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Theology and Belief in Digital Speech Acts and Online Protests

A Singapore Case Study

Abstract

This article examines the relationship between theology, belief and speech acts. Translated onto or directly performed on digital platforms, speech acts influence the spatial arrangement of protest, especially when such protest concerns theology and belief. Digital platforms such as Facebook and online blogs provide protestors the medium to disseminate and proliferate their ideology, on both the right and the left of the political spectrum. Drawing from the theoretical perspectives of Giorgio Agamben and Shoshana Felman, this study discusses how a network of Christian churches or church affiliated groups and individuals use the internet to counter-perform and protest against the LGBTQ community in Singapore. When such groups theatricalise their objections to any mass assembly of the LGBTQ community and their supporters, the uneasy relationship between theology, state governance, and society plays out in contested ways through offline and online assemblies. Observing the recent 2016 US presidential election and the dissemination of conservative ideology online, the Singapore case study shows a connection between the Christian theology underpinning US politics and the spread of these ideas across the Pacific Ocean through online gestures, tweets, web articles, and digital videos.

Introduction

This article looks at the function of digital platforms in relationship to the social-spatial arrangement of protest, especially when such protest concerns theology and belief. Digital channels such as Facebook and blogs provide protestors the medium to disseminate and proliferate their ideology, on both the right and the left of the political spectrum. Protests for and against the LGBTQ community in Singapore also unfold through a confluence of theatricality, religion, mediality, and online protest. In Singapore, for example, a network of Christian churches, church affiliated groups and individuals use the Internet to counter-perform against the LGBTQ community. Arguing that their *religious* definition of the nuclear family structure as involving only one man and one woman should also be *national* policy, these groups performatively exclude the LGBTQ community from public and religious spaces through speech acts and gestures performed on mainstream and social media. When such groups theatricalise their objections to any mass assembly of the LGBTQ community and their supporters in Singapore, the uneasy relationship between theology, state governance, and society plays out in contested ways through offline and online assemblies.

In this article, I will draw upon philosopher Giorgio Agamben's analysis of the theatrical implications of a Christian theology that spatially opposes the blessed to the damned. By engaging with the thirteen-century theologian Thomas Aquinas, Agamben points out that such a theological perspective aims to establish an eternal government through the production of a "spectacle of suffering" (Agamben 2012, 164). By creating a fourth wall, the "blessed" or the "saved" carves out an infernal hell separate from one's safe (and divine) space. This arrangement predicates a figurative proscenium stage where the saved can witness the suffering and punishment of the sinner on the other side. Moreover, Agamben describes the roles of "demons" and "angels" that maintain this oppositional order and its hierarchies. In that respect, this article will provide an understanding of how the digital medium mediates and stages religious belief, where particular figures of power performatively gesture one's sovereignty over others through online platforms. The Internet itself becomes Agamben's stage upon which the "spectacle of suffering" plays out, as religious conservatives work to actively exclude the LGBTQ community from the public sphere, both online and off.

Agamben's theological perspective echoes the governance and spatial arrangement of the LGBTQ community in Singapore. A hybrid theology mixed into a process of national self-discipline has emerged over recent years. This theology conforms to a heterosexual family structure as the societal norm, and digital platforms in fact provide the stage for prominent figures to execute speech acts that aim to maintain this heteronormativity. It is also through minimal yet highly charged gestures that the minority groups are often marked out as the other in the social fabric. Through my case studies of the Pink Dot movement in Singapore and the dropping of two productions before the start of The Necessary Stage's M1 Fringe Festival 2017, I will observe how theological or ideological spaces are imagined through the digital medium and subsequently contested in a digital space.

When online users employ digital tools to demarcate certain groups as posing a threat to the national-social fabric, the digital medium paradoxically opens up the space for both religious expression and exclusion. On the one hand, an anonymous actor (on behalf of a religious community or someone who believes he or she represents a widely accepted sense of morality) can freely comment, blog, post, share and

disseminate online information detrimental to another community. On the other hand, this actor's agency is tied to his or her own perceived sovereignty as an intermediary, who already conflates religious values with supposed societal and national values. Such a conflation of values may convince a religious actor that he or she has the moral right to exclude even discipline those who contradict his or her combined values.

Observing the recent 2016 US presidential election and the dissemination of conservative ideology online, I discover a connection between the Christian theology underpinning US politics and the spread of these ideas across the Pacific Ocean through online gestures, tweets, web articles, and digital videos. Reproduced wholesale, they collectively influence members of the public in Singapore to openly restrict and censor the LGBTQ movement. This article will examine the speech acts and tweets of US President Donald Trump and Vice-President Mike Pence as a way to connect their performative acts reproduced through digital media to the spread of Conservative Right ideology as it found its way to Singapore. Thus, I shall illuminate the specific spillages of their performative acts to the Singapore context. Broadly speaking, I observe how an individual conservative Christian has more influence (online) than a public assembly. I also argue that US politics and the underlying conservative right Christian discourse percolate into Singapore's public discourse through the functions on Facebook such as the 'share' button.

