



writers' piece

words that
need to die

four writers nominate a term
that's due for retirement.

By Tara Kenny

Once upon a time, cancelling was what you did to an unused gym membership or overzealous social plans when you were tired. You could cancel *on* a person, not cancel *them*. Today, the terms 'cancel' and 'cancelled' are thrown about in response to perceived bad behaviour with such abandon that it's difficult to remember a time when every middle-aged mum and her cavoodle were not shaking in their boots about so-called 'cancel culture'.

Back in 1981, Nile Rodgers and Chic crooned "your love is cancelled": Rodgers reportedly penned the lyric after a love interest tried to pressure a waiter into clearing a table of diners so that their party of VIPs could have the best seat in the house. It was entitled behaviour that Rodgers deemed worthy of – you guessed it – cancellation. Over the years, the use of 'cancel' as an action one takes against a wrongdoer popped up in gangster films and rap music, before becoming a mainstay on Black Twitter and eventually making its way into the popular vernacular.

To my knowledge, Nile Rodgers never put his pushy date on blast. Being cancelled today, however, implies an element of public shaming. As movements such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter have shown, it can be impactful and cathartic to call out powerful people and organisations on social media and in the streets, given that private, polite requests for fair treatment have been ignored throughout history. And yet, somewhere along the line we got bored of publicly piling on to politicians, titans of industry and celebrities who abuse their power, and we turned our attention to random citizens who become flash-in-the-pan social pariahs for vague and minor indiscretions. Remember "couch guy", the university student who was accused of cheating and general bad vibes

after a video where he didn't look adequately excited when his girlfriend unexpectedly turned up at his dorm room went viral? Me either! While the term cancel is often used playfully and ironically, it gets confusing when it's applied liberally to both legitimate ghouls and random TikTok youths.

As a society, we lack a widely agreed upon definition of what it means to cancel or be cancelled. Depending on the context, "cancel them!" can imply a desire to punish, lightly ridicule, deplatform, elicit an apology from, silence, fire, bankrupt, educate, bring to justice, or completely eradicate from the face of the earth. While the term is commonly associated with super-online, social-justice-warrior types, it has a punitive finality that makes the potential for redemption or forgiveness null and void. The implication that there's no coming back from being cancelled is perhaps why it strikes such fear into the hearts of many baby boomers and conservatives, who understand it as far worse a fate than whatever transgression led to said ousting in the first place. Never mind that many of the most prominently cancelled celebrities continue to enjoy unimaginable riches and the dogged adoration of their fans – looking at you, JK Rowling and Woody Allen.

All of this is to say: it's impossible to 'cancel' a person with the totality that the word suggests (at least, without going to jail or sinking your own ship in the process). And it's probably not advisable to follow the angry and aggrieved parts of yourself that might secretly wish to annihilate someone who wrongs you, starting with uttering the dreaded c-word. Instead, I say we 'divest attention', 'hold to account', 'cleanse our psyches and timelines', 'wring our hands of' and 'consciously uncouple from' toxic people and bad actors. If you disagree, just try and cancel me (I'm uncancellable).

By Serena Coady

Gelatinous. Cleat. OshKosh B'gosh. Do you feel sanitary after reading these words? Judging by the sound of you bombing into the shower, I doubt you do. But I assure you, reader, you will feel clean again! For you were not the one scratching at the keyboard, birthing these feral terms with your hands.

I believe these three words to be malignant in origin – even though they might just be Latin. I believe they hurt the ears of all. I believe these words were originally designed as curses that would incite instant insomnia, mob violence and a fortnight-long case of thrush. But as long as I don't regularly come into contact with these words, I can move on with my life. This is because I have no personal connection with what these words represent and because I think that sooner or later, the experts at *Merriam-Webster* and *Wheel of Fortune* will wake up feeling clear-minded and simply stamp them out. However, there is one word that troubles me more than the rest, because it's a word I cannot escape. That word is masturbation.

Every part of the word feels purpose-built for revulsion. By the first syllable, the word is dead in the water. 'Mas' makes me think of the mastiff, a breed of dog with round-the-clock slop chops. The word in its entirety sounds like an affliction, and a shameful one at that. To me, it's always felt like a scare-mongering term invented by a conservative authority, designed to deter people from doing the extremely fun thing it represents.

I looked into the etymology of masturbation and can't say I was far off. I also can't say I would recommend it; this research only deepened the word's rancidity. Masturbation is a compound from the Latin roots *manus*, meaning hand, and *stuprare*, meaning to defile oneself. The word is also historically linked to 'self-abuse'.

To this day, 'self-abuse' is still listed as one of the top synonyms for masturbation in the *Collins English Thesaurus*. Philosophy professor William E Phipps, wrote in the *Journal of Religion and Health*: "Social scientists who are sensitive to etymology realise that the word 'masturbation' carries too much manual association to be fully descriptive and, of more concern, has traditionally carried a negative moral judgment." So, why should we continue using a word that not only sounds like shit but is also heavily rooted in shame?

Many concepts, once considered to be cringe, have undergone recent rebrands. Take low-rise jeans. Before Missoni, Versace and Bella Hadid embraced them last season, these pelvis-centric garments were basically prohibited by law. Paleo, mullets and dad rock have also been revived (by TikTok's generous algorithm) and ushered back into the realm of palatability. I'm fairly certain none of these concepts can result in a lovely orgasm – though I am happy to be corrected – so why hasn't the word masturbation received its rebrand yet? Sure, pleasuring oneself has gained wider social acceptance in recent years, but the terminology is not bringing anything to the fight.

Masturbation might need a grassroots movement behind it. Most of the alternative terms have come from the people anyway: fap. Jerk off. Jack off. Flick the bean. Maz. Wank. Of these, 'wank' shines the brightest, probably because it has the widest comedic application. Whom among us hasn't sunk into that hard k for laughs? But in the same way masturbation doesn't need to be tied to an archaic notion of shame, it needn't be the butt of the joke, either. Masturbation is a fact-finding mission: it's the imperfect, exploratory and euphoric process of physically mapping out what makes you feel good (and at what tempo). At the end of the day (or start! Or middle! No judgment), it's a form of self-love – and this kind of magic deserves a proper name.

By Eleanor Robertson

One of the most regrettable trends in the modern habitus is that of endless self-narrativisation. Think of how the contestants describe themselves on any American reality TV show: they cannot just be living their lives – they must be overcoming adversity. Nobody describes themselves primarily in terms of their role in society or community; nobody is simply chilling. They are *triumphing over* [insert hardship real or imagined]; they are *just a kid from* [whichever state they're from], *trying to make it in the world*. They present themselves as being the hero of their own monomyth, currently slogging their way through Act 2 of 3, striving to reach the cathartic denouement when they have slain all the dragons standing between them and success.

The ever-present mark of this infuriating way of speaking is the word 'journey'. How I have come to hate this word, which is now encrusted on the discourse like pigeon shit on public furniture. My interior-decorating journey. My reactive-dog journey. My sciatica journey. My breastfeeding journey. My yoga journey. My god, my god, please, make it stop. You are not the protagonist of your own reality. Your life is not *The Lord of the Rings*; even Frodo, the most famous hero on the most perfectly crafted hero's journey of all time, had the grace to accept his role with a certain reluctant humility. Can you imagine! "Hi, I'm Frodo, I'm just a kid from the Shire on a journey to overcome the forces of evil, and I really want to win *Chopped* so I can use the money to achieve my destiny in life of throwing the one ring into the fires of Mount Doom!"

The main problem with everyone constantly nattering on about their journeys is that most people's lives, unless you know and care about them as an individual, are excruciatingly boring. Their joys

are boring; their tragedies are boring; their passions and grudges are boring. But the ubiquity of My Journey makes people think that their lives will become interesting, if only they are shoehorned into this redemptive story of adversity, resilience, hard work and eventual reward. It's just not so! I'm sorry Michelle, I would rather eat my dead cat's ashes than listen to your journey of overcoming psoriasis to achieve a master's by coursework in hair-restoration techniques.

Another problem is that, to the extent other people's lives are interesting, this one-size-fits-all way of talking about them instantly extinguishes anything you might care to hear about. It sands off all the rough edges, all the bits that don't make sense, the parts where people broke the rules or didn't get what they expected. All of this is reduced to "an obstacle on the journey", made to play a pre-defined part in the story. Maybe you changed your mind halfway through about what you wanted. Maybe you realised that the outcome you personally achieve is not actually the most important thing in the world. Maybe making your experience legible and sympathetic to an external audience is actually a pathetic activity that is only redeemed if it's done with some real artistic merit!

In the face of this adversity, and in an effort to overcome the hardships that have been visited upon me by having to listen to people talk this shite, I am embarking on a journey to ban the word 'journey'. Yes, it will be difficult. People may say, "Cultural trends can't just be halted by banning one arbitrary word," or "Why are you being such an ornery bitch about this?" or "Don't you have something better to do, like scratch your arse?" But these are just obstacles on my journey, and I will triumph over them in order to achieve my destiny: living in a world where the word 'journey' is banned. ❀