

DON'T GET TOO COMFORTABLE

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On October 5, 2017, the *New York Times* published the article, “Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades,” launching the Hollywood mogul’s sexual misconduct into the public eye. Since then, “more than sixty accusations of varying degrees of harassment . . . and twenty-seven accusations of sexual assault” against Weinstein have surfaced, spanning over three decades (Thulin). Writers Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey opened a floodgate to an issue that has plagued the entertainment industry for years—and it has yet to close. This dramatic influx of accusations may seem like a recent development, but sexual misconduct has been part of Hollywood for so long that the act of influential men using their power to take advantage of young women has its own name: the casting couch. Sexual misconduct is not a new issue; it is an old one that, as outsiders of the industry, we have consciously ignored, reducing it to a euphemism.

The danger of the casting couch euphemism is that by giving this misconduct an inoffensive name, we can pretend to be unaware of the severity of these crimes. In her article “The ‘Casting Couch’ Euphemism Lets Us Pretend Hollywood’s All Right,” Claire Fallon looks at the way the phrase is used to disregard sexual harassment. As she points out, “the very phrase seems designed to prevent us from thinking too hard about what it means. *Casting couch*. It describes the setting instead of the act, the furniture instead of the sexual extortion and violence” (Fallon). The euphemism allows the public to both acknowledge and disregard the acts of these men, the horrors of their crimes hidden behind a seemingly innocuous name. “Casting couch” evokes images of the seamy side of early Hollywood; one can imagine “a cigar-chomping producer coaxing an ingenue onto a couch in his private office, offering a role in exchange for a blowjob” (Fallon). These images, however, create a barrier between Hollywood now and then. One wants to believe the corruption of the entertainment industry has declined with time, yet with more than thirty-four men accused of various degrees of sexual misconduct since the allegations

against Harvey Weinstein surfaced, it is impossible to ignore the issue (Almukhtar).

Accusations of sexual misconduct within the entertainment industry are as old as Hollywood itself. The phrase “casting couch” can be dated back to the early 1900s, when it initially referred to the actual couch castings were held on and on which sexual acts were performed in exchange for roles. According to Ben Zimmer, who provides a history of this problematic symbol in his article “‘Casting Couch’: The Origins of a Pernicious Hollywood Cliché,” “The casting-couch tradition originated in theatrical productions on Broadway well before the Hollywood film industry became the new locus of the entertainment world” (Zimmer). Until the late nineteenth century, actresses, who often emphasized their attractiveness and sexuality during performances, were viewed with the same disdain as sex workers. This comparison carried into the early twentieth century along with the idea that “filmmakers must try out the goods in order to cast an actress who can make America (that is, straight American men) fall in love” (Fallon; Adams).

Women weren’t the only victims of the casting couch, though, as Thelma Adams points out in her article, “Casting-Couch Tactics Plagued Hollywood Long Before Harvey Weinstein.” Henry Wilson, a notorious casting couch agent of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, had a habit of convincing young men he could help them become stars (Adams). For them, there was an added risk of blackmail and exposure, for “yielding to sex with men in order to gain access” gave them “even more incentive to keep quiet about sexually exploitative business practices” (Adams). The casting couch goes beyond men wanting sex and writing it off as “[try]ing out the goods”; it is truly about power and using whatever means necessary to maintain it. As the movie industry expanded, so did the practice and usage of the term “casting couch.” By the 1960s, the phrase began to shed its literal meaning, becoming “emblematic of the way that sexual aggression has been normalized in an industry dominated by powerful men” (Zimmer). The couches might have been thrown away, but “the environment they bred would linger” (Zimmer).

Powerful men maintain their dominance by preying on young, vulnerable women beyond the confines of Hollywood. According to

an ABC/*Washington Post* poll, more than half of women in the United States have been subjected to inappropriate advances at work, and “of those, [eighty] percent said the encounter approached the level of sexual harassment. One-third said it amounted to sexual abuse” (Swan). “This translates to approximately 33 million American women being sexually harassed, and 14 million sexually abused, in work-related incidents,’ the pollsters write,” as quoted by Noelle Swan in her article “‘Casting Couch’ Or ‘Crime Scene’? How Language Promotes Culture of Sexual Harassment.” Swan examines the role language has in the discussion of sexual harassment within American society, as this issue does not just lie in the hills of Hollywood. In fact, it has plagued our society long before La La Land was even established. While we can understand, to a certain extent, how and why we have missed this blatant corruption within the entertainment industry, it is harder to explain how we missed something that has occurred right in front of us for centuries. The answer lies in language.