The Pink Dot Singapore Movement

Much like the rainbow colours which have become a worldwide representation for LGBTQ rights, the use of colour is one of the ways in which public debate on LGBTQ movements and gender politics play out in Singapore. Pink has become the symbolic colour to champion for a more inclusive society as it represents the merging of Singapore's national colours (red and white). This idea came about during Singapore's first Pink Dot rally on 16 May 2009, an annual event that advocates for the rights of the LGBTQ community. The campaign slogan was "RED + WHITE = PINK" in 2009. Since then, participants wear pink and gather at the Speaker's Corner in Hong Lim Park.¹ The number of people in attendance increases each year and this is the most visible development of the Pink Dot movement. This can be seen when aerial photographs of the annual event (from 2009 to 2016) are compared alongside each other to reveal an expanding pink 'dot' on an open green park. In 2017, however, changes were made to the Public Order Act rules on general assembly. Earlier in 2016, foreign companies were not permitted to sponsor or donate to the Pink Dot movement (Yuen 2016). This year, only Singapore Citizens and Permanent Residents were allowed to assemble at the Speakers' Corner. In response to this new ruling, the Pink Dot organisers issued a statement on 14 May 2017:

As organisers, we were reminded by the Singapore Police Force that with these changes, the law no longer distinguishes between participants and observers, and regards anyone who turns up to the Speakers' Corner in support of an event to be part of an assembly. ("Announcement on Speakers' Corner Restrictions for Pink Dot SG 2017" 2017)

Any violators of this law would result in the person and/or the Pink Dot organisers being found "guilty of an offence and shall be liable on conviction to a fine not exceeding \$10,000 or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 6 months or to both."² In response to this, Pink Dot posted on Facebook to urge all attendees to carry

their pink Singaporean identification cards with them when entering the marked out space in order to verify their identities. While at the beginning of the Pink Dot movement the colour pink symbolised inclusivity, it now separates the locals from the foreigners.

Kenneth Paul Tan notes that homosexuality may be seen as an import from the West. Yet Singapore “transplanted almost verbatim from Britain and shored up by Victorian Christian morality” its “colonially inherited laws that have criminalized gay sex until the present” (Tan 2016, 87).³ Following Tan, one can interpret press releases leading up to the Pink Dot event at the Speakers’ Corner as indirectly operating within what he and other scholars describe as a “moral panic framework” (85). Stanley Cohen’s much cited definition of this framework still applies to the current discussion:

Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or groups of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved (or more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. (Cohen 1972, 9)

I would like to offer a reading of the performative moments or what Cohen calls the “stylized fashion” that make spatial and gender politics visible. More significantly, protests are redistributed and extended to online spaces, where moral panic on one side of the opposition trigger responses from the other. Against the backdrop of state governance, where protests are only legal within the confines of the Speaker’s Corner in Hong Lim Park and protest organisers have to apply for a permit, Pink Dot often has to react to the authorities’ changes to the regulations. Pink Dot thus started a fund-raising campaign in response to the Ministry of Home Affairs’ rule. As of 11 June 2017, the campaign drew about a hundred and twenty local sponsors and exceeded the organisers’ target of S\$150,000 (Kok 2017). A new website called *Red Dot for Pink Dot* (<https://www.reddotforpinkdot.com/>) was also set up to list the local sponsors and continue the funding campaign. In addition, organisers encouraged people to follow the event online. As written on Pinkdot.sg, they would “be livestreaming the event proceedings over Facebook and there will be to-the-minute updates on our Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter platforms.” Where physical spaces are not available to protesters to assert their rights, they turn to online spaces to do so.

In her recent *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Judith Butler hints at the combination of bodily enactment (or bodily appearance) and ‘people’ who operate through virtual or digital networks. Her focus is, however, on the “plural and performative right to appear” where one “asserts and instates the body in the midst of the political field” (Butler 2015, 11). The Pink Dot rally can be accurately described as an assembly, where “bodies assemble” in a highly contained Hong Lim Park and exercise a plural and performative right to appear, delivering “a bodily demand for a more livable set of” legal, social and political conditions, “no longer afflicted by induced forms of precarity” (11). There is a potent force at work here. Plural performativity includes a redistributed body through which one’s speech act can be multiplied across a spectrum of spaces—a church building, a rally site, television, reposted and shared digital videos across a range of websites from online newspapers to Christian websites.

On the one hand, the online space provides nodes of interactions for a public assembly to extend their presence into the virtual realm, thereby expanding its support and social presence. On the other hand, the same medium can be resources for resistance and discipline, as was the case for Pink Dot and the M1 Fringe Festival in 2017. In some cases, “trolls”—those who come together on an ad hoc basis to abuse and heckle—exist entirely online where it is difficult to identify them yet alone determine their motivation for any abuse or support.⁴

As Pink Dot responded with their series of online acts leading up to the 1 July Pink Dot assembly at Hong Lim Park, other online groups carried out performative acts that had a direct effect on the production and sharing of space in Singapore. Facebook groups such as “LoveSingapore” (a page for a 100-strong network of churches) and “Singaporeans Defending Marriage and Family” (SDMF) staged their own online protests against pro-LGBTQ movements, specifically the Pink Dot annual rallies. For instance, the administrator of SDMF created an animation video to criticise the LGBTQ movement, focussing on section 377A of the penal code and arguing for the law not to be repealed (see Tan 2017). Moreover, posts on the Facebook page regularly consists of media articles from foreign news media such as FoxNews (USA) and Telegraph (UK), citing cases of pastors and religious leaders being arrested for their anti-LGBTQ messages. The page also cites the blog singaporeaffairs.wordpress.com, which often posts essays about and against the LGBTQ communities.

