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Cancel culture as a "site" for cultural and political struggle: A critical media perspective

It might seem that cancel culture has been around forever — or at least accompanied scandalous events and moral transgressions alike for a long time. From frequent news articles and vast users' commentary on social media to quick colloquial spread and rising interest towards canceling in academia, the phenomenon swiftly made its way into public discourse, inflating the notion of canceling with various interpretations and representing the most popular type of public outcry that people now employ in the case of mass scandal. Yet, years into cancel culture's prevalence, recurrent canceling events and ongoing engagement in cancel practices by online users still do not seem to add full clarity to what cancel culture stands for or through which instruments and methods to investigate it. It is precisely this issue that Eve Ng — an associate professor in the School of Media Arts and Studies and the Women's, Gender, and Sexuality program at Ohio University — tackles in her monograph, *Cancel Culture: A Critical Analysis*, published in March 2022.

In hindsight, *Cancel Culture: A Critical Analysis* is among the first academic books devoted to examining cancel culture from a scholarly perspective, and, therefore, one of the pioneering attempts to conceptualize canceling through a large-scale and theoretically ample approach reinforced by empirical study. Before that, several prominent journal articles were introduced in the field, including one written by Ng herself, paving the way for future research and mapping out directions for academic enquirers to follow (e. g. [Clark 2020; Ng 2020; Norris 2023]). Some other — less scientific and more reflective — monographs with commentary on the emergent phenomenon were also published at the time (e. g. [Dershowitz 2020; Burgis 2021; Kovalik 2021]). Transcending the relatively short format of a published article and going beyond the journalistic book concept, Ng presents a sound and elaborated scientific overview of cancel culture: her research is timely, compelling, and in several instances innovative. For one, developed at the time of cancel culture's peak popularity, specifically in the Western context, the book proposes some pragmatic ideas on how to approach canceling from a scholarly perspective — mainly, through a twofold system of canceling discourses and a multi-stranded genealogy of canceling's roots that are discussed in this review later. It is in that sense that Ng makes a considerable contribution to the cluster of cancel culture research as she aptly brings together many theoretical developments useful to understanding canceling on a more fundamental level: theories about celebrity culture, Black communicative traditions, fan activism, as well as commentary on the historical course of several countries all serve to demonstrate the vast background that lies behind today's swift and at times superficial cancelings. At the same time, the work puts forward some dubious claims based on ideological grounds that a large portion of readers might struggle to agree or identify with.

The book consists of six chapters, each exploring different facets of cancel culture as we know it today. Much of Ng's analysis comes from her background as a critical scholar, which is why the research is primarily led by the critical media and cultural studies paradigm: the author sees cancel culture as a point of contestation between different agents engaged in dynamics of "cultural and political

power in media production, circulation, and consumption" (p. 4). Because of this, Ng pays particular attention to intersections of digital activism practices, fan culture, and national policies that ultimately comprise canceling — and explores which political implications they bring through a "broader lens on power and society" (p. 4). The logic that Ng follows to approach the topic seems to be valid, since at the very core of canceling — so it is believed — lies a desire to achieve social justice and bring more diversity into the public sphere [Velasco 2020, p. 1].

Content-wise, the book is organized coherently: most chapters and their subsections combine theoretical elaborations and case studies to reinforce the argument. Chapter 1, the Introduction, sets out a general picture of the content that follows: the author explains her goals and motivations behind the research, provides key definitions, and elaborates on the methodological basis for the investigation. Chapters 2 and 3 equip the readers with historical origins and lineages of canceling, using retrospective logic to trace what kind of incidents cause cancel-like reactions. Among them are two major streamlines: cases of celebrities' misbehavior towards people around them and cases linked to matters of social justice when those in positions of power fail to "preach" virtue as expected from them due to their status. Additionally, Ng considers how canceling came to be in the first place in the depth of the so-called Black Twitter — an informal culturally-entwined meta-community within the social media network composed of people of color with experiences and practices alike. Here, the author goes back to the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s and probes the system of vernacular language used by Black musicians, media personalities, and fictional characters who helped disseminate interactional verbal traditions like "dissing" and "calling out" which largely predate modern canceling practices.