Qi Pan, in the scholarly journal “A Tentative Study on the Functions and Applications of English Euphemism,” looks at euphemism as a social and linguistic phenomenon and considers many of its functions. She provides multiple definitions of euphemism, but the general consensus among dictionaries defines it as a “mild” or pleasant expression that is used in lieu of a more “direct” and “harsh” one (Pan). Pan argues that words themselves are meaningless; it is the associations they have developed over time that define them (Pan). This is how the casting couch came to encompass the corrupt sexual politics that dominate Hollywood. The initial association of actresses performing sexual acts on couches found in producers’ and casting agents’ offices evolved into a symbol of the normalization of sexual harassment within the entertainment industry.

Isn’t it concerning, though, that sexual harassment is so commonplace in Hollywood that a special title is attributed to what would otherwise be called ‘workplace harassment?’ With more than thirty-four men accused of sexual misconduct and over sixty women coming forward with their experiences with harassment from a single man, it is impossible to believe Hollywood has been pristine prior to this moment. Yet, with its own special term, exchanging sexual favors for

roles seems to be the norm in this supposedly glamorous industry. Tales of this nature about Hollywood have led to the creation of a standard trope that minimizes the weight of abusers' actions as well as the impact it has on victims. This normalization creates a scenario in which powerful men feel they are authorized to take advantage of women, and women feel they are forced to succumb to these advances, fulfilling the roles in a story that has been written over and over again throughout history (Simpkin). In this industry, where getting noticed by the right person can lead to a lifetime of fame and success, trading sex for roles is apparently just a part of the job.

However, within the entertainment industry, the lines between the intimate and professional are often blurred, making it difficult for the victim to distinguish between an awkward encounter and inappropriate advance. Lupita Nyong'o, an award-winning actress, joined the other sixty women who have spoken up about Weinstein's sexual advances and shared her experience with the casting couch. Her piece highlights the difference in position between powerful men like Weinstein and aspiring actresses like Nyong'o at the time, and how easy it is for those men to manipulate young women. She knew she "was entering into a business where the intimate is often professional and so the lines are blurred" and used this idea to excuse Weinstein's unwarranted sexual advances (Nyong'o). At the time, she was aware that Weinstein's advances were wrong, and she vowed never to work with him or men like him again. But, it was when other women began speaking out against Weinstein that Nyong'o was also able to. She explains, "[Weinstein] was one of the first people I met in the industry, and he told me, 'This is the way it is.' And wherever I looked, everyone seemed to be bracing themselves and dealing with him, unchallenged" (Nyong'o). For years, sexual harassment in Hollywood was considered inherent to the industry. It was known to happen, as victims like Nyong'o tried to share their experiences, yet their accusations were dismissed because of the belief that intimate interaction, warranted or not, came with the job. By holding this belief, we, as bystanders to the industry, are complicit in the perpetuation of sexual harassment and assault in Hollywood.

As spectators to the entertainment industry, we hold fantasies that taint our view of Hollywood. The entertainment industry is laced

with mystique and glamour, so it is fitting that it utilizes a more dazzling name for what would otherwise be called workplace harassment. As Fallon demonstrates, “Sure, groping would seem inappropriate during an interview for a sales management position, but Hollywood, we understand, must operate by its own rules to allow for creative genius to work” (Fallon). By viewing it as a unique, untouchable realm, we place a partition between ourselves and Hollywood, creating a divide between these two seemingly different worlds—not because they are so different, but because “most of us *want* the film world to be different from the workplace mundanity we experience” (Fallon). Yet this divide is made of glass; despite wanting to section off these two worlds, we still want to know what is happening in the other. As viewers, we want a certain level of intimacy with celebrities and, with recent developments in social media, which allow for more immediate and direct contact, we even expect it. Despite wanting this intimacy, we also want to maintain our fragile fantasies of Hollywood, creating an environment in which we are aware of the existence of sexual harassment, but continue to ignore it, acting as if it is as fake as the roles these actresses take on.

