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Book Review

“Disrupt or die.” (Owens 23) This is the rallying call of technology ideology, and the antithesis of what Trevor Owens believes should be the future of cultural memory work in his work *After Disruption: A Future for Cultural Memory.* Drawing from a wide and diverse range of scholarly sources and voices in social justice, Owens makes his case against the disruptive, upwards growth oriented energy of the tech sphere, and for a radical re-alignment with the values that shape the foundation of memory work. This disruption, he argues, is not something that will just end, and allow everyone to go back to normal. The challenge is clear: cultural memory workers must take hold of the direction of their future, now, while they still can. The field must diverge from the growth oriented, ever grasping and greedy ideologies of technology and business and move onto a new pathway. One which centers on the needs and voices of the marginalized who have been historically oppressed and whose oppression memory institutions have not only looked away from, but had a hand in. Owens urges us to work towards a future that is equitable and sustainable for all. In doing so, he has written a compelling call to action, revealing and challenging the forces of disruption with a rich body of evidence and supportive text, and, with equal rigor and density, points the reader towards a new way forward, by shifting our ways of thinking, and what we base our actions on in the everyday. Owens draws on the unique connection memory workers have to the past, to build a more hopeful future.

Owens sets the scene in chapter one, “Cultural Memory and the Future,” with a central argument: memory workers need to take back control of the future of cultural memory from the tech and business world. He begins laying the groundwork by challenging our assumptions about what the future can look like - assumptions that have been largely shaped by tech sector visionaries who operate on disruptive ideologies. Here, Owens asks an important question, “whose imagined future” are we working towards? (Owens 3) He juxtaposes the tech sector’s ideas of a “block-chain enabled colonization of space” (Owens 4) to more serious scholarship on the dismal state of our future as things are. Additionally, he challenges that our very ideas of what memory is has been twisted by the computational ideas and the language of “storage” and “data” (Owens 11-12) - inert, to be optimized and capitalized upon, rather than lived and enacted, deserving of care and stewardship. Memory, in Owens estimation, is lived and enacted, and that future thinking always includes “notions of memory as well.” (Owens 13)

In chapter two, “What Disruption Wants,” Owens tackles the ideologies of disruption. What we’ve come to understand as “disruption” - often steeped in the language of innovation and change - actually finds its roots in feminist critical race theory, as expressed by humanities scholars Dorothy Kim and Jesse Stommel in the introductory chapter of their book, which Owens makes reference to, *Disrupting the Digital Humanities*. This full, embodied justice practice has had all of its care and humanity stripped back, until something toxic remains. This new iteration of disruption is rooted in fear, that “disrupt or die”(Owens 23) mentality that urges forward motion. Owens says, “[t]his rhetoric is about making us afraid and pushing us to believe that Silicon Valley has the secrets to how we address the fear of being made obsolete or being replaced.” (Owens 22) If we don’t keep up, we will crash and burn, it tells us. We will fail. What started as a rebellious, anti-establishment movement has mutated into the driving force behind platform monopolies and corporations that have ironically become the very thing that they touted themselves as replacing. These corporate tech giants are encroaching on the field of memory work, divorcing the labor from experts in the field with consultants and higher skill floors, and funneling money and gainful employment into their own hands to mete out at meager rates. Rather than roll over, Owens suggests the cultivation of skill and technical knowledge within cultural memory institutions, forming connections within and between institutions, and taking steps to pull away from the tech-centric, business driven frameworks that have dominated the conversation.

Chapter three, “Where Data Drives,” begins with a bold assertion: data is not objective, and the idea of “raw data” is a myth. Drawing on scholarly work such as Jerry Z. Muller’s *The Tyranny of Metrics* and critiquing works such as John E. Doerr’s *Measure What Matters: How Google, Bono, and the Gates Foundation Rock the World with OKRs*, Owens paints a detailed picture of the ways in which data driven thinking harms those who fall outside of the scope of measured data. Our societal obsession with metrics as the end all be all depends on the false perception of the objectivity of statistical data, of numbers. But data is shaped by the people asking the questions and the systems collecting it. (Owens 54) This data-centric mindset, particularly in business schools, has led us to prioritize numbers and metrics at the expense of more meaningful, nuanced understandings of the world. Owens uses YouTube’s shift to “watch time” as the ultimate metric for success as a prime example of how an over-reliance on data can have devastating effects on the content within (Owens 51). This watch time metric has driven higher the amount of harmful content in the name of more views, skewing the idea of what really “matters.” Owens draws on feminist data perspectives, as from Catherine D’Ignazio and Lauren F. Klein’s seven principles of *Data Feminism*, to make the argument that we need to combat this - by calling out the irrationality of data, centering the expertise of those directly affected, and pushing back on the easy to measure goals and towards the meaningful ones, qualitative, human centered ones. (Owens 72)

