

On the Couch: Casting, Cruel Optimism, and Memory Work

In advance of Harvey Weinstein standing trial for the rape and sexual assault of actor Jessica Mann and production assistant Mimi Haley in New York in 2020, newspapers reported that his lawyers would set out the “casting couch defense.”¹ Weinstein’s accusers and those giving supporting statements, they argued, were not victims of serial sexual violence, but rather experienced individuals with agency participating in a well-known and legal aspect of hiring in the film industry, whereby sex was exchanged for employment opportunities.² This defense strategy was forged in reaction to the #MeToo movement, which became enmeshed in the trial as well as in the slew of accusations against Weinstein which did not reach the court room. As is widely known, #MeToo was created by social activist Tarana Burke for Black women and girls in the US in 2006 and came to international attention after the Weinstein revelations, when actress Alyssa Milano’s tweet prompted a mass of women to share personal experiences of sexual harassment and violence with the hashtag.³ The heightened visibility of such violence, within and beyond the entertainment industries,

¹ James Queally, Richard Winton and Hailey Branson-Potts, “Weinstein cites ‘casting couch’ defense as he faces rape charges in New York,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 26, 2018, available at <https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-weinstein-case-20180526-story.html>; Patricia Hurtado, “Weinstein Prosecutors Build Case That Casting Couch Was Trap,” *Bloomberg*, January 29, 2020, available at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-01-29/weinstein-casting-couch-could-save-him-or-send-him-to-prison>

² Jia Talentino, “The Opening Statements in the Harvey Weinstein Trial and the Undermining of #MeToo,” *New Yorker*, January 23, 2020, available at <https://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/the-opening-statements-in-the-harvey-weinstein-trial-and-the-undermining-of-metoo>

³ Alyssa Milano is an American actor, producer, and activist, who began her career in television and film as an adolescent. Her tweet of October 15 2017 read: “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet”, with a screenshot message below: “Me too. Suggested by a friend: ‘If all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote ‘Me too.’ as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem.” Available at https://twitter.com/alyssa_milano/status/919659438700670976?lang=en

sparked ongoing institutional and cultural change, particularly in the performing arts.⁴ Burke subsequently criticised the foregrounding of wealthy, white actresses, because it effaced the women of colour for whom she had created the movement. #MeToo was and remains, Burke said, “Not just a movement for famous white cis-gendered women.”⁵ Even as it enabled many to draw attention to sexual abuse, #MeToo revealed the racial-sexual politics of who is heard, believed, and held to account.

Weinstein’s defense lawyers’ rhetoric was bolstered by the “casting couch” cliché. Since its popularisation in the early twentieth century, the “casting couch” cliché had situated sexual coercion, exploitation and violence—particularly against actresses—in *genre-scenes* which minimised and obscured their impact, often rendering them a source of pleasure for an audience. By genre-scenes, I mean events and situations which are steeped in genre convention: I outline this below in relation to Lauren Berlant’s theorisation of genre. The cliché’s ahistorical quality was utilised to invoke a patriarchal fantasy of a generalized past that continued into the present, in which sexual violence was not sexual violence, but rather *quid pro quo*.

⁴ Some examples of the growing body of work on the impacts of #MeToo on the performing arts, which has taken distinct form in different national and cultural contexts: Judith Rudakoff, ed., *Performing #MeToo: How Not to Look Away* (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2021); Eloïse Mignon and Paul Rae, “Masculinity after #MeToo in Mainstream Theatre,” *Performance Research* 24:8 (2019): 106-120; Agnieszka Jakimiak, “Theatre after #MeToo: Sexual Abuse and Institutional Change in Poland,” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 30:1 (2020), available at <https://www.contemporarytheatrereview.org/2020/theatre-after-metoo-sexual-abuse-and-institutional-change-in-poland/> ; Soo Ryon Yoon, “Mapping the Stage Differently: Theatre #MeToo Movement and Internet Culture in South Korea,” *GenderIT.org*, October 25, 2019, available at: <https://www.genderit.org/es/node/5344> ; Marta Keil and Katie Kheriji-Watts, *Gender and Power Relations: #MeToo in the Arts, From call outs to structural change* (SHIFT Culture, 2021), available at <https://www.ietm.org/system/files/publications/SHIFT%20Gender%20and%20Power%20Relations%20Report%202022.pdf>

⁵ Rosanna Maule, “‘Not just a movement for famous white cisgendered women:’ #Me Too and intersectionality,” *Gender and Women's Studies* 2, no. 3 (2020): 1-13, quote on 2.