Due to the way sexual assault and harassment are discussed, both in Hollywood and in general, the victim is blamed rather than the perpetrator. This victim blaming dismisses and perpetuates sexual harassment and assault. As Swan says, “the words society chooses to use to describe sexual harassment and assault—and the tone we cast them with—can tint the lens the public uses to assign judgment, belief, or blame.” By using an indirect phrase, “casting couch,” to refer to sexual harassment in Hollywood, we are not only disguising the ugly reality that lies beneath, but giving protection to perpetrators. Pan explains, “When a word is attached with psychologically unpleasant elements, people try to find a colored word to avert an unpleasant fact. Therefore, it is natural for euphemisms to come into being and be used to soften an offensive or unpleasant expression.” However, the casting couch doesn’t protect those who need it the most: victims. Instead, it hides the conduct of perpetrators and the reality of the problem from complicit bystanders. When discussing sexual assault, language has an immense impact; it can help empower victims, but it can also silence them. After the initial allegations against Harvey

Weinstein, many women within his sphere were thankful for the discrete warnings they were given to steer clear of the mogul. While having a conversation is encouraging, discussing sexual assault in “hushed tones and veiled words of caution . . . fosters a culture where unwanted advances—even overt coercion—are seen as a normal part of female life” (Swan). This phenomenon, combined with the all too common attacks on women’s character when attempting to discern the truth behind sexual assault allegations, make women believe it is their job to prevent such events by behaving a certain way.

To this extent, the largest issue with the casting couch, besides the acts that it encompasses, is the phrase itself. It conceals the horrible actions of those powerful, manipulative men behind a seemingly innocuous phrase. As Fallon demonstrates, “casting couch’ sounds gentle; ‘he extorted sex from vulnerable women’ does not” (Fallon). The reliance on euphemisms and vague language diminishes the harm that results from sexual assault, blurring the lines between appropriate and inappropriate. In 2015, during the case of Brock Turner, a college athlete who was convicted on three counts of felony sexual assault, the media and those defending Turner questioned whether he should be sentenced to life in prison for “twenty minutes of misguided action” (Swan). Theresa Simpkin, a professor who studies the connections between language and bias, says, “If we change that language to his being penalized for ‘20 minutes of sexual, premeditated assault on a defenseless, unconscious victim’ it changes the way we actually see that behavior” (qtd. in Swan). As Pan states, “by using euphemism, ambiguity can be produced and truth can be hidden. As a consequence, some profiteers and politicians are likely to use euphemism to make it a language of deceit.” This same idea can be applied to the casting couch: if we begin calling the actions hiding behind this euphemism for what they actually are—sexual harassment, sexual assault, unwanted advances, coercion, rape—then maybe the men who commit these crimes will actually be held accountable for their actions.

The truth is, these perpetrators are protected by a host of euphemistic phrases that disguise their true intentions and actions. While victims’ characters are viciously attacked during sexual harassment and assault trials, perpetrators get off the hook simply because

they were 'only joking,' and sadly, we often believe them. Donald Trump, the current US President, has used a similar phrase as a defense against allegations that surfaced during his campaign. His "lewd remarks" on *Access Hollywood* "about being able to do 'anything' to women" was chalked up to "locker room talk"; however, the context suggested otherwise (Swan). His words didn't seem like harmless banter, but rather like something he had actually done in the past. The phrase "locker room talk," like the casting couch, is a reference to the setting instead of the action. The locker room, like Hollywood, seems to be an exclusive place where standard rules don't apply. It is in this room that 'boys can be boys,' where their words are deemed insignificant—after all, they were 'just joking.' "Locker room talk" is another harmful phrase found in the daily lexicon that diminishes the gravity of sexual harassment by promoting the innocence of its perpetrators, making them seem like a group of schoolboys goofing off after gym class. Because language attempts to excuse these harmful behaviors, we must work to change not only the words that are used to discuss sexual harassment but the manner in which they are spoken as well.

When explaining why victims of sexual assault do not come forward with their stories sooner, Nyong'o offers this thought: "That's why we don't speak up—for fear of suffering twice, and for fear of being labeled and characterized by our moment of powerlessness." Not only do the perpetrators defile their victims, they also rob them of the one thing they never thought they could lose: their voices. Hollywood and the entertainment industry are seen as untouchable realms. As a result, many men feel they are able to get away with their actions. Hollywood, however, does not have a monopoly on sexual harassment; the only difference between sexual harassment in Hollywood and sexual harassment in the rest of society is that it is hidden better in plain sight, cozily tucked away behind the casting couch euphemism. We must change the way we speak about sexual harassment to stop harmful practices like the casting couch. To assign blame to the perpetrators and give victims their voices back, we need to change the way we speak about sexual harassment. Maybe then we can finally kick this ratty old couch to the curb.

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