee Kim-Kort, the statement directly critiqued the Asian American 'open letter to the evangelical church' for its minimisation of 'anti-black racism'. 'For example', they wrote, 'the line "efforts have been reduced to black-white relations" implies that because blackness is *visible* it has been more seriously addressed than anti-Asian racism. This could not be less true. Black hypervisibility causes increased violence against black bodies on both an interpersonal and state level' (Park et al. 2014). The problem with the open letter, they continued, is that 'it seems more advantageous for Asian Americans to gain proximity to whiteness in order to access resources, while simultaneously distancing themselves from blackness' such that 'prioritizing white approval or integration above addressing black suffering is itself a self-serving strategy, lacking the ability to absolve racism from its roots' (Park et el. 2014). In other words, the 'you' addressed by the open letter were normatively white evangelicals and the organisations whose publication practices composed the 'Body of Christ' suggested to Park, Rice and Kim-Kort, as well as to a collective that they announced themselves as being, that Asian American evangelicals were cozying up to the structures of white supremacy as an avenue to advocate for their own racial recognition within evangelicalism. To constitute themselves as distinct from the open letter, these manifesto authors operationalised the concept of the 'feminist killjoy' from Sara Ahmed's *Promise of Happiness* (2010) as 'one who points to racism or sexism and therefore interrupts the surface level happiness by causing disruption, but also points to possibility' (Park et al. 2014). Drawing from their own experiences of marginalisation and solidarity with black and indigenous communities, they named themselves the Killjoy Prophets, who 'believe in centering voices of most marginalized rather than seeking acceptance from whiteness'. They described themselves as 'focusing on women of color feminist politics' with 'the possibility for hope in radical transformation'; the prophetic dimension lay in them 'fighting for justice from within the margins rather than aiming to get a seat at the table' (Park et al. 2014).

That this critique of the open letter appeared on Park's website suggested that yet another new Asian American evangelical online self-publishing configuration was coming together, at least in some part joining Park's Internet notoriety at the time to the project of virtually overhauling evangelicalism. On 15 December 2013, Park's tweet, '#NotYourAsianSidekick because I'd rather base build with fellow Asian Americans than rely on allies, who have a history of being absent', had trended its hashtag all over the world as a rallying cry for Asian American women feeling sidelined and accessorised in a number of spaces: Asian American, feminist, academic, activist and all the rest (Kim 2013). The radical writer Yasmin Nair (2016) has conducted perhaps one of the most incisive, thorough, and critical reviews of Park's work. Based on an archive of Park's tweets, Nair dates Park's emergence onto Twitter to 2009, whereupon she 'became the

uncrowned queen of "hashtivism", defined (and sometimes dismissed) as online activism which rallies Twitter users around causes with the use of participatory hashtags'. In terms of her 'reign, which lasted till the end of 2015', Nair calls it 'an astonishingly long one', considering that 'Internet celebrity is notorious for being short – entire careers can take off, flounder and disappear in a matter of days'. For Nair (2016), as well as for a number of online commentators, Park may have 'previously become famous as the woman behind #NotYourAsianSidekick, but she is most well-known as the creator of the hashtag #CancelColbert'. On 27 March 2014, she challenged a public figure, the comedian Stephen Colbert and his satirical Comedy Central show, The Colbert Report, where he played the character of a right-wing commentator. His show's Twitter handle retweeted out of context a joke that had been on the previous night's episode, where they made fun of Daniel Snyder, the owner of the Washington Redskins who had created a community foundation named the Washington Redskins Original Americans Foundation. 'I am willing to show the Asian community I care by introducing the Ching-Chong Ding-Dong Foundation for Sensitivity to Orientals or Whatever', Colbert had said the night before, and his social media team tweeted it the next day without context, with '#Asian' as the hashtag. Park responded: 'The Ching-Chong Ding-Dong Foundation for Sensitivity to Orientals has decided to call for #CancelColbert. Trend it'. It did trend, with tens of thousands of tweets for and against (Kang 2014), and even Colbert himself satirically used the hashtag: '#CancelColbert – I agree! Just saw @ColbertReport tweet. I share your rage. Who is that, though? I'm @StephenAtHome' (StephenatHome 2014).