This article turns to the era in which the “casting couch” cliché arose—the early- to mid-twentieth century—and contrasts its conventionally misogynist presentation of sexual exploitation and violence with first-hand accounts of women working in the entertainment industry in the UK at this time. I demonstrate how women used the discourse available to them to express experiences of sexual exploitation, even when that discourse undermined their ability to speak. Genre—comedy, actor memoir, melodrama—structured the expression of particular performers’ experiences, whether strategically or otherwise. Drawing on sources that preserve women’s own words—life writing and interviews—I analyse their statements, euphemisms, deployment of humor, and in recorded interviews, pauses and laughter. These sources are: an autobiography by actor and writer, Dodie Smith, written and published in the 1970s; interviews with music hall performers conducted by Martha Vicinus in the 1970s; and interview extracts in biographies of performers by Stephen Bourne written in the 1990s and 2000s. The incidents I discuss took place from the 1910s to the 1940s.

In its focus on first-hand accounts, this article is animated by the prevalence of personal testimony in the #MeToo movement and its exposure of systemic sexual violence and exploitation. Like women testifying in the #MeToo movement, my sources found ways to convey experiences of sexual exploitation which were often difficult to recall and express, and which conventionally went unheard. Unlike those accounts, these experiences were not framed as testimony in a movement (or trial), but as part of broader autobiographical recollections of life and work as an actor. As a genre, actor autobiographies are bound up with the maintenance of public image and legacy. As Thomas Postlewait writes, “Whatever the performer’s impulse in autobiography to reveal the secret or unmasked self, there is also a strong need to maintain the achieved self, which is the basis of fame and love.”⁶ Postlewait

⁶ Thomas Postlewait, “Autobiography and Theatre History,” in *Interpreting the Theatrical Past: Essays in the Historiography of Performance*, ed. Thomas Postlewait & Bruce A. McConachie (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989): 259

notes that in the early twentieth century, actresses still had to raise defensively their “sexuality” and “suspect morality,” the supposed roots of their success.⁷ Such pressure could be intensified for Black women and women of color, who had to ward against—and sometimes work with—their racialized hyper-sexualisation. These social requirements shaped “narrative forms” in autobiographical writing and reminiscence, which express “complex truths about actresses’ lives—on and off stage.”⁸

There are numerous difficulties in “locating a reliable archive” of sexual exploitation.⁹ Though there was a gradual increase in reporting sexual violence in the UK throughout the twentieth century, it was predominantly crimes against minors rather than adult women and men that police prosecuted, in the mistaken belief that “false accusations” were common.¹⁰ Sex discrimination at work was not outlawed until 1975, and legislation did not include specific mention of sexual harassment until 2008. As Julia Laite writes, there were racialised moral panics about the abuse of women in the entertainment industry at the turn of the twentieth century, described as a traffic in “white slaves.” Nonetheless, there was a failure to recognize the crucial role of low pay in driving women to take on supplementary sex work, in making women vulnerable to sexual exploitation, and as a form of exploitation its own right.¹¹ While some female performers earned high wages, others worked long hours for relatively low pay: in 1914 the Actor’s Association recorded an average income of £70 a year, half of which were spent on expenses, leaving a “typical figure for a working-class

⁷ Postlewait, “Autobiography and Theatre History,” 265.

⁸ Postlewait, “Autobiography and Theatre History,” 269.

⁹ Lana L. Dalley and Kellie Holzer, “Victorian Literature in the Age of #MeToo: An Introduction,” *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* 16, no. 2 (Summer 2020).

¹⁰ Shani D’Cruze and Louise A. Jackson, *Women, Crime and Justice in England since 1660* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2009), 28.

¹¹ Julia Laite, ‘Between Scylla and Charybdis: Women’s Labour Migration and Sex Trafficking in the Early Twentieth Century’, *International Review of Social History* 62, no. 1 (2017): 48, 52.

woman of the period.”¹² Performance work had distinct characteristics—a surplus of skilled labor, frequent travel, evening work, public appearances, sporadic employment—yet other forms of feminized work, (particularly domestic service as the primary employer of women at the turn of the century), were just as likely to involve abusive employment practices.¹³ While this article evidences historical incidents of sexual exploitation, I don’t attempt a history of sexual exploitation itself here; rather I am most concerned with what afforded these instances of abuse discursive presence in recollections, the performative modes these archival traces enact, and how they are shaped by class and racialization as well as gender.