As a whole, both parties continue to stage their protests and concerns on the same platforms, such as Facebook public pages, Facebook status updates made public, and other social media platforms. However, after several years, they now risk perpetuating a binary opposition, now extended to the digital as they use the same apparatuses to speak to their audience. Nevertheless, the distribution of their messages is still unequal, where the conservative voices have so far done enough to influence the authorities to react and change the regulations and policing of space.

One of the most vocal opponents to the Pink Dot movement is Senior Pastor Lawrence Khong of Faith Community Baptist Church (FCBC). He is also the founder of Touch Community Services (TCS), a non-profit charity organisation, providing multiple services to various underprivileged communities in Singapore. He founded Gateway Entertainment as well, which in 2015 built a \$50 million arts hub. Called Gateway Theatre, this nine-storey building is now part of Gateway Entertainment’s operations. On weekdays, the venue is open for hire to arts groups. On weekends, FCBC holds their church services in the same theatre (Zaccheus 2015). This theatre space, in particular, represents FCBC and Khong’s complex confluence of space, where theatre and religion are housed in the same place.

Khong would also often cite divine intervention as the motivation behind his speech acts: “the church leadership began to sense God telling us that we should get involved in the arts and entertainment arena” (Toh 2013). This speech act legitimises his spillages of spatial practices, oscillating from the secular to the non-secular and concretised in the theatre building. Moreover, he is a magician and performs shows with his daughter, Priscilla Khong. As such, his multiple roles and ventures exemplify his amalgamation of religion, social work, commercial interests, and entertainment media.

In an open Facebook note, Khong writes, “I believe it is time for the Church to work with like-minded groups (like the Muslims) to register our opposition to the Pink Dot Event before it is too late” (Khong 2014). To counter-perform the LGBTQ

movement Khong aligns himself (including his church members and presumably a population of Singaporean Christians) with the Singapore Muslim community. “Belief” is performed here, where the speech act of “I believe” projects a plural performativity and religiosity in the public sphere:

We [my emphasis] must let our government know that, in allowing the Pink Dot Event to continue without restraint, they are more than tolerating the gay agenda. They are bordering on endorsing and emboldening the LGBT claim to gay rights. We must continue writing private letters to our Ministers. But we have come to the point where the Pink Dot Event is getting so unashamedly public and loud with their agenda that we can no longer just rely on private communication. (Khong 2014)

His note came as a call to join the “wear white” campaign, where his church and the LoveSingapore network of churches assembled “island-wide” on 28 and 29 June 2014 to protest against the LGBTQ community’s “gay agenda.” Khong called his campaign “We.Wear.White,” and staged his own assembly of members wearing white as a visible counterperformance to Pink Dot’s colour symbolism. Perhaps to register a moral high ground and supposed purity in unity (with other religious communities),⁵ Khong’s “we” suggests an act of inclusion but excludes those that do not conform to the heteronormative structure of Singaporean society.

As mentioned, Khong himself employs a mix of similar spatial practices—the practice of assembling people in places of worship or stadiums and across areas of community work, public entertainment and pulpit preaching. Nevertheless, he and his church members do not have to overcome the same state apparatuses that Pink Dot must in order to voice their theological opinion. Within the limits of a religious setting and the laws and regulations that govern non-profit organisations in Singapore, FCBC and its affiliated companies can cross from one function to another, all within the same space. It is, however, within that expanded space that a boundary is paradoxically reemphasised. As Kenneth Paul Tan points out, “moral panic...performs a Durkheimian boundary-defining function based on the perception of threats to a cherished way of life” and can “induce Singaporean patriotism in conditions of profound globalization” (100). Khong provokes a perceived collective nationalism but infuses it with Christian doctrine when he writes the following statements: “the family unit is the lifeblood of our nation” and “[t]hey cannot and should not meddle with our national values” (Khong 2014). Quoted in a mainstream newspaper, he states that his campaign to wear white is “a powerful statement of our belief” and “[t]he natural family is a universally accepted norm and a public good” (Zaccheus 2015). For Tan, the conservative set of onlookers casts the LGBTQ community as “folk devils” who are “quite capable of mobilizing against ‘mainstream’ society” in this “moral conflict” (Tan 2016, 97). They are considered “generally to be able to look after themselves, make use of social media, and almost reverse the moral panic to turn the Christian Right into the real folk devils” (101).

The above-mentioned media and their platforms often utilise theatrical elements to stage manage the public’s perspective. In the next section, I will further explore online protests’ connections to theatre and theatricality, and discuss how online presence is often preserved longer than the ephemeral theatrical performance. This effect has significant bearings to why and how protests in the form of speech acts (or tweets) can be efficacious online.

Is Theatre Safe?

In November 2016, the US Vice-President-Elect Mike Pence was greeted with boos at a performance of *Hamilton* in New York. This was followed by a message delivered by the cast members to Pence, urging him to uphold “American values...on behalf of us”:

Vice President-elect Pence, we welcome you, and we truly thank you for joining us here at *Hamilton: An American Musical*. We really do. We, sir, we are the diverse America who are alarmed and anxious that your new administration will not protect us, our planet, our children, our parents, or defend us and uphold our inalienable rights, sir. But we truly hope this show has inspired you to uphold our American values and to work on behalf of all of us, all of us. ... We truly thank you for sharing this show — this wonderful American story told by a diverse group of men, women, of different colors, creeds, and orientations. (CNN 2016)

Then, President-Elect Donald Trump responded to this incident with a tweet:

The Theater must always be a safe and special place. The cast of Hamilton was very rude last night to a very good man, Mike Pence. Apologize!
(Trump 2016)

Since then, massive protests against the new White House administration have taken more concrete forms, spreading across the country and across continents. Mike Pence responded to his reception by saying that the boos he faced were “what freedom sounds like” (CNN 2016). The two statements paint a precarious landscape, where single-liners and tweets can easily shape discourse surrounding the use, entry into, and governance of space. In responding to the workings of social space in relation of a digital tweet, the notion of performativity is worth revisiting in relation to speech acts carried out online.