Some interesting case studies support the author's theoretical developments in this section of the book — like the 2014 *#CancelColbert* campaign example, which Ng frames as one of the first instances when, in addition to the audience's calls for a media product's (a TV show or a movie) termination, canceling terminology was figuratively applied towards a person (Stephen Colbert himself) as a form of moral "punishment," thus preceding many similar cancelings that followed in the future.

It is within this section of the book that Ng also makes a case in point for fans' affiliation with both canceling discourses and practices, actively enhanced by the advent of digital media — a line of research that is not yet sufficiently explored but is likely to get more attention from the academic community in the coming years. To showcase how fan groups leveraged their agency in the digital realm as part of canceling endeavors, Ng describes the 2016 case of a sci-fi television show, *The 100*, specifically a controversial decision by the series' show-runners to kill a popular character named Lexa amid an active development of her arc and strengthening relationships with other characters. Fueled by such a plot twist, fans joined forces to organize a collective campaign targeted at diminishing the show's social media prominence, lowering its viewership ratings, and undermining advertiser commitments. These coordinated mobilizations, as Ng specifies, turned out to be one of the earliest cases of fan activism employed against promi-

nent media figures as a form of protest and a call for better-informed decisions, which resembles modern canceling practices.

Chapters 4 and 5 are specifically dedicated to analyzing more practical aspects of cancel culture within two distinct contexts. First, Ng situates the analysis within the politics of the United States, where canceling has been and continues to be severely criticized by right-wing ideologists. Looking into the historical formation of American identity, Ng provides a synoptic explanation as to why canceling has been monopolized by right-wing politicians as a means to criticize the established social order within the country under the influence of new canceling rules. For instance, Ng traces how some of the events from the 2020 protests that erupted after George Floyd's death at the hands of police were framed by Republicans as manifestations of cancel culture that were a threat to the country's history and culture, which led to a spike in conservative discourses against said culture at the time. Similarly, national-level turmoil that followed Donald Trump's loss in the 2020 presidential elections and the subsequent impeachment attempt by the House of Representatives, according to Ng, was fueled by some of the Republican leaders' claims that questioned the validity of both the election results and grounds for impeachment and presented them as another form of "woke" canceling adopted by the Left. At times, the premise of Ng's argumentation seems to balance a fine line of interpretations that may be under the impact of the author's ideological beliefs. That is why one might expect that a large share of the audience who tend to position themselves within the right-wing political spectrum and voice particular support towards the Republican Party in the U. S. would not accept this train of thought.

In Chapter 5, Ng shifts the focus towards the People's Republic of China (hereinafter the PRC), where cancel culture garnered support from the state whenever the authority of the government was undermined or the honor of the Chinese people impugned. Using instances of nationwide cancelings of Dolce & Gabbana's 2018 promotional campaign that seemed to mock Chinese people's way of eating with chopsticks, Western fashion brands like Adidas, Nike, and H&M that condemned labor conditions in Xinjiang province and refrained from sourcing local cotton material for its goods in 2021, as well as Thai television series *2gether* star Vachirawit Chivaaree, whose 2020 social media post alleged Hong Kong's autonomy and sparked nationalist outrage in Chinese social media, the author concentrates on two kernel concepts — consumer nationalism and fandom nationalism — central to cancel culture's manifestation in the country. Unlike in the U. S., where canceling has been under severe criticism amid debates about freedom of speech, cancel culture in China was put into use by both the people and the government to defend the interests and the image of the country, specifically due to these two phenomena. They, as Ng states, are inherent to the PRC due to a complex and specific set of historical, economic, and political circumstances — and may not be present in other countries at all.

The sixth — and final — chapter of the book provides a summary of previous sections. Looking back on the reviewed material, Ng emphasizes the importance of an ad-hoc approach to analyzing instances that are generally accompanied

by a "canceling" label: even though they may look alike at first glance, many of them are assembled through a unique set of practices that derive from various historical lineages. Most importantly, though, the author once again makes the case for the relevance and significance of theoretical advancements in the area of cancel culture that will contribute to a greater understanding of media as a domain where power is exercised, challenged, and negotiated: cancel culture seems to have secured its place in contemporary social life across many borders and nations, and it is only beneficial to make full sense of this phenomenon.