In chapter four, “Why Memory Doesn’t Work,” Owens delves into the ways social media, personal branding, and the “do what you love” mindset undermine memory workers. These ideas feed into a dishonest narrative that grinding away for little to no pay for prolonged periods of time will end in a permanent job, rewarding your passion. Owens critiques this, drawing on personal work experience as a tech evangelist, and Fobazi Ettarh’s concept of “vocational awe” - the reverence held towards positions in the field of cultural memory that seem “noble” and moral, which leads to accepting burnout, lower pay, and unstable work environments. He builds on the idea of creating “good jobs” (Owens 99) - a phrase borrowed from organizational theory scholar Zaynep Ton - which hold space for balance, self care, and mental clarity. Good jobs “come with boundaries,” (Owens 102) they offer less, recognize that “our lives and worlds exist beyond the boundaries of our work,” (Owens 103) and are designed to be permanent and have slack. Doing less, namely prioritizing bandwidth and slack over hustle, can actually help memory workers do more in the long run by creating more space for meaningful, effective work.

The latter half of Owens’ work shifts from unpacking the issues, to laying out a clear path forward, into a healing future. In the beginning of chapter five, he cites Mierle Laderman Ukeles concepts of the “death instinct” - which promotes separation and individuality - and the “life instinct” - which seeks unification, equilibrium, and perpetuation. (Owens 114-115) These two opposing states are echoed in the very structure of Owens’ work, the first half fleshing out the death instinct at the reins of our current state, and the latter half, where Owens argues that for cultural memory to thrive, we must embrace the life instinct, moving away from the extractive, individualistic models that dominate our current systems and into one that focuses on balance, sustainability, and interdependence. The three driving forces for that model are maintenance, care, and repair.

The focal point of chapter five is Owens' proposal that memory workers develop “The Maintenance Mindset.” This framework is derived from Lee Vinsel and Andrew Russell’s work on innovation and maintenance, *The Innovation Delusion: How Our Obsession with the New Has Disrupted the Work That Matters Most*. In building out this concept, Owens pulls on feminist theory and sustainable practice, shaping them to fit his more “technical or engineering concept[s]” of maintenance. (Owens 115) The first big player in this chapter is Ukeles feminist work, *Maintenance Art Manifesto*, which, in part, describes a proposed living art exhibition called *Care*. Owens begins this chapter by describing in detail the three stages of the exhibit, “personal, general, and Earth maintenance,” (Ukeles, Owens 113) using these three stages as an echo of the different areas which must be maintained.

Owens fleshes out these ideas, drawing from indigenous frameworks, in particular the Haudenosaunee Confederacy’s “seventh generation” thinking. This value “takes into consideration those who are not yet born but who will inherit the world.” (Haudenosaunee Confederacy, Owens 128) Pulling from these and more indigenous values, as well as modern sustainability initiatives, Owens renders a mindset that prioritizes the long term, reliability metrics, and stewardship over short term, rapid growth – perpetuation, as the life instinct calls for. Owens reminds us that, rather than scalability or optimization, memory work is most concerned with the ongoing maintenance and usability of culture (Owens 129). In fact, Owens argues that this shift has already begun in the tech scene, as the exponential rates of growth become more and more untenable. The maintenance mindset enables memory workers - with jobs accordingly designed around their maintenance as well - to maintain and guide their institutions into infrastructures that support and draw out the best in each other and the community. Owens gives readers a diverse and grounded bed of values with which to center and guide their own work, and develop their own maintenance mindset.

