

On Cancel Culture and Frank Sherlock

Shortly after it was revealed that thirty years ago the poet Frank Sherlock had played in a white supremacist punk band, Camille Rankine posted a thoughtful Twitter thread on cancel culture. While I don't know if Rankine had Sherlock in mind when she wrote that, she's an excellent poet and insightful commentator, so it's worth looking at some of her ideas:

At its core, cancel culture, in contrast [to state censorship], is a grassroots corrective action that functions to enact consequences for harmful offenses that the state cannot or will not punish: Harassment. Intimidation. Racism. Bigotry. Sexual assault.

Cancel culture's consequence is the erosion of the cancelled subject's cultural capital, and thereby their literal capital.

Cancel culture tends to hit at the wallet: When it is no longer profitable to provide a platform for the cancelled subject, their value in the cultural marketplace diminishes, and so does their ability to do harm while protected by those who would stand to profit off of them.

I think that's an excellent formulation of the best aspects of cancel culture, and, in most cases, I support those tactics. Rankine suggests that one goal is to reduce the canceled subject's cultural and literal capital, and thereby limit their "ability to do harm." An example of that would be the many men who have sexually harassed and/or assaulted women or, in some cases, other men: by being called out, they lose the prestige that allows them both lucrative contracts and easy access to people they might prey upon. But Rankine's definition suggests that Sherlock is not being canceled, since he would appear to lack any inclination to do harm now and is instead being punished for his teenaged white supremacism. Instead, it seems he's being disciplined because (to use the language of the carceral state) he has assumed a debt to society that he cannot pay.

Rankine continues:

And to call these protests the actions of a mob feels dismissive of the reality that individual human people are genuinely angered by the harmful the [sic] actions of another, and make their anger known. That anger is often met with calls for nuance. But what is nuanced about harm?

I would agree that the word “mob” is not ideal, and that it seems to dismiss the real anger that propels cancel culture. At the same time, many mobs are “angered by the harmful... actions of another,” and these displays of anger in cancel culture are largely based upon collective interactions on social media. Because of that, cancel culture is predicated on almost instantaneous displays of anger in 280 characters or fewer. The problem with that combination of immediacy and brevity is evident in the response of a Twitter commenter who said “I don’t know the story and I don’t need to but I will say that the question should never be ‘can a fascist change?’ but ‘should a fascist be allowed to change?’ and the answer is ‘no.’” That’s equal parts gibberish and self-parody. Who would proudly declare they don’t need to know the story they’re nominally commenting on? How would we not “allow” a “fascist” to change? Wouldn’t it be better to have fewer fascists?

And that’s the problem with Rankine’s elegant rhetorical question “what is nuanced about harm?”: it licenses incoherent displays of anger that obscure the very real issues to which they’re supposedly responding. And because those displays are hastily written tweets or Facebook posts responding to other social media posts, they often find easy targets while ignoring much more appropriate ones. It’s worth comparing Sherlock’s case to that of Linh Dinh. (Full disclosure: ten years ago I invited Dinh to read at the university where I teach, and he gave an absolutely amazing performance.) Each has been active in the Philly poetry scene for over two decades, although Dinh is certainly more prolific and widely acclaimed than Sherlock. Dinh has devolved into an alt-right, Holocaust denying, racist anti-Semite. He posts weekly columns for the *Unz Review*, most of which include some kind of racist idiocy. Here’s a selection from his most recent column:

Unless you’re a reactionary, assbackward asshole, you believe in progress, as in history definitely has an aim, and that’s to reach the Messianic Age, where there will be no more war, all races will be harmonious and equal (except one will be a tad more equal than the rest, because more circumcised and chosen) and Yahweh will beam his benevolence on your sorry ass, even if you’re goy as fuck. “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice,” so just keep on tearing down as you forge forward, comrades, and if you want a passing grade, don’t even try to argue against Moses, Marx and George Soros. All progressive visions are derived from Jewish messianism.¹

This is much worse than garden-variety anti-Semitism: Dinh’s casual assertion that “all progressive visions are derived from Jewish messianism” and his linking of Moses, Marx, and George Soros echo the language of Robert Gregory Bowers and of John Earnest, who murdered

¹ Dinh, Linh. “America as Religion,” *The Unz Review*, <https://www.unz.com/ldinh/america-as-religion/>. Retrieved May 5, 2019.

a total of 12 Jews in the synagogue shootings in Pittsburgh and Poway, California. This rambling article jumps from anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, to transphobia, to suggesting the lunar landings – and perhaps the attacks of 9/11 – were hoaxes. Despite these weekly displays of bigotry and ludicrous conspiracy theories, I know of no one in the Philly poetry scene who has publicly condemned Dinh’s indisputable prejudice.² In fact, the only poets I’ve seen criticize Dinh at all are the editors of *Dispatches*, who did so eloquently and forcefully.

Obviously, Dinh is the perfect example of someone who should be canceled for his racism, so what explains the silence? Is it really possible that almost no one is aware of it? Would anyone seriously argue that Sherlock’s offenses, committed as a teenager in an almost completely unknown white supremacist punk band 30 years ago, are worse than Dinh’s current racism and anti-Semitism? That’s why I’m surprised and concerned when Rankine seems to dismiss the need for nuance. John Lydon sang that anger is an energy, and social change never occurs without powerful and often non-rational emotions. But anger can also be a comfort, a place of lazy righteousness where there’s no need for the difficult process of thought or perspective.

I’ve been thinking about Sherlock’s racist past in the context of one of his recent poems, “The Next Last One,” published in *Poetry* in November, 2018. It’s an excellent poem, and I’m particularly struck by this section:

Someone
dressed like a traitor convinced me
there are loyalties that deserve to be broken Someone
w/ DEATH TO THE KLAN on the door
let me know I already broke free

I’m not quite sure how to read those lines. Is Sherlock talking about moving beyond his racist past? Is the person “dressed like a traitor” someone who helped him show that his white nationalism was an imaginary and destructive loyalty? I don’t know, and it seems to me that that’s an answer that’s too often missing from online political debates. Even as I think a permanent and unconditional cancellation of Sherlock is too extreme, I don’t really know what the proper public response should be. Recently, former white supremacists such as Derek

² . *Jacket2*, based out of the University of Pennsylvania, seems to have removed some of his podcasts: clicking on the links gets an “Access denied. You are not authorized to access this page” message, which lends itself to a variety of possible readings. I contacted *Jacket2* to ask why the links are no longer operable, but have not yet received an answer.

Black³ and Katie McHugh⁴ have discussed how they both entered and left racist communities. I'd like to see Sherlock discuss his white supremacist past in more detail, and I'd like to hear how he thought he had "already broke[n] free." And I'd like to hear a nuanced – yes, nuanced – discussion of how the various poetry communities should handle Sherlock's former white supremacism.

³ . Black explains his former white supremacism in an interview here: <https://www.npr.org/2018/09/24/651052970/how-a-rising-star-of-white-nationalism-broke-free-from-the-movement>. That's covered much more extensively in Saslow, Eli. *Rising Out of Hatred: The Awakening of a Former White Nationalist*. New York: Random House, 2018.

⁴ . Gray, Rosie. "Get Out While You Can," *Buzzfeed News* <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/rosiegray/katie-mchugh>. Retrieved May 5, 2019.