The stand-out advantage of the book comes from its analytical value. Perhaps one of the most useful findings in Ng's volume has to do with the analytical model for cancel culture's structure that the author proposes. At the very beginning, Ng draws a distinction between two levels of canceling discourses — first-order (i. e. canceling practices involved in a canceling event) and second-order (i. e. narratives about a canceling event beyond the event itself). This conceptualization offers scholars practical optics on how to approach canceling and situate the analysis when working with the subject: it is not just the canceling instance itself that shapes and influences the perception of cancel culture among the general public, but also everything around it. A good portion of the book is devoted to tracing the origins of cancel culture — here too Ng is able to carry out a solid analytical procedure to determine the social and historical factors that were at the very basis of canceling when it first started to form. As such, drawing on Clark's [2020] analysis of cancel culture's etymology, Brock's [2012] conceptualization of Twitter/X as a space where the authentic culture of marginalized groups gets shaped, and some other relevant papers, Ng develops a convincing and sequential genealogy of canceling from its earlier stages within niche communities of Twitter/X to the modern phase of cancel culture as a widespread tool of social accountability. Seen as an additional advantageous trait, the book is written using an easy and narrating style, as well as relatively accessible English, which is why many readers should be genuinely interested not only in its contents but in the way it is delivered.

Nonetheless, as noted earlier, the book is not without shortcomings and limitations, some of which Ng herself highlights within the text of her work. Overall, there seem to be two   noticeable issues that need to be accounted for. First, there is the apparent left-leaning ideological position of the author that subtly tracks throughout the text. Even though Ng specifically states that her book avoids favoring any stance on cancel culture from a "particular point along the left-to-right political spectrum" (p. 139), her analysis draws a large foundation from identity politics — and traces how canceling can be seen as a tool used for challenging societal inequalities brought onto oppressed and disempowered groups based on axes of gender, class, race, sexuality, and so on. While no political or ideological preference is openly stated, a reader might get a feeling that Ng adheres to left-wing views — whether through her harsh criticism of Trumpian politics, her take on the history of the U. S. with emphasis on white nationalism, or other less significant notes and remarks in the chapters. In no way problematic by itself, the author's ideological stance that is traced within the monograph may

undermine Ng's impartiality towards the topic, the overall validity of the investigation, as well as the conclusions she reaches.

The second shortcoming has to do with the book's methodological approach to selecting primary data. Addressing the strategy for data collection, the author calls the process she follows "intentionally eclectic" (p. 7), since the empirical material that forms the basis for the inquiry is fragmented: it consists of comments and posts on different social media, news article comment threads, as well as selected comments in published articles and commentary essays. Even though Ng does not set a goal of achieving representative outcomes with this study, a rather hectic logic to collecting data does raise concerns about the extent to which chosen materials reflect the general picture in the field. Similarly, criticism may be put forward towards the selection of key case studies — namely, canceling in the U. S. and the PRC — and the justification for this choice. Ng's explanation for the options stems from the author's greatest familiarity with the culture and politics in these countries. With that in mind, she openly admits that such a selection creates a basis for significant limitations to this work, which is something that readers may need to account for when familiarizing themselves with the content of the book.

Despite these limitations, a person who wishes to make better sense of the significations — both explicit and implicit — behind cancel culture, as well as someone generally interested in contemporary digital media politics, will certainly find Eve Ng's *Cancel Culture: A Critical Analysis* useful. One of the first complete volumes dedicated to canceling, the monograph meets public demand for foundational research in the domain of mass canceling and delivers some interesting points to consider. The book does not unequivocally define what cancel culture is but instead opens up possibilities that get us closer to finding an answer: through the study of fan cultures, digital activism, and national politics. One should, however, stay cautious interpreting the contents of the book, specifically when applying the author's conceptualization outside of the countries and cultures mentioned in the analysis.

Overall, the monograph makes a good case for cancel culture's genesis and the kind of actors and processes that are shaping the phenomenon today — but sometimes lacks a deliberate and unbiased outlook to cover the bigger picture of modern-day canceling. It remains to be seen whether the book will serve as a conceptual basis for investigation of cancel culture in the future and take its place among the scholarly works that will later be referred to as cancel culture research "essentials."

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