In my conceptualisation of genre, I draw on Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* (as well as *The Female Complaint* and *Desire/Love*). Berlant defines genre as providing “an affective expectation of the experience of watching something unfold, whether that thing is in life or in art.”¹⁴ They argue that the present is characterised by a “waning of genre,” particularly older realist genres (including melodrama), which now contain “archaic expectations about having and building a life.”¹⁵ *Cruel Optimism* articulates the affective bargains that we make with ourselves as a “life-sustaining defense against the attritions of ordinary violent history.”¹⁶ These bargains enable us to maintain our attachment to a fantasy of a good life: “All attachments are optimistic. When we talk about an object of desire, we are really talking about a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us.”¹⁷ The condition of *cruel* optimism describes “a binding to fantasies that block the satisfactions they offer, and a binding to the promise of optimism as such that the fantasies

¹² Tracy C. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture* (London: Routledge, 2002), 30.

¹³ Laite, “Between Scylla and Charybdis,” 54.

¹⁴ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 6.

¹⁵ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 6.

¹⁶ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 45.

¹⁷ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 23.

have come to represent.”¹⁸ While Berlant is describing the present and recent past, their concepts also apply to the sources discussed in this essay. Describing their lives in autobiographical forms, the subjects convey themselves seeking survival and fulfilment in the context of their unequal status and the frequent threat of sexual violence. As they recounted these experiences, they sometimes drew on genre-scenes which enabled the preservation of optimism and obscured sexual exploitation itself.

Though my sources are various, they have in common the act of looking back, at times enacting what Sara Ahmed describes as “memory work.” Ahmed writes: “Feminist work is often memory work [in which] we work to remember what sometimes we wish would or could just recede.”¹⁹ I contend that in doing so, these subjects reveal genre-scenes which shaped the discourse of sexual exploitation, both affording it discursive presence and limiting that presence. I aim to elucidate their ways of maintaining hope and resilience as they attempted to find their own voices, as performers and in the act of articulating experiences of abuse.

2. Casting Couch as Cliché and Genre

A silent era film, *The Casting Couch* (1924), was the first recorded pornographic depiction of the casting couch trope. A casting call-out appears in a newspaper and an actress attends an audition. The male casting director persuades her to wear a bathing suit, spies on her undressing, and attempts to coerce her into sex. Having consulted a guide to ‘How to Become a Movie Star,’ she then returns to have sex with the casting director. A caption sums up: ‘The

¹⁸ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 51.

¹⁹ Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 22.

only way to become a star is to get under a good director and work your way up.’²⁰ By the 1940s “the casting couch” was a firmly entrenched cliché, invoking on one level “a scene of the love of cliché, of repetition itself,” in Berlant’s words.²¹ It was often used with a tone of weary cynicism and knowingness, a kind of false wisdom which worked against further understanding. (A casting couch was a “familiar theatre prop,” according to coverage of a 1954 libel case in Aberdeen.)²² The phrase gestures towards a joke, drawing on some of the techniques that Sigmund Freud observed: it condenses a complex action into a pithy phrase, combines metaphorical and literal functions, and releases repressed aggression and libido (particularly towards women).²³ Some of its potential humor stems from the awkward co-presence of the sofa as object and symbol, and its euphemistic removal of human actors from the scene. Hovering between satire, censure, and changing the subject, the phrase resists what it expresses, maintaining a kind of silence. As Ahmed notes, a “location can be a reduction” and here actions are minimised, contained by the limits of the setting.²⁴

The “casting couch” offered clichéd expression for what was already clichéd action, reflecting the discursive conventionality of sexual exploitation, particularly in combination with actresses. Anton Zijderveld writes: “Clichés are not only manners of speech which well-nigh coercively impose themselves on our linguistic efforts, but they are at the same time forms of thought, of action, and even of emotion which mold our thinking, acting and feeling in social life.”²⁵ In this context, as Ahmed writes, “familiarity and repetition” are a “source of

²⁰ *The Casting Couch*, c. 1924, director and performers unknown. Archived as a collection of stills in: Al Di Lauro, *Dirty Movies: An Illustrated History of the Stag Film* (New York: Chelsea House, 1976), 42.

²¹ Lauren Berlant, *Desire/Love* (New York: Punctum, 2012), 73.

²² Edgar Lustgarten, “The Theatre Ladies Scandal,” *Aberdeen Evening Express*, November 2 1954, 3.

²³ Sigmund Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. John Carey and Joyce Crick (Penguin, 2002), ebook, 33, 94.

²⁴ Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 29.