As Park's centrality in the vortex of #CancelColbert gained her both celebrity-status popularity on the Internet as well as notable critics – that is, as her self-publishing practices challenged mainstream liberal hegemons – she opted for a re-invention of herself as an online evangelical voice, also through the spaces of cyber-publication. Nair (2016) traces this process to the summer of 2015, when Park re-emerged on Instagram as a lifestyle guru after a New Republic article authored by Elizabeth Stoker Bruenig (2015) in May enabled her to rebrand as an evangelical who was penitent for her social media antics, resurrected in Nair's words as 'Saint Suey'. The existence of the Killjoy Prophets one year before, however, suggests that the shift took place in the summer of 2014. As Nair (2016) records, the way that Park narrates the ensuing months after #CancelColbert featured stories of being 'doxxed' (her address revealed to the public), receiving death threats, escaping stalkers and even experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder after being followed by what she claims to have been a sniper, the veracity of which Nair calls into question (one seldom knows, Nair points out, that one is being followed by a sniper), as well as her claims to be marginalised when she voluntarily revealed her address to be one of the most expensive buildings in Chicago. The emergence of the Killjoy Prophets in 2014, then, lays out the path for Park's resurfacing after #CancelColbert. Suey Park's rebranding in this sense was not so much about seeking a new religious purity as 'Saint Suey', but as moving from her cyber-critique of activist spaces and popular culture to the self-publication of criticism regarding white evangelicalism, and Asian American involvement in it through the open letter, through the women-of-color posture that she started in #NotYourAsianSidekick. Indeed, shortly after co-founding the Killjoy Prophets in July 2014, Park trended a new hashtag, #NotMyChristianLeader with the tweet 'When you only engage people who flatter you and your work, you have become the very thing you seek to dismantle', dedicating this new Twitter campaign to calling out Christian clergy and intellectuals accused of exclusionary practices directed toward women of colour and queer bodies (McDonald 2014).

At least in the Killjoy Prophets manifesto on Park's website, there is remarkable continuity between Park's secular cyber-escapades from her #CancelColbert days and her online critique of evangelicalism, which seeks to reconstitute it along what she conceived as women-of-color lines. The document explicitly calls attention to #NotYourAsianSidekick as a women-of-color hashtag with a racial justice agenda that is broader than the open letter's call to reconcile evangelicalism with Asian American identity. 'Rather than framing women of color as simply non-white', they write, 'we remember women of color being created as a political identity', which has the implication – in the words of Loretta Ross – that one has been 'lifted […] out of that basic identity into another political being and another space'. 'Instead of letting our identity inform our politics', they argue that #NotYourAsianSidekick means, 'women of color feminism means letting our politics inform our identity'. The open letter's 'call to "go beyond the Black/White binary"' is in this sense the support of a politics with an identity, and citing the Native studies scholar Andrea Smith, the manifesto calls such an approach 'multiculturalist' and insufficient in dismantling white supremacy and its legacies of 'slavery, genocide and Orientalism'. In this interpretation, #NotYourAsianSidekick is more than an assertion that the marginalisation of Asians, especially women, in activist, media and evangelical spaces,

is not simply an attempt to advocate for representation. It is an attempt to build solidarity through cyber-publication to dismantle the conditions that result in such processes of marginality.

From this online manifesto, the Killjoy Prophets banded together in an attempt to dismantle what they came to call 'dudebro Christianity', hegemonic versions of Christian ideology that centred the white patriarchy that they saw as leading to the marginalisation of groups as diverse as women of colour, indigenous peoples and black people. In August, another hashtag, #NotMyChristianLeader, began to trend, beginning with Park's tweet, 'When you only engage people who flatter you and your work, you have become the very thing you seek to dismantle' (McDonald 2014). Following the women-of-color logic behind #NotYourAsianSidekick, the tweet takes on the gap between representation and labour, pointing out the chasm between what the Killjoy Prophets claim are the celebrity 'dudebros' who, in the words of the collective's Rod T. Rod, take credit for the work of people-of-color who enable their churches to operate on lands stolen from indigenous peoples (Killjoy Prophets 2014). By October 2014, a second part to the Killjoy Prophets manifesto appeared on Mihee Kim-Kort's blog, again co-authored by Kim-Kort, Park and Rice, this time detailing Kim-Kort's treatment as a Korean American woman within white evangelicalism as someone who was usefully tokenised to show that evangelical spaces were diverse (Kim-Kort et al. 2014). In December 2014, Park posted the audio of a conversation that she had had with me, titled 'Open Letter Meets the Killjoy Prophets', in which Park rehearsed all the charges that had been raised against the representational politics of the open letter (Park et al. 2014), and I attempted to show that they were not a zero-sum game because starting with Asian American identity was still a good place from which to understand one's place in the larger structures of evangelical colonisation. The truth, in other words, is that Park et al. (2014) had a great deal in common with the strategies of Asian American evangelical self-publication; what was at issue for her was ideology, that evangelicalism should not be reformed to be more inclusive, but to be a space that centred a women-of-color positionality. But there is remarkable methodological agreement with the open letter writers that she denounces: self-publication is positioned over against evangelical institutional publishing. The problem that emerged was also similar: Suey Park and the Killjoy Prophets had to become the online representations of women-of-color evangelicals.