In *The Scandal of The Speaking Body*, Shoshana Felman discusses Molière’s Don Juan alongside J. L. Austin’s theory of speech acts and shows the “specular structure of the meaning and reflexive capacities of language” (Felman 2003, 18). Furthermore, “like eroticism, theology in the Don Juan myth is played out exclusively on the stage of language” (19). For Felman, “the act of seduction is above all an inducer of belief.” Citing Molière’s *Don Juan*, Felman presents the illusory meaning-effect produced by Don Juan’s seduction, referring to a theological concept of belief (or the performative utterance of ‘I believe’):

DON JUAN: I have only your interest at heart, I beg you to believe me.

SGANARELLE: I assure you that his entire household would die for you...

MONSIEUR DIMANCHE: I believe it. [IV, iii]

CHARLOTTE: ... I would like nothing better in the world in the world than to believe you... Lord! I don’t know if you’re telling the truth or not, but you make people believe you. [II, ii] (19)

“I beg you to believe me” is not only to be read on a page but performed (on stage) as well. Here, I consider how there is a symbiotic relationship between the person who utters (“I believe”) and the audience who repeats the utterance (“I believe”). Underpinning those utterances, the listeners of Don Juan’s plea echo a theological belief. It is not so much the truth behind Don Juan’s statement that compels the believers to echo him but the maintenance of their faith, an assured reference to the virtue of Christian faith. Played “on the stage of language” as Felman calls it, if the listeners choose not believe in the Don Juan and his speech act it would mean to

disbelieve in the capacity of language to name a transitive truth: the truth of their own belief in God.

In the digital realm, where the machine and Twitter handle embody the typed statements, a performative act stages this “stage of language.” Projecting the person who types the tweet, an utterance becomes digital, forming lines of text that manipulate in others (some and not all) their own concepts of theological belief and faith. Trump, who ironically goes by the Twitter handle @realDonaldTrump, performs the figurehead while concealing the performativity of Twitter as a medium that disguises truth statements. The user behind a Twitter handle may be someone else altogether. Meanwhile, it publicizes a certain persona of the figurehead to a multitude of Twitter users. In this case, Trump’s public statements on Twitter make his sovereignty all the more persuasive and widespread when he is able to evoke likes and retweets and responses and echoes from his viewers and readers. In the case of his declaration that “Theater” is a safe space: “liking it” or tacitly believing in this statement means to accept that theatre is a space of consumption that is separated from politics and the federal government, and that is in no position to assess the character of a Vice-President. In a simple gesture, Trump was able to demarcate space, censoring ‘Theater’ to a consumer function. Words may not mean what is said/typed, but it can translate into actual efficacy, creating distance between those who believe him and those who do not. Following Felman, “belief, which he manipulates in others, is always a performance of language...is referential, capable of transitive reference” (19). In this case, Trump strategically echoes the language that his supporters use and connects to his audience. A Twitter’s tweet substitutes a speech act and mediates his ideology; it can also incorporate a video recording of a speech act. Thus, a tweet, as a transitive act and equally a performance of language, can directly influence a person through a combination of transitive references—Trump’s tweet reproduced on news broadcast, then retweeted on the news channel’s Twitter handle, and so on.

French philosopher Henri Lefebvre’s uses of “theatre” in his seminal work *The Production of Space* provides an complimentary application of theatricality to Felman’s theory of speech act, explicating how spaces can overlap through look, word, or gesture:

The playful aspect of space escapes it, and only emerges in play itself (by definition), and in irony and humour. Objects serve as markers for rhythms, as reference points, as centres. Their fixedness, however, is only relative. Distances here may be abolished by look, word or gesture; they may equally well be exaggerated thereby. Distantiation alternates with convergence, absence with presence, concealment with revelation, reality with appearance – and all overlap in a theatre of reciprocal implication and explication where the action halts only during sleep. (Lefebvre 1991, 211)

As the above has shown, the US President could assert the special status of his authority because he creates a particular theatrical space where the individual and the public, mass media and personal online platforms, overlap. By bypassing the mass media and communicating (through his tweets and selective media platforms) to his supporters, he was able to ‘abolish distances’ by a tweet. Millions of followers of @realDonaldTrump subscribe to his tweets, though it is also likely that Twitter users follow the account in order to receive his tweets on their Twitter feeds and they are not truly his supporters. With each tweet, nevertheless, the individual @realDonaldTrump can distribute his message to many, and the many can mark their support through a

like, their own tweets that include “@realDonaldTrump,” or a retweet with their personalised message.