²⁵ Anton Zijderveld, *On Clichés: The Superseding of Meaning by Function in Modern Society* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), ix.

difficulty,” partly because (as Freud observes), “rediscovery of the familiar” is a source of pleasure.²⁶ Zijderfeld notes how clichés “come to the rescue” when we are faced with “the precariousness of social life,” posing themselves as a way to foreclose contemplation.²⁷

Clichés provoke a “kind of relief” because “speech is reaching the end.”²⁸

The use of “casting couch” as a means of naming but not recognising sexual violence is exemplified in a 1953 Los Angeles newspaper report on the sentencing of a model, Inga Borg. “She is a victim of one of the oldest routines in Hollywood,” Judge Robert Gardner explained, “the casting couch routine.” Gardner issued a month-long suspended sentence and two-year probation to Borg for “lewd and lascivious conduct”: posing naked for photographer Richard Mitman, who was committed to hospital for a month of observation. The judge reflected: “I think she did it because she was promised a lot, and which many people do a lot to obtain.”²⁹ His words contain the cliché’s hallmarks: an association with Hollywood (both as a place and a set of relations); compelling if unspecified opportunity in the entertainment industry; a history that stretches back as far as memory; and a woman presented as responsible while being a victim. Borg’s own testimony in court stands in stark contrast to the judge’s depiction. Her words are paraphrased in the contradiction that she posed “willingly [...] because [Mitman] threatened her with violence.”³⁰ Borg names what is concealed by the “casting couch” cliché, which renders the threat of sexual violence as a melodramatic misfortune rather than criminal behavior on the part of Mitman.

The “casting couch” offers actors’ sexual exploitation as clichéd sexual exploitation *par excellence*, creating a genre with associated tropes, pleasures, and scenes (most obviously

²⁶ Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 9; Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, 118.

²⁷ Zijderfeld, *On Clichés*, 60.

²⁸ Zijderfeld, *On Clichés*, 14.

²⁹ Anon., “Model Gets Two Years’ Probation,” *The Key West Citizen* (Florida), February 23, 1953, 10.

³⁰ Anon., “Model Gets Two Years’ Probation,” 10.

in pornographic films and literature labelled “casting couch”). More broadly, this genre is a sedimentation of farce, melodrama, and soft pornography. “Almost every producer’s office has a casting couch,” Ursula Andress said in the sixties, of working as an actor in Rome. “I was chased round several, but I managed to win all the races.”³¹ The circular chase speaks to the mechanical nature of farce’s images, in which movement comes to supersede event or narrative: farce is a “closed circuit of comedy” in playwright Steve Waters’ words.³² There is a melodramatic quality to this image too, drawing upon stock characters of ingénue and villain or ambivalent patriarch, as well as the virtue-endangered sensation scene. And in its pornographic possibilities, the “race” round the table tends towards self-parody.

Film scholar Linda Williams’ seminal essay on “body genres” groups melodrama and pornography with horror, defining the three genres by their perceived excess or “gross” qualities, and the “almost involuntary mimicry” they inspire in spectators: tears in melodrama, orgasm in porn, a scream in horror.³³ Williams posits that the three body genres could all be included in an expanded concept of melodrama, encompassing excess, lapses in realism, circular narratives, and “primal, even infantile emotions.”³⁴ She connects each genre to a defining psychoanalytic scene/enigma:

The enigma of the origin of sexual desire, an enigma that is “solved,” so to speak, by the fantasy of seduction; the enigma of sexual difference, “solved” by the fantasy of castration; and finally the enigma of the origin of self, “solved” by the fantasy of family romance or return to origins.³⁵

³¹ Ramsden Greig, “Hollywood Gives the Big Treatment,” *Liverpool Echo and Evening Express*, October 15, 1964, 4.

³² Steve Waters, *The Secret Life of Plays* (New York: Nick Hern Books, 2013), 103.

³³ Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (1991): 2, 4.

³⁴ Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” 3.

³⁵ Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” 10, partially quoting Jean Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis, “Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality,” *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 49 (1968): 1-18.

The three body genres rehearse these fantastical psychoanalytic scenes: pornography plays out seduction, horror enacts castration, and a melodramatic “weepie” stages the loss and sometimes regain of maternal love.³⁶

The “casting couch” and psychoanalytic “couch” have more than a passing connection: they undertake similar work in their use of genre to enact physical sensation and dramaturgical possibility. Freudian theory is central to Williams’ reading of genre and is decentred, but nonetheless formative, in Berlant’s and Ahmed’s theorisations. Peter Brooks notes that the “moral occult” of melodrama could be seen as a kind of unconscious, the “repository of fragmentary and desacralized remnants of sacred myth [...] where our most basic desires and interddictions lie.”³⁷ The reverse also holds: the key scenes of psychoanalysis are themselves melodramatic. Psychoanalysis and melodrama have in common highly legible, decipherable bodies, bodies that perform unconscious drives partly because they are unable to know them. Bodies speak through symptom and gesture where patients/characters cannot. In the case of the virtuous heroine, Brooks writes, it is her very virtue that necessitates her silence: to question the judgements of patriarchs would be “to violate...[her] nature as innocence.”³⁸ The bodily “jerks” displayed and elicited by a “body genre” film such as *The Casting Couch* operate a kind of hermeneutic logic: they inscribe what can be felt *and* known.

