

# ***The Campaign to “Cancel” Colbert***

**by Jay Caspian Kang**

On Thursday night, the official Twitter account for *The Colbert Report* committed the comedic sin of delivering a punch line without its setup. The offending tweet, “I am willing to show #Asian community I care by introducing the Ching-Chong Ding-Dong Foundation for Sensitivity to Orientals or Whatever,” was meant to be a satirical analog to the Washington Redskins Original Americans Foundation, whose creation was announced earlier this week by the team’s owner, Daniel Snyder.

The joke, which originally aired on Wednesday’s episode, is not particularly complicated: Daniel Snyder created a charitable organization for the benefit of a community and used a racial epithet for that same community in the organization’s name – so here’s an absurd fictional extrapolation of Snyder’s own logic. Everyone who hates both racism and Daniel Snyder laughs.

On Twitter, where words often slip free of their contexts, the unaccompanied punch line sparked a firestorm of outrage, which quickly escalated into a campaign demanding the show’s cancellation. The hashtag #CancelColbert became one of Twitter’s trending topics across the United States, and prompted Comedy Central to point out that the tweet in question, which was soon deleted, was posted by a corporate account that Colbert did not control.

#CancelColbert started with Suey Park, a twenty-three-year-old writer and activist, who, in December of last year, came to Twitter prominence when she set up #NotYourAsianSidekick, an online conversation that encouraged Asian-American women to voice their frustrations with traditional feminism. The hashtag has generated tens of thousands of tweets, which in turn led to wide coverage from mainstream media organizations. Park has gone on to start, or facilitate, several other successful hashtags, including #POC4CulturalEnrichment and #BlackPowerYellowPeril. For her efforts, she was named one of the Guardian’s “top 30 young people in digital media.”

Park, now a veteran of so-called “hashtag activism,” started the campaign with the following tweet: “The Ching-Chong Ding-Dong Foundation for Sensitivity to Orientals has decided to call for #CancelColbert. Trend it.”

As #CancelColbert grew, Park acted as something of an online personal trainer, exhorting her followers to push the hashtag up the list of Twitter’s trending topics. In response, tens of thousands of people came to Colbert’s defense, many of them apparently outraged at the outrage. By lunchtime on Friday, when Deadspin published a post by two Korean-American writers with the tongue-in-cheek headline “Gooks Don’t Get Redskins Joke,” #CancelColbert had become another online feeding trough, attracting heated commentary from everyone who has ever thought anything about race in this country. (As Deadspin noted, it had also shifted the debate away from Daniel Snyder and the name of his football team.)

I called Park on Friday to ask her about how #CancelColbert got started. She said she saw the offending tweet while eating dinner Thursday night and decided to respond to it. Despite her online profile – and the forceful, yet sometimes decidedly academic, tone of her advocacy – Park does not consider herself a “full-time” activist and claims that she does not particularly enjoy hustling along a hashtag. Her degree of involvement in a hashtagged cause, she said, depends on how much “free time” she has at the moment, and whether a particular issue piques her interest. “It’s not like I enjoy missing *Scandal* to tweet about *The Colbert Report*,” she said.

Every debate on Twitter gets put through the platform’s peculiar distortion effect. The form’s inherent limitations – the hundred-and-forty-character limit and a fleeting shelflife – reward volume, frequency, and fervor rather than nuance, complexity, and persuasion. This might feel unseemly to those who value a more refined conversation, but there is no denying the viral power of hashtag activists who capitalize on the speed

at which a single tweet can multiply into something that resembles a protest rally. A new Twitter outrage seems to detonate every week, and, in many cases, the voices raised in these social-media movements belong to groups that do not have equal representation within the mainstream media. But they should not therefore be immune to questions or criticism: If an activist hashtag becomes a trend, has a broad, important conversation taken place? It is no simple thing to determine whether Twitter outrage can itself expand the terms of discourse and challenge the status quo.

At its best, #NotYourAsianSidekick provides a channel for thousands of Asian-American women and their allies to discuss the tokenism that so often accompanies broad conversations about diversity in this country. Dissatisfied with the idea of a “seat at the table,” Park uses social media to facilitate a self-contained conversation among Asian-Americans that does not require any explanation or translation of our shared cultural norms. The ultimate significance of a string of tweets can always be questioned, but that a hashtag conversation on Twitter could have such resonance speaks to just how desperate Asian-Americans have been to talk about identity without deferring to the familiar binaries that shape most discussions of race in this country.

#CancelColbert could be seen as a similar attempt to carve out space for Asian-Americans to discuss something that has nothing to do with parody, Daniel Snyder, or the good intentions of *The Colbert Report*. There’s a long tradition in American comedy of dumping tasteless jokes at the feet of Asians and Asian-Americans that follows the perception that we will silently weather the ridicule. If I were to predict which minority group the writers of a show like *The Colbert Report* would choose for an edgy, epithet-laden parody, I’d grimace and prepare myself for some joke about rice, karate, or broken English. The resulting discomfort has nothing to do with the intentions of the joke or the political views of the people laughing at it. Even when you want to be in on the joke – and you understand, intellectually, that you are not the one being ridiculed – it’s hard not to wonder why these jokes always come at the expense of those least likely to protest.