Though Lefebvre was not referring to Twitter when he wrote his commentary, he is hauntingly close in describing how a digital presence substitutes President Trump the person. The digital platform similarly performs a “theatre of reciprocal implication and explication,” where Christian belief is implied and evoked in this digital theatre by President Trump and his followers—the constant reminders that the President was elected by a majority, the manifestations of his supporters’ belief in Trump’s campaign message to “Make America Great Again,” tweets of support when he signs an executive order, and a defence of his policies. An online platform, especially Twitter, performs acts of belief that only halt during sleep. It is a platform that allows millions to declare their faith and belief in the President but also preserves the distance between him and his followers such that @realDonaldTrump performs an abstraction of the person, disseminating himself into a multiplied yet immediate presence to be taken up by individuals.

At the same time, theatre was marked as a centre in his online tweet-act, where he could insist on Pence’s role as an audience member, temporarily without agency except that of a passive audience. But the reverse is also true: the actor loses agency when the scope and space of one’s resistance are demarcated as theatrical space, without being able to implicate the larger society.

In an MSNBC live televised interview with the US Vice President Pence, the confluence of religious discourse, faith and belief, and politics came to the fore in a fashion that would exemplify Felman’s application of performativity:

Stephanie Ruhle: Sir...before we get to those politics, you have said that you are a Christian, a Conservative and a Republican, in that order. Were your Christian values not rocked on Saturday [referring to the leaked recording of Trump’s lewd comments on women], and if they were, today, wouldn’t it appear that you’re putting your political views, your party above your faith?

Mike Pence: Well, well, thanks, thanks for reflecting on my faith... I’m always happy to have people note that in my life and I’m humbled by it. My faith teaches two things. Number one is, is we try to live up to a godly standard in our life. And we speak truth when people, when people don’t reflect that. But secondly, the other part of my faith is grace. I believe in redemption. I believe in second chances. And I... I think Donald Trump in expressing genuine contrition and remorse, apologising not only to his family but to the American people for the words that he used. I think that in saying that he is truly embarrassed about all of it on national television last night, you know, merits grace. I believe er, I believe in er, I believe in redemption and I believe the American people believe in grace and that’s the central piece of my faith.

Ruhle: Is grabbing a vagina or using your power to kiss a woman whether she wants it or not an act of grace?

Pence: Well, Donald Trump made it clear that those were words, only words last night that he didn’t engage in any of that behaviour and I believe him. But look, but I understand the media’s focus on this. I understand your focus on it. But I’m telling you I’m heading to North Carolina this morning, I was in

Rhode Island Saturday night, this is not where the American people are focused. (“Mike Pence: ‘I believe in redemption’” 2016)

Pence, in evoking his faith and carrying out the performative speech act of “I believe” in uncertain repetition, borrowed divine power (and forgiveness) while legitimising the separation of personal character from political authority. At the same time, he cast the media as the opposite side, shifting his attention to the “American people” whose focus had a higher purpose. By appealing to the Christian belief of forgiveness or more specifically redemption, Pence was also able to shift from the personal to the national. For Pence and the American people he met, Trump represented the authority who would “Make America Great Again” and each utterance from Trump about his subsequent electoral victory assumed an election to this authority. Christianity, in that instance, fused with politics thereby creating an abstract space for sovereign power to negotiate with belief, divine grace, God’s will, and the will of the American people. Pence, being the actor surrogate for the President elect, emboldened his own staging of Trump’s redemption and continued legitimacy by the repetition of “I believe” till, in Pierre Bourdieu’s terms, he could present to the media his version of a “miracle of predestination”:

“[T]he correspondence between several relatively autonomous spaces—the space of the producers (playwrights and actors), the space of the critics (and through them the space of the daily and weekly press), and the space of the audiences and readerships (i.e., the space of the dominant class), is so perfect, so necessary and yet so unforeseeable that every actor can experience his encounter with the object of his preference as a miracle of predestination.” (Bourdieu 1984, 234)

Bourdieu’s distinction of spaces echoes Judith Butler’s own elaboration on how the public sphere manages and designates bodily appearance in the public space:

These forms of embodied and plural performativity ... are important components of any understanding of “the people” even as they are necessarily partial. Not everyone can appear in a bodily form, and many of those who cannot appear, who are constrained from appearing or who operate through virtual or digital networks, are also part of the “the people,” defined precisely by being constrained from making a specific bodily appearance in public space, which compels us to reconsider the restrictive ways “the public sphere” has been uncritically posited by those who assume full access and rights of appearance on a designated platform. (Butler 2015, 8)

Pence virtually evoked on the news media a gathering of forgiving (Christian) people able to look beyond a character transgression. At the same time, they made a specific bodily appearance in rallies and online platforms, excluding all others who did not operate within that specific religious-political sphere. I am however hesitant to focus on a plural performativity strictly produced through bodily appearances in assembly. As mentioned, the theatrical elements assembled through performance are potent in managing bodies, that is, heterosexuals against homosexuals. When church pastors initiate their own “I believe” statements online, and followed up with the donning of white costumes to purge the “pinkness” of what is already a blurring of identities, they attempt to negate the other.

Here, I shift from the U.S. back to Singapore, where Senior Pastor Lawrence Khong has amassed his own right within the Christian community to perform protests

against the LGBTQ community. In other words, his performance as a pastor and as the leader of this countermovement against Pink Dot is efficacious insofar as there is a perpetual othering of homosexual space, both physical and digital. It is then telling that the digital tools, private and public letters to Singapore ministers or governmental bodies, and social platforms that Khong and church members utilised share precisely the same digital stage as Pink Dot.