The image of actress chased by a lecherous producer is thick with genre, perhaps *stuck* in genre, decisively shaping responses and recalling, for me, Berlant’s evocative phrase “genre as defense.”³⁹ In the case of Mitman—as in the Weinstein trial—genre was martialled to defend a sexual predator against the consequences of his actions, in a “redeployment and

³⁶ Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” 4.

³⁷ Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 5.

³⁸ Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 31.

³⁹ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 45.

banalization of violence and ordinary inequality.”⁴⁰ Berlant’s concept of “genre as defense,” however, is a rich and paradoxical one, which applies in a different way to the first-hand accounts below. In their study of women’s culture as an “intimate public,” Berlant elucidates “what is absorbing in the defensive, inventive, and adaptive activity of getting by [...] less in changing the world than in not being defeated by it, and meanwhile finding satisfaction in minor pleasures and major fantasies.”⁴¹ In these recollections, genre was often invoked by the speaker to defend the individual’s attachment to her work as a performer, her agency, and the possibility of fulfilment through heterosexual love and desire, with the effect of masking sexual exploitation and its perpetrators.

3. *Look Back With Mixed Feelings*

Dodie Smith’s memoir, *Look Back With Mixed Feelings*, offers an obscured account of sexual exploitation in a casting process, as part of an often comic autobiography. Before becoming an acclaimed writer, Smith—a white, British, lower-middle-class woman—was an actor, who trained in the early period of the (soon to be Royal) Academy of Dramatic Art, arriving there in 1914. Upon graduation, she gigged as an actress until her mid-twenties. Smith is wry about her acting abilities and lack of material success, which makes her book both a valuable source for understanding quotidian acting labor and one inflected with a writer’s sense of comedic genre.

In 1921, having heard that Norman Macdermott had created a new repertory theatre, the Everyman in Hampstead, London, Smith managed to meet him by arriving unannounced in his office as if it had been arranged. The following year, Macdermott offered her work

⁴⁰ Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 13.

⁴¹ Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 27.

running a bookstall in the theatre foyer combined with administration, which she accepted in the hope of attaining a part on stage. She was also called upon to advise about casting.⁴²

In a chapter called “Seduction on Demand,” Smith’s memoir details two events: being cast in a play by Macdermott, and having sex for the first time with a married man whom she gives the pseudonym “Arlington.”⁴³ These events stir a range of feelings which are instructive about the complications of recalling and representing sex, sexual exploitation, and being cast. A biography of Smith by Valerie Grove explains that in life, both men were Macdermott, drawing on unpublished notebooks kept by Smith.⁴⁴ In a much later journal, Smith reflected on the difficulty of telling the true story of what took place, even in her own diary: “I funk[ed] [avoided] recounting the events of 1922,” she wrote in her journal in 1965; “[...] I used to be discrete about such matters, but after 44 years it ceases to matter.”⁴⁵ The timeline recorded in Grove’s biography strengthens the relationship between having sex with Macdermott and being cast in the roles: rather than a single night, Smith spent two nights with him, three months apart, and they had sex on the second. Immediately after this, Smith was offered two roles and they proceeded to have a short affair. Despite these events being attributed to different characters in *Look Back With Mixed Feelings*, they are closely connected: “then the miracle happened at the theatre [...]. I was suddenly told I could have those two parts.”⁴⁶ Being cast and having the affair are not merely coincidental; they are

⁴² Dodie Smith, *Look Back With Mixed Feelings: Volume Two of An Autobiography* (London: W.H. Allen, 1978), 239.

⁴³ Smith, *Look Back With Mixed Feelings*, 245.

⁴⁴ Dodie Smith wrote diaries throughout her life, as well as fictionalised autobiographical works, and a three-volume autobiography. Relevant works for this period are an unpublished Red Notebook (covering 1917-1921), an unpublished Black Notebook covering a period after 1921, and an unpublished fictionalised autobiography written in third person, *One Eye on Posterity*. Smith also references events in this period in later journals. These are all held with Smith’s papers at the Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University. Smith used these materials to write her published autobiographies in the 1970s.

⁴⁵ Valerie Grove, *Dear Dodie: The Life of Dodie Smith* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1996), 50.