Chapter six, “Concentric Circles of Care,” is Owens building on feminist ethics of care, discussing how memory work should center care, for both the community and those within institutions. This basis of practice draws on disability justice work and indigenous concepts of interconnectedness, shifting the basis of the work from from growth and product to equilibrium and care. This allows memory workers to find and address where the greatest need for care is. Owens says, “[t]his reorientation of our work requires us to trace and map concentric circles out from the objects of memory in collections into various people’s lives.” (Owens 137)

Drawing from works such as Robin Wall Kimmer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*, and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha’s *Care Work: Dreaming of Disability Justice*, Owens untangles the ideological web that has ensnared our concepts of what care is, and how we care. In a society built on the death instinct, the “concentric circles of care” shift the way we approach care as a whole - from the demeaning, paternalistic ways which weaponize and feminize care - to the the life instincts unification: the interplay between the workers of an institution, the community, the field, and the earth itself - “survival of the fittest to symbiosis, sympoiesis, and making kin.” (Owens 149) Once again, Owen’s carefully crafted synthesis points us in the direction he sees as an actionable solution.

Chapter seven, “Repair, Revision, Return,” confronts the painful truth that cultural memory institutions have often been built on oppressive systems - white supremacy, colonialism, and patriarchy - and have perpetuated harm in the name of preserving culture. Owens proposes that to truly care for and support freedom and justice, then steps must be taken to repair the harm done and perpetuated by these institutions, focusing on the repair, revision, and return. This entails challenging the dominant hegemonic memory, and pushing at its cracks, (Owens 159) revisiting and revising the stories our institutions have told as we gain new perspective and information, (Owens 161) and returning artifacts, histories, and culture to the people from which they were stolen as an act of repair (Owens 161-167). Quoting Dan Hicks’ work, *THe British Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution,* Owens challenges us to “imagine anthropology museums where nothing is stolen, where everything is present with the consent of all parties.” (Hicks 180, Owens 166) Owens is forthright in drawing connections between past present and future, drawing once again on indigenous models of thought - that the present is built by and connected to the past, and as we look to the past to envision the future, so all three are irrevocably intertwined. By looking to the past and making reparative moves, we can reimagine what the future of memory work can look like.

Owens concludes his work in chapter eight, “A Future for Cultural Memory,” with a vision for the future of cultural memory that is both optimistic and realistic. He pushes back on the idea of “the system” as a monolith, but rather the complex interplay of different forms of dominance. In that sense, he argues for the lasting change we accrue by day to day action. How can we work to enact change from within a broken system? By doing what we each can from within. Owens develops five ways in which to shape the daily practice of incremental change: by centering maintenance and sustainability as antihype, enacting care as anti-individualist, revealing and challenging the power dynamics which shape our current society, fostering community for marginalized folks, and critically examining the way in which one’s organization treats land and time - rejecting the idea that they are resources to be drawn from and made use. (Owens 192) For Owens, he concludes, it is not the grand, sweeping acts that create lasting change, but the shifts in the “humdrum” (Owens 186) every day, antithetical to the large-scale disruption he seeks to assuage.

*After Disruption* is a dense, rigorous, and widely scoped work, but its core messages are powerful and necessary. Owens draws on a multitude of scholars and researchers works, many of which are of marginalized backgrounds and whose work is rooted as such, synthesizing a vibrant, well developed, rich body of work that masterfully weaves together a narrative for change. As a white, male author drawing on marginalized works, he presents a highly sensitive positionality, and an awareness and responsibility for his place in the matrix of power, offering his own voice as an amplification of others. Additionally, threaded amongst his synthesis is a grounding bed of his own personal journey through the tech and information spaces, with anecdotes and deeply self aware analysis, a very subtle humor, and a genuine care that shines throughout the work.

For only having 200 pages, the text covers an immense amount of ground, and each chapter is dense with supporting evidence and background information. While this could be overwhelming to the casual reader if unprepared, there is something to be said for Owens leaving no stone unturned, no counter argument unchallenged. The structure of the book can feel somewhat meandering at times, as a substantial portion of the supporting material is presented prior to establishing the central argument or framing its relevance. In chapter three, a reader may wonder at why they are reading about KPIs and Brad Pitt in the set up, before Owens ties these into the statistical reverence he is challenging. Nonetheless, this stylistic choice does have its own value, in that it feels as though the reader is being taken along Owens’ thought process, guided to the revelation in the same way he may have arrived there.

Ultimately, the force of Owen’s arguments and the vigor of his evidence and supportive literature can not be denied. Owens conveys to the reader a feeling of genuine hope and passion for change. *After Disruption* is far more than a simple critique, it is a challenge and call to action, both warning and encouragement, for all corners of cultural memory work. Owens believes that, should we take up the challenge, we have the power to build a future for ourselves that is rooted in care, justice, and collective responsibility.

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