In our conversation, Park admitted that despite the hashtag’s command, she did not want *The Colbert Report* to be cancelled. “I like the show,” she said. Instead, she said, she saw the hashtag as a way to critique white liberals who use forms of racial humor to mock more blatant forms of racism. “Well-intentioned racial humor doesn’t actually do anything to end racism or the Redskins mascot,” Park told me. “That sort of racial humor just makes people who hide under the title of progressivism more comfortable.”

It’s important to note here that Suey Park identifies herself as an activist, and does not make any claim to objectivity or fairness. #CancelColbert might have rankled and annoyed people who got Colbert’s joke, but Park says that the point of the “movement” was to argue that white liberals who routinely condemn what she called “worse racism” will often turn a blind eye to, or even defend, more tacit forms of prejudice, especially when they come from someone who shares their basic political beliefs. “The response shows the totality of white privilege,” Park said. “They say, ‘Suey is trying to take away a show we enjoy, so we’re going to start a petition to take away her First Amendment rights and make rape threats.’ All this happens because they were worried that a show they enjoyed might be taken away.”

If we are to take Park’s explanation in good faith and see #CancelColbert as the work of a master provocateur who held up a mirror up to the way that self-identifying liberals of all races respond to criticism from people that they assumed to be allies, then it should be hailed as a rousing success. In interviews and on Twitter, Park has repeatedly pointed out that she does not subscribe to a traditional distinction between liberalism and conservatism. She does not defer to white liberals who point out that the joke was meant to satirize white racists, nor does she believe that a debt of gratitude is owed to the good intentions of white liberalism. During our conversation, she mentioned Kanye West and the politics behind his public persona. Park suggested that she, like West, is playing to a part and, in the process, satirizing what we might expect from a twenty-three-year-old hashtag activist. “There’s no reason for me to act reasonable, because I won’t be

taken seriously anyway,” she said. “So I might as well perform crazy to point out exactly what’s expected from me.”

I am ten years older than Suey Park, and, like her, I grew up in a suburban Korean household, read critical theory in college, and now make my living peddling words on the Internet. Like Park, I am a fan of *The Colbert Report*. I did not find Colbert’s joke offensive in any way. But, while I was initially turned off by what I saw as a disingenuous and self-aggrandizing attempt to blow up a joke into a national issue, I also found myself agreeing with what Park has to say about the roles we, as Asian-Americans, are called to play in America’s ongoing diversity drama. Unlike Park, I tend to keep my political beliefs close to the vest, especially when talking to white liberal friends, because I assume – fairly or not – that they expect me to laugh at whatever gets mocked on *The Daily Show* or satirized on *The Colbert Report*. Like Park, I have seen how quickly a presumed collegiality can turn into a mocking, almost threatening, tone whenever I stray from the assumed consensus that we all hate “worse racists,” Fox News, and gun nuts. Like Park, I have always assumed – again, fairly or not – that white liberals believe that as a person of color, I owe a debt of gratitude to the generations of well-intentioned white people who have fought hard for my right to write for prestigious publications.

I do not know if I believe that Park set out to incite this particular riot when she first tweeted #CancelColbert, but I also do not believe that any activist really owes an explanation for the mess she leaves in her wake. Over the past two days, much of the debate about #CancelColbert has been about the efficacy of hashtag activism and whether the act of dissent has been cheapened by the ease, and sometimes frivolity, of Twitter protests. As the debate intensified, I, too, thought that we had reached a point where hashtag activism had circled back onto itself – a moment when the earnestness of a conversation like #NotYourAsianSidekick had been compromised by self-promotion and race hustling. But journalists and pundits are particularly sensitive to charges of self-promotion and hustling because we so often use Twitter to self-promote and hustle. Unlike Park, we usually do this without any particular ideological motivation – and, if we are honest with ourselves, I think we can admit that one reason we may find Twitter activism distasteful is because it interrupts our online socializing with questions we might not want to answer.

#CancelColbert may have been silly and dumb and wrong in spirit, but it’s worth asking if those of us who find it distasteful know as much about the intentions of the hashtag activists as we think we do. If we take #CancelColbert at face value, we can easily dismiss it as shrill, misguided, and frivolous. But after speaking to Park about what she hoped to accomplish with all this (a paternalistic question if there ever was one), I wonder if we might be witnessing the development of a more compelling – and sometimes annoying and infuriating – form of protest, by a new group of Merry Pranksters, who are once again freaking out the squares in our always overreacting, always polarized online public sphere.