⁴⁶ Smith, *Look Back With Mixed Feelings*, 254-5.

interwoven in Smith's understanding of her decisions, with the parts identified as her primary interest:

Had I known I was going to get those two parts at the Everyman, it is possible I should have gone on saying "No" to Arlington, particularly as I did not believe myself to be in love with him.⁴⁷

The title 'Seduction on Demand' works in two directions. It could be read as sex being demanded in exchange for acting roles, but given that this doesn't happen in the published version of the story, the title finds another meaning in Smith seeking out a sexual relationship. Having reached twenty-five without the prospect of marriage or love, she decides to have an affair and sets about finding one. Arlington, who had always "suggest[ed] an affair," presents an obvious potential lover, though when Smith "volunteer[s]" for one, he seems surprised and worried about his wife finding out despite his habitual infidelity.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, Smith suggests herself for the roles "repeatedly" until finally Macdermott "hint[s] there might be a chance for [her,] if no one better turned up."⁴⁹

So there are a range of connected exchanges taking place, in the context of an imbalance of power which is structural as well as personal. Macdermott is Smith's employer and the source of her income and also has the power to cast her in roles that she wants and thereby launch a new, more promising phase of her acting career. She is a virgin, which for Macdermott raises a spectre of patriarchal responsibility for her should he enter into an affair. She is seeking sexual experience, excitement, and love, all of which have substantive value for her. After a night spent together, the affair does not immediately deliver a role, sexual satisfaction, or strong emotional attachment, any of which might have provided sufficient justification for Smith. While her memoirs maintain an alternately skittish and wise

⁴⁷ Smith, *Look Back With Mixed Feelings*, 246.

⁴⁸ Smith, *Look Back With Mixed Feelings*, 245.

⁴⁹ Smith, *Look Back With Mixed Feelings*, 244.

perspective on the interaction, Grove's biography records a more painful response, written in an unpublished, semi-fictionalized, third-person account which Smith wrote of her life, *One Eye on Posterity*: "She had betrayed her innocence [...] without getting one iota of physical pleasure, and without benefiting materially."⁵⁰ This confusion is worsened by events following the second night at the studio: the next evening Smith meets a close friend (unnamed in Smith's memoir; Madge Compton in Grove's biography), and discovers that only an hour before arriving at the studio, Arlington/Macdermott had "made a dead set at her both verbally and physically."⁵¹ Macdermott then recasts Smith's friend Nadine in the roles that Smith was playing and, shortly afterwards, tells Smith his wife's friend is going to take over the bookstall. In the same conversation he ends the affair because of concerns about his marriage, despite Smith's suspicion that he is now pursuing an affair with Nadine. Hence Smith loses her income, roles, and love affair.

In *Look Back With Mixed Feelings*, however, Smith transposes this experience into a comic story more concerned with her own actualization than the relationship with Macdermott. She enjoys the "cloak-and-dagger nature of the intrigue" and when she enters Macdermott's empty studio she finds it "faintly, even pleasantly, sinister coming into that deserted and *prepared* room."⁵² The potential for becoming that the affair offers is exhilarating, though Smith's retrospective gaze offers a dry perspective on this feeling:

I felt extremely happy. I remember thinking that no one who felt so happy could possibly be doing anything wrong. This, I thought, is what I was made for. I believe countless women, in similar circumstances, have thought the same thing. I wonder how many of them, later, reconsidered that opinion.⁵³

⁵⁰ Grove, *Dear Dodie*, 50.

⁵¹ Grove, *Dear Dodie*, 52.

⁵² Smith, *Look Back with Mixed Feelings*, 247-8.

⁵³ Smith, *Look Back with Mixed Feelings*, 249.

The difficulty for Smith is less the morality of the act than her own lack of investment. “I found it dull,” she remarks, it sparked “little or no emotion.”⁵⁴ The following morning, when “Arlington” orchestrates them leaving separately, Smith realizes she hasn’t asked him where the toilet is and ends up going on a desperate rush round nearby cafes in search of one.

Rereading the autobiographical account in light of Smith’s other statements illuminates some of the “memory work” that Smith seems to have undertaken, but ultimately avoided communicating in her memoir. Smith severs the two experiences, to protect Macdermott’s identity and to separate the transactions in play. She distances herself sufficiently to make readers laugh at her attempts to “rationalise the trouble out of existence”:

I must be *fair*. Arlington had never said he loved me, never implied he was going to be faithful to me, or that we had started a permanent relationship. I must accept all this. (But did I? Did I Hell!)⁵⁵

She invests in the “intrigue” surrounding the affair, allowing her to imagine and realize herself in an exciting way. I’m not suggesting that Smith shows any false consciousness about this experience; rather, she gives a very clear account of the complexity of feelings involved in seeking employment, sexual relationships, and—in far more coded ways—sexual exploitation. In the opportunity for an acting job and a love affair, versions of herself are up for grabs, and the promise of becoming through labor, and indeed through desire and love, is a powerful one that resists simple narrativization. Her affair strives towards the conventional use of “romantic desire to neutralize, at least symbolically, the violence and attraction at play in hierarchical social relations,” in Berlant’s words.⁵⁶ Yet the intersection of sex and employment in this experience make such neutralization difficult if not impossible: social hierarchies cannot be erased through romantic feelings, which in any case frustratingly refuse

⁵⁴ Smith, *Look Back with Mixed Feelings*, 249.

