The Case for Cancel Culture: How This Democratic Tool Liberates Us All

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Ernest Owens unabashedly takes on critics of cancel culture in The Case for Cancel Culture. In it, Owens argues that vilifying cancel culture unites figures as disparate as Donald J. Trump, Bill Maher, Candace Owens, and Noam Chomsky because all of them have taken strong, even vehement, positions against the practice in recent years. The crux of this book centers on the fact that what many call cancel culture does not actually partake of a process that Owens describes as a fundamentally democratic practice of fighting injustice by exposing and amplifying instances of wrongdoing—and by exposing those who are committing acts of injustice. He writes, “Frequently, people who are being canceled will claim they are being bullied. And some who bully may claim they are canceling. Bullying is rooted in causing deliberate harm, nothing more. Cancel culture is rooted in causing transformative change—something more is being demanded.”

Owens meticulously and engagingly traces the “something more” throughout this significant treatise that considers all aspects of cancel culture with thoroughly-sourced, easy-to-read prose.

Indeed, cancel culture cannot be confused with bullying after reading this timely offering from Owens. He is a journalist, cultural critic, and CEO and he uses all his ethos to build his “case for cancel culture.” In the introduction, Owens traces the popular origins of the term to a December 2014 episode of VH1’s Love & Hip Hop in which one character “dismisses” the other with the phrase, “You’re canceled.” Owens argues, “After that, Black Twitter couldn’t get enough of the phrase.” (Rosado, from Love & Hip Hop, did note that he remembered the phrase from the film

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89 Ibid., 5.
90 Ibid., 6.
*New Jack City,* but Owens rightly maintains that the phrase became the cultural phenomenon it is now because of Rosado’s utterance of the phrase). This detailed exploration of the origins of the term reminds us that like the term *woke* and countless other aspects of mainstream culture, cancel culture is appropriated from Black cultural spaces and then misappropriated and used to punish the very Black culture from which it originated. This is particularly apparent in the chapter “Not All Cancellations Are the Same,” when Owens traces the far-harder and longer-lasting damage done to the careers and to the lives of women, especially to Black women such as Anita Hill, who have been “canceled” by both conservative and liberal factions when compared what happens to the lives and careers of white men who are canceled.

Owens maintains throughout the work that cancel culture has not only been present in our cultural history, albeit under different names, but it has been a foundational tool of the marginalized who have no other options left for protest. The Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Stonewall Riots, and the 1960s counterculture movements are harbingers of cancel culture protests such as the Me Too movement, the March for Our Lives, Black Lives Matter, and a host of other protest and pro-justice movements from roughly 2015 until now. Indeed, the scope of this book can work against its message in two fashions—neither of them has an editorial solution, but they exist nevertheless. Owens simply overloads readers with examples of past and present instances of cancelling as a generative and successful form of protest and mechanism for positive social change. That there is so much evidence in favor of the legitimacy of cancel culture that Owens certainly brings his message full-circle. Similarly, reading example after example of cancellations in our culture shines a harsh light on how much work we need to do to bring about significant and lasting change; Owens remind us that there are many bad faith actors who wield enormous power. These aspects of the writing, despite moments of humor in the text, make it a difficult book to read quickly.
And, in the end, perhaps a book full of the worst moments of our collective history deserves a considered, slower reading. The penultimate chapter “Cancel-Cry Me a River” carefully describes the many popular cultural and scholarly arguments against cancel culture. Owens concisely argues successfully each of these criticisms, but makes one of the most impactful statements of the entire book, as he ends the chapter, “Too many critics of cancel culture spend more time worrying about the offender being canceled than asking why such a cancellation was made in the first place.”91 Owens forces us to consider why so many knee-jerk reactions against cancel culture exist, when so little reflection is spent on the actions that cause people to be canceled. We owe it to the historical and contemporary protests that use cancel culture to consider Owens’s trenchant arguments that cancel culture is “democracy unchained.”92

91 Ibid., 209.
92 Ibid., 212.