Within and beyond the staged assemblies, many of the performances of protest are carried out online. In that respect, Khong delineates and prohibits behaviour and yet he and others enjoy relative freedom to inhabit the shared space that is at once national, digital and public. Again, as is the case with President Trump, certain figures protest online by actively engaging with the digital apparatus. At the same time, they conceal their privileged position over others, failing to acknowledge that their ability to protest is precisely because they enjoy more mobility and visibility than others through their successful use of digital and entertainment media.

Theatre and Protest

The issue becomes all the more complex when theatre is implicated in this tussle for spatial representation in Singapore. What is perplexing in the case of Khong and Gateway Entertainment's building of an actual theatre space is their invitation to Singapore's theatre and art groups to produce "Made-In-Singapore works" (see "About Gateway Theatre" at <https://theatre.gateway.sg/about/about-gateway-theatre>) at its theatre venue. Despite the apparent conflict against Pink Dot, Khong and FCBC's business venture in the shape of a theatre venue aims to develop "an appreciation of the arts within the heartlands of Bukit Merah and in Singapore." There are some theatre and art groups that are vocal in their support for the LGBTQ community. It is not clear yet which theatre companies will eventually hire Gateway Theatre's space for performances but in this case, theatre occupies the blurred place where representations negotiate, clash, contradict or loosen their meanings.

In other cases, theatre represents the obvious site to censor and restrict. More recently, a posting on "Singaporeans Defending Marriage and Family" challenged the programming of the M1 Fringe Festival 2017 for including two theatre productions, "Naked Ladies" by Thea Fitz-James and "Undressing Room" by Ming Poon. In a blog post by an anonymous author, theatre was deemed an unsafe space:

The above-mentioned "shows" depicting sex in various themes are highly questionable. Cloaking them as forms of "art" does nothing to lessen the fact that they are actually pornographic. (@Singapore Affairs 2016)

His or her anonymity foreclosed any dialogue, prompting the director of the festival to reach out to the author.⁶ Instead of initiating a discussion, subsequent letters and responses both on social media and in the mainstream media played out the moral conflict. At the end of the anonymous letter, the writer cited the US presidential election as an impetus for this protest against theatre:

In other words, they have lost touch with the silent majority that had enough of the constant attack on their conservative and profamily beliefs, turning the prediction by mainstream media (or rather lame stream media) of a Hilary [sic] Clinton victory on its head. (@Singapore Affairs 2016)

This invocation of a "silent majority" is somewhat misleading. As anonymous complaints and later named letters appeared on mainstream papers, these protests

were not silent.⁷ In the immediate aftermath of the anonymous complaint online, the licensing board Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA) ruled that the shows “exceeded the R18 rating under the Arts Entertainment Classification Code (AECC) and cannot be shown here in their current form” (Nanda 2016). The shows were eventually removed from the programme. Even after the IMDA statement, a commentator continued to rebuke the festival for its programming in an open letter to *Today*:

Unfortunately, a number of shows in the coming M1 Fringe Festival have disguised themselves as art, with the veneer of challenging existing ideals of sexuality, while indiscriminately promoting lewd content. Such art, disguised as being provocative, glorifies perversity instead. (Tam 2016)

Athenaide Dallett (1996) suggests that theatre riots in playhouses in the 20th century were provoked by a breach of the contract between performers and audience. In this instance, a theatre space is no longer deemed as a space for theatre performance but supposedly encroaches into the spheres of religion and society. The cancelled show of dancer and performance artist Ming Phoon’s “Undressing Room” at the M1 Fringe Festival repeats a misunderstanding of the social contract between a performer and an audience member. In Phoon’s act, each audience member would perform with him in a private space that could last up to an hour, depending on how long the audience member wishes to be in the room with him. Yet because of the cancellation, no one could participate in this performance. For a non-audience member to argue against Ming Phoon’s show is to undermine the paid contract between an audience member and the performer. This shared space would have been intimately conceived and supported by a mutual understanding of that contract. On the one hand, this regulatory act disregards the intimacy such a form of theatre requires and hence the bodily dialogue that is only possible in a controlled and paid space. On the other hand, it illustrates the spillages between theatre and the public sphere, wherein a conflict may occur.

Theatre as a safe physical space is challenged by a history of violence and riots, sometimes inside theatre buildings. A closer look at contemporary theatre spaces would show how prevailing structures (such as a lack of disabled access) might prohibit sections of society to be part of the theatre. Theatre scholar Baz Kershaw argues that theatre is shaped by the ruling ideologies of society and often practices certain rules to impose its own superstructure. An actual theatre building is “a kind of social engine that helps to drive an unfair system of privilege” and achieves this “through ensnaring every kind of audience in a web of mostly unacknowledged values, tacit commitments to forces that are beyond their control, and mechanisms of exclusion that ensure that most people stay away” (Kershaw 1999, 31).

In 19th Century France, for example, theatres would hire *claqueurs* (literally “clappers”) to influence audience reception. Prompters in boxes provided cues and lines for actors and opera singers. In more contemporary manifestations, surrogates appear on the news media to act as narrators, prompters and *claqueurs* in support of a sovereign discourse. In a similar performative way, theatrical surrogates employed by a sovereign or a prominent religious figure resemble the centuries-old practice of performers carrying out “propagandist function, advocating their patrons’ ideological interests” (White 1993, 1).⁸ These religious functions have since found new avenues across websites, where staged assemblies are reproduced online. Trump’s tweets lead his supporters to believe in his presidential authority and give the impression that he is

easily reached and has no secrets. Similarly, Khong's posts on Facebook lead his congregants to believe that they somehow represent a moral majority. Those digital acts then proceed to be performatively enforced and physicalized into live rallies—as evidence of support; bodies that matter. Through mass media, a tweet or a Facebook post extends a body's reach in propagating one's own religious ideology.

Hence, there is an inherent contradiction in the production of space when the material stage spills onto online social media, and vice versa. The specific level of media performance threatening physical spaces such as public assemblies engages, as mentioned earlier, a “spectacle of suffering.” The forces of established norms, or what pro-family and pro-life groups in Singapore called “traditional values,” are championed in order to “witness the punishments of the damned” (Agamben 2011,164). To think in Agamben's terms, the damned, the “folk devils,” and the supposed deviants of society “will be the indefectible ministers and eternal executioners of divine justice” while being punished by this divine justice. From the perspective of a particular interpretation of Christian theology, Agamben aptly describes a similar spatial paradigm at work:

[T]he idea of eternal government (which is the paradigm of modern politics) is truly infernal... the blessed and the angels with whom they contemplate it are not allowed to feel compassion before this atrocious spectacle but enjoyment, insofar as the punishment of the damned is the expression of the eternal order of divine justice. (164)

Therein lies the contradiction: for the “blessed” and the “saved,” their salvation is predicated on an abstract space absolute in its power to create an opposite spectacle of suffering, where the blessed could be set apart from the hellish drama. They are nevertheless implicated in this abstraction of space when they argue for their right to appear (in heaven or in a nation). They must posit a hell where alongside the angels and worldly powers, they jointly govern it and derive their power through this demarcation of space. For Agamben, “the intercourse between the angels and the worldly powers is more intimate and essential, and derives, first, from the fact that, insofar as they are figures of the divine government of the world, they are immediately also the ‘princes of this world’” (165). In concrete terms, certain religious leaders establish their authority over people by evoking abstract ideas of nation and heaven, and through the performative speech of “I believe.” Their surrogates and *claqueurs* perpetuate this narrative, producing a spatial spectacle in which one side is condemned but co-inhabits the space with the other side that represents everlasting glory. In more positive terms, however, there are ways to critique space so as to expose the oppressive strategies that curse the sharing of that common space.

Although those who initiated the censorship of theatre shows did not exercise the same performative right to appear bodily, and in spite of anonymity, they still demanded a right to a voice, and thus, space. I emphasise the so-called “silent majority” (who may not necessarily represent a numerical majority) who react not by an occupation of physical spaces but by their religious association (to their churches) and citizen power (in mainstream media). By encouraging the public to send letters to ministers or authorities, they could potentially censor a theatre performance (see Nanda 2016). Such acts unfold through a confluence of theatricality, religion, mediality and online protest.

I focus on these cases so as to illustrate the transitive nature of utterances (Felman) when performed across different forms of media. Often performed in very

simple gestures and speech acts on social media, theological belief can be intricately interwoven to the performativity of such statements or acts in a digital platform. Religious meaning underpins the efficacy of the spatial practice, where these acts are performed precisely because they can simultaneously demarcate space as well as create a privileged opposition. I also observed, as mentioned, the spillages of US politics to Singapore on social media through Facebook's "Share" function point to an overarching trend of religious oppression mediated online.⁹ Digital platforms provide a quick and effective avenue to import verbatim conservative ideologies from overseas. The effect, however, is that such undiscerning adoption of those ideas risks causing more conflicts in society. More significantly, theatre now becomes the site that onlookers and non-theatre-goers look to discipline through social media.

Conclusion: Toward a Performative Theory for Digital Protests

Hegemonic restriction can often be performed in very simple gestures and speech acts on social media. The public Facebook page of "Singaporeans Defending Marriage and Family" often cites from *Lifesitenews.com* for its religious justifications on pro-life values. These spillages of US politics to Singapore on social media through Facebook's "share" function point to the borrowing of foreign politics and conservative ideologies that are constantly mediated online. Without bodily appearance, online protests carried out by individuals have sometimes more performative efficacy in restricting bodies that do assemble. Even though an individual performs the online speech act alone, he or she gestures for and to a virtual assembly of people willing to "like" and support this gesture.

While Pink Dot can and has to continually be creative to resist societal delineation, local laws are still open to revisions. Felman provides the tools to unpack the interwoven nature of speech acts that hold religious meaning, especially when theology influences state control. At the same time, these tools are tweaked in this article to elaborate on the function of digital platforms in disseminating and translating speech acts into digital format. This also includes the blurring of theatre spaces with digital ones. The digital blurs spatial boundaries when an act can be reproduced across a range of media channels. This extends to the privileged position of certain charismatic social media users who carry out these acts with relative ease. Entangled with notions of truth, a speech act can also embody fictive, even imagined, truths. To be certain, a speech act in the combined contexts of Pink Dot and the M1 Fringe Festival delineates space, where supposed socially abhorrent behavior and deviance take one side, and heteronormative behavior is protected within an already fragmented social fabric. In what journalists and scholars are calling a "post-truth" era, the critical strategies offered by Felman highlight the theatrical elements of speech acts vis-à-vis the context in which they are uttered. In this case, digital platforms provide an expanded set of tools that can shape and manipulate perception and protest behaviour. Particular to speech acts carried out by religious groups and leaders, those acts gained what Mark Lilla (2007) might call, "theotropic" meaning, where we yearn "to connect our mundane lives, in some ways, to the beyond" (315). As our digital activities and online acts become increasingly mundane, counter protests carried out by church members act as supposed divine interventions. They begin when there is a lure to mix religion with politics, as the means to connect to Christian truth whilst being citizens (of