⁵⁵ Smith, *Look Back with Mixed Feelings*, 254.

⁵⁶ Berlant, *Desire/Love*, 108.

to emerge convincingly. In a close parallel to Smith's looking "back with mixed feelings," Ahmed writes that sometimes feminism requires that in looking back you "give up on a version of yourself as well as a version of events," a painful requirement which serves to diminish agency retrospectively.⁵⁷ Smith's account hints at, without fully revealing, how memory work diminishes both this experience and her agency within it.

Yet in the comedy, Smith also maintains the hope embedded in her search for agency, a hope for self-realization. Her dry comments on heterosexual love and happiness utilize comedy's tendency to "expos[e] to laughter [...] all the figures of the universal essence and its powers (gods, morals, state institutions, universal ideas and so on)."⁵⁸ As Alenka Zupančič demonstrates, however, this is not quite the whole story: there is another feature of comedy which reinstates the universal it seems to debunk. Comedy is the "universe of the indestructible," in which characters remain unchanged and undeterred, whatever accident befalls them; it is this persistence that humanizes them or brings them down to earth rather than the accidents themselves.⁵⁹ The constant or "universal" in Smith's comic telling is her continued hope that there might be something more on offer than gendered exploitation, enacted through a quest for romantic love and fulfilling acting work, which frequently constitute gendered exploitation in their own right. Her humor and resilience are a form of cruel optimism.

The received understanding of "casting couch" was a means for ambitious women to progress through sexual appeal (or "sex power" to borrow an early twentieth-century term).⁶⁰ This not only offered a cover for perpetrators of abuse; it also presented a fantasy of agency on the part of actors. This is why many representations of the "casting couch" enact a

⁵⁷ Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 29.

⁵⁸ Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 27.

⁵⁹ Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy*, 28.

⁶⁰ Dale M. Bauer, *Sex Expression and American Women Writers, 1860-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2009), 21.

pornographic empowerment of the actor, presenting her/him as seducer or enabling her/him to find pleasure in exploitation, through queering, reversing aspects such as gender roles, or introducing sadomasochistic themes.⁶¹ As Smith's biography demonstrates, this fantasy of agency found expression even when Smith herself was not taking it seriously.

4. Near the Mark

Smith's story both expressed and concealed sexual exploitation, first through Smith's protection of MacDermott and second, through the comic mode in which she recounted the experience. Martha Vicinus' interviews and Stephen Bourne's biographies complicate the affective bargain embedded in *Look Back With Mixed Feelings* and indicate how racialization and class impacted both the experiences recounted and a subject's ability to articulate them.

Scholar Martha Vicinus interviewed music hall stars in the 1970s, capturing their biographies and insights into music hall performance as experienced in the early-to-mid-twentieth century.⁶² By the time the interviews were conducted, music hall as a genre? institution? was "dead and buried" after a period of "terrible struggle," as one interviewee

⁶¹ Some examples, variously styled as literary novel, erotic novel, exposé or a combination: Beryl Bainbridge, *An Awfully Big Adventure* (London: Duckworth, 1989); David Macmillan, ed., *Casting Couch Confessions: Erotic Tales Anthology*, (Laguna Hills, CA: Companion Press, 1999); Joan Wood, *The Casting Couch: The Uninhibited Memoirs of a Young Actress* (London: Paul Elek, 1975); Becky Bell, *The Casting Couch: The Ultimate Test of Sensual Skill!* (Reading: Delta, 1994); Bessie Bardot and Geoff Barker, *Casting Couch Confidential* (Sydney: Macmillan, 2003).

⁶² The Vicinus Collection contains 32 interviews recorded in 1975 and 1976. The people interviewed were music hall artists, mainly performers, who were born around the turn of the twentieth century. 19 of these interviews are with women and of those, eight make mention of sexual exploitation, some very briefly. These are short sections of longer interviews which usually cover the subjects' childhood, career, wages and conditions, and personal lives. The collection is held by the British Library in London.

remarked.⁶³ The speakers perceived themselves as looking back on a vanished era (several lived in a residential home for performers). Vicinus, who was part of the women's liberation movement and the emerging field of women's studies, engaged in a theatre history project which, in its foregrounding of female performers, was also a second-wave herstory. While Vicinus' project highlighted gender inequality and at times queer lives, it did not discuss racial inequality or the contributions of performers of color. It was historians of Black British history such as Bourne who highlighted the work of Belle Davis, Cassie Walmer, Evelyn Dove, Mabel Mercer, Elisabeth Welch and other Black performers living and working in the UK in this era.⁶⁴