It is arguably with that 'killjoy' mentality that the demise of the Killjoy Prophets came to be wrapped around the exposure of three persons in 2015 who worked as activist women of colour within their collectivities, but had in fact self-fashioned themselves into such roles and seemed to have claimed the very celebrity that they accused others of taking. The first was Rachel Dolezal, the president of the Spokane chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples (NAACP) who was exposed as a white woman pretending to be black, in June 2015, with a media circus erupting around her over the course of the year (Brubaker 2016). The second circulated around one of Suey Park's mentors Andrea Smith, in which she was accused on an indigenous student's blog in July 2015 – a month after the allegations against Dolezal – that she had faked her identification with the Cherokee Nation. This scandal was less of a popular culture scandal and more of a minor hubbub in academia; that very month, Smith (2015) posted on her blog to say that her identification with the Cherokee is more based on her activist work against domestic violence for indigenous women and is not dependent on her enrolment in the nation. But the third was perhaps the most devastating, and it was for Suey Park herself. Nair (2016) has produced one of the most comprehensive reports on Park's self-fashioning tendencies, especially in Bruenig's (2015) Christian profile of a repentant 'Saint Suey' who now was re-positioning herself as a lifestyle photographer and blogger while capitalising on what she confessed were her mistakes on social media on a national tour with one of her former nemeses during #CancelColbert, Arthur Chu. It was over the course of this reporting, Nair (2016) said, that Suey Park accomplished her greatest self-fashioning feat yet: 'On December 1, I wrote to Park with fact-checking questions about some of the details in the Bruenig piece. Less than 48 hours later, Park deleted or put into abeyance her entire internet presence'. As the Killjoy Prophet who trended #NotYourAsianSidekick and #NotMyChristianLeader, Suey Park herself had been outed as one who claims celebrity among her followers on the very space where she had called others out: the Internet.

Conclusion: Asian American evangelicals on the Internet

What, then, of the Internet as a hopeful space from which Asian American evangelicals can reform evangelicalism as a theological network in which they have a place? Like a number of scholars and commentators raining on the online parade of celebratory optimism about cyber-liberation, the stories told in this chapter have been less than hopeful. The hubbub about the Asian American open letter to the evangelical church, itself the product of nine years of online activism, suggests that cyberspace publicity

may have offered a creative network of sites by which to force changes within evangelical culture. But as Linda Herrera (2014) has also shown about occupy movements trying to make use of the Internet to fuel their physical occupations against social injustice and authoritarianism, online culture is a place where movements also go to fragment amidst infighting and debate. Agreeing with the critique of Internet libertarianism long ago launched by Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron (1995), Jacob Silverman (2016) also points out that the free-for-all feel of the Internet masks its intentional design to re-entrench the norms of white supremacy and capitalist entrepreneurial selfhood. Indeed, as Whitney Phillips (2016) has shown, the space of the Internet makes it easy for trolls to summon mobs based on dubious news (see also Phillips and Milner 2017). Provocatively, Suey Park could be seen as an example of this phenomenon: fashioning herself as a social media celebrity, her embrace of a women-of-colour ethos, regardless of her personal material circumstances, enabled her to further divide an already fragmented and fraught conversation about Asian American evangelicals and the possibility of reforming evangelicalism.

Further study on Asian American evangelicals in online spaces would probably require even more attention to the emerging conventions of 'virtual ethnography' and the shifting norms of public and private as posts are made in quasi-public spaces, such as Facebook groups (Hine 2000; Boellstorff et al. 2012). Launched by the Korean American ministers Lydia Shiu and Liz Lee to combat what Lee (2017) described as the loneliness of progressive Asian American Christians in both immigrant and white evangelical congregations, the Facebook group Progressive Asian American Christian boasts well over 5000 members and is a site in which both news about evangelical reinforcements of social injustice are shared alongside deeply personal confessions, sometimes sexual in nature. Certainly, the group has also developed a national conference, a scholarship programme, and even a 'Statement on God's Justice' (2018) written to affirm social justice activism and the full inclusion of LGBTQ+ persons into Christian spaces over against the popular preacher John MacArthur's statements against both of those affirmations. But at the heart of Progressive Asian American Christian is not so much these public postings, but the deeply personal Facebook group itself. Moreover, with the emergence of 'subtle Asian Christian' and 'subtle Asian Christian dating' as spinoffs from the widely popular 2018 Facebook groups 'subtle Asian traits' and 'subtle Asian dating', the sincerity of the various posts all have to be discerned, as per Phillips's (2016) warning that what is posted on the normatively libertarian Internet sometimes is the work of trolls whose entertainment lies in driving readers to take jokes far too seriously.

The episode of the Asian American open letter to the evangelical church reveals these very problems in the telling of its own story. With Asian American evangelicals having conceptualised the Internet as a space to reform the networks of evangelicalism – themselves conceptualised alternatively as 'the church', the 'Body of Christ', a network of institutions of publication, and activist collectives – the narrative in this chapter has unfolded what perhaps might ultimately be described as layer upon layer of overdetermination in the quest to overcome the conditions Busto (2014) describes as evangelical colonisation. And yet, maybe in the final analysis, that hope – liberation from the public cultures of evangelicalism as normatively white and patriarchal – is not dead. It is just that the Internet is probably not the space where the decisive confrontations with this infrastructural formation will occur.

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