Singapore). In the last words of Felman's *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*, she writes that,

Modern Don Juans, they know that truth is only an act. That is why they subvert truth and do not promise it, but promise themselves to it. Never considering their own answers to be satisfying, they remain the scandalous authors of the infelicity that never ceases to make history. (111)

Felman's ending remark points out that promises and claims of belief often subvert the truth. As such claims publicly spread through the Internet, they also co-author Singaporean society as one that excludes more than it includes. If such actors can acknowledge that our mundane lives are shared unequally between the digital and the national, religion would not be conflated with the politics of bigotry. Instead, protests digitally and theatrically performed would reveal the fragmentation of society.

Notes

¹ Located within Hong Lim Park is the "Speaker's Corner" where Singapore citizens may demonstrate, hold exhibitions, performances and rallies. The area was launched on 1 September 2000 as a "free speech area" where speaking events could be held without the need to apply for a licence under the Public Entertainments and Meetings Act (Cap. 257, 2001 Rev. Ed.) ("PEMA"). However, speakers have to register their intention to speak at the venue with a police officer at the Kreta Ayer Neighbourhood Police Post (located next to it) any time within 30 days before the event. It is a highly conflated space of representation, where the Speakers' Corner is concurrently under the jurisdiction of the Singapore Police Force (under the Ministry of Home Affairs), the Ministry of Communications and Information, and the National Parks Board, respectively regulated under the Parks and Trees Regulations ([Cap. 216, Rg. 1, 2006 Rev. Ed.](#)), the Public Entertainments and Meetings (Speakers' Corner) (Exemption) (No. 2) Order 2011 ([S 493/2011](#)) (issued under the PEMA) and the Public Order (Unrestricted Area) (No. 2) Order 2011 ([S 494/2011](#)) (issued under the Public Order Act 2009 (No. 15 of 2009) ("POA")).

² You may view the online document of the Public Order Act in its entirety here: <http://bit.ly/2qeAcot>.

³ Tan is referring to the specific section 377A ([Cap. 224, 2008 Rev. Ed.](#)) in Singapore's penal code, where it states that: "Any male person who, in public or private, commits, or abets the commission of, or procures or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of, any act of gross indecency with another male person, shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to 2 years."

⁴ Beyond the religious context, online harassment and abuse are prevalent in other contexts such as video gaming. There is a growing body of literature on how digital platforms contribute towards online abuse and scholars often cite the "Gamergate" controversy which began with online viral campaign against female game developers such as Zoë Quinn and Brianna Wu, as well as feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian. See Salter's (2017) "From geek masculinity to Gamergate: the technological rationality of online abuse" and Massanari's (2015) "#Gamergate and The Fapping: How Reddit's algorithm, governance, and culture support toxic technocultures." The latter, in particular, reveals the nature of Reddit.com as a "hub for anti-feminist activism" and how the platform and similar imageboards (4chan) implicitly support such movements

by masking the identities of Gamergate supporters who anonymously post false accusations or launch smear campaigns on these platforms with little accountability.

⁵ One of the leaders of the “We.Wear.White” movement, a senior pastor of Faith Community Baptist Church in Singapore was quoted for saying: “We will wear white until the pink is gone.” See Kintan Andanari and Yi Shu Ng. 2015. (8 March 2017). See as well the news report, “Christians to don white for services as Hong Lim Park hosts Pink Dot” (*The Straits Times* June 12, 2015).

⁶ See the news report, “M1 Fringe Festival draws protests online,” November 24, 2016, for a summary of the protests against the theatre festival.

⁷ This invocation of the “silent majority” somewhat illustrates Jean Baudrillard’s assertion that “this silence [of the majority or the masses] is paradoxical—it isn’t a silence which does not speak, it is a silence that refuses to be spoken for in its name...far from being a form of alienation, it is an absolute weapon” (Baudrillard 2007, 49). However, the question still remains: who wields this weapon? In the context of a speech act – most exemplified in President Richard Nixon’s 1969 speech to turn attention away from the anti-war protestors: “the great silent majority of my fellow Americans—I ask for your support” (quoted from watergate.info) – one can still say to represent the silent majority. It is precisely because the majority in Singapore is a surveyed referent (see Baudrillard 2007, 48) that the “silent majority” continues to be invoked in order to make claims of representation. In fact, in Singapore, the mainstream media play a part in announcing the vote share of the incumbent party, which in the last elections in 2015 had 69.9% of the votes. This invocation of a silent majority, articulated in percentages and numbers, lends itself to political power. The more active this power is wielded, the more secure it is.

⁸ See Paul Whitfield White’s *Theatre and Reformation* (1993) for a historical discussion of the relationship between England’s early Protestants and the theatre, stressing the roles of patronage and propaganda in shaping Protestant belief and culture (xiii).

⁹ See for example the public Facebook page of “Singaporeans Defending Marriage and Family” that often cites from *Lifesitenews.com* for its religious justifications on pro-life values. Available at <https://www.facebook.com/FamilyFirstForSingapore/>.

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