Vicinus' and Bourne's differing political animations shape their subjects' scope for articulating experiences of sexual exploitation. Bourne deliberately did not probe his subjects' private lives: "Those seeking here information or revelations from Elisabeth [Welch] about her private life will be disappointed."⁶⁵ Of his biography of Adelaide Hall, Bourne noted: "It is not a warts-and-all exposé. She would have hated that."⁶⁶ Bourne's emphasis on the celebratory is a political response to the erasure and oppression of Black women, echoing the resistance of actors like Welch to the hyper-sexualisation of their public image: "I wasn't going to go out looking like some floozy."⁶⁷ Experiences of sexual exploitation could too easily be folded into a degrading narrative which did not serve the subject. Not talking about sexual exploitation could be seen a form of racialised labor, both in the early twentieth century and in much later recollections of the period: a strategic response

⁶³ Marian Mosley interviewed by Martha Vicinus, British Library Sound Collection, F2279, June 20, 1975.

⁶⁴ Stephen Bourne, *Black Poppies: Britain's Black Community and the Great War* (Stroud: The History Press, 2014); Stephen Bourne, *Elisabeth Welch: Soft Lights and Sweet Music* (Lanham, MA: Scarecrow Press, 2005); Stephen Bourne, *Evelyn Dove: Britain's Black Cabaret Queen* (London: Jacaranda, 2016); Stephen Bourne, *Sophisticated Lady: A Celebration of Adelaide Hall* (London: ECOHP, 2011).

⁶⁵ Bourne, *Elisabeth Welch: Soft Lights and Sweet Music*, xxv.

⁶⁶ Bourne, *Sophisticated Lady: a Celebration of Adelaide Hall*, 8.

⁶⁷ Bourne, *Elisabeth Welch: Soft Lights and Sweet Music*, 24.

to the erasure of Black people from British history, and the sexual violence of white supremacy.⁶⁸

Vicinus did approach the topic of sexual exploitation in about a quarter of her interviews, but she often encountered resistance. Across multiple interviews, she used the term “casting couch” to introduce the subject, rather than the emerging phrase, “sexual harassment.”⁶⁹ This approach seems to have been picked up during the project: “One of the things that people have said to me with a wink is, ‘There was of course the casting couch.’”⁷⁰ It was perhaps Vicinus’ conversation with white, middle-class musical director Marian Mosley which gave rise to this technique. Responding to Vicinus’ question, “Did you find it difficult as a woman to make your way?” Mosley stated:

Very tough actually, because um.... It’s probably tougher then than now, because em.... I suppose one would say that when you were younger you were quite attractive... and we’ve heard of the Hollywood “casting couch” [very long chuckle], which also was very much so in those days, nasty little backstreet agents and things like that.⁷¹

Mosley’s long laugh registered the ridiculous quality of the metonym and at the same time created a discursive route: via Hollywood, she could return to her own experiences. The existence of this cliché enabled Vicinus and some of her interviewees to discuss sexual exploitation, drawing on its proximity to a joke and euphemistic concealment of violence.

Vicinus’ subjects often began defensively, distancing themselves from the phenomenon, and according with the cliché’s conventionally misogynist trope of ambitious women trading sex for opportunity. Several adopted the modes identified by Postlewait, underlining their own moral standing and conventional femininity. Singer Isabel Barrie

⁶⁸ In autobiographies covering the mid-twentieth century, the mode of resistance differs. For example, Cleo Laine’s autobiography acknowledges the existence of sexual exploitation and names a perpetrator, when she notes that venue owner Bill Benny was “well known in Manchester” for his “tendency to grope young girls” (Cleo Laine, *Cleo* [London: Simon & Schuster, 1994], 190).

⁶⁹ Nathalie Hadjifotiou, *Women and Harassment at Work* (London: Pluto Press, 1983), 2

⁷⁰ Isabel Barrie interviewed by Martha Vicinus, British Library Sound Collection, F2210, July 8, 1975.

⁷¹ Marian Mosley interviewed by Martha Vicinus, British Library Sound Collection, F2279, June 20, 1975.

(white, middle-class) responded: “Oh, not for me, never. I could have got much farther if I’d played ball you but you see, my mother had instilled into me what was right and what was wrong.” She notes that it would have harmed her marriage prospects: “I don’t think he would have married me if he thought I was that sort of person.”⁷² Dancer Vera Kennett (white, middle-class though financially unsupported) also noted she was “pure” when married: “People say girls who have been on the stage are this, that, and the other, it’s not true.”⁷³ Several associated “casting couch” with success, stating that they would have attained more opportunities if they’d used sex as a bargaining tool. Barrie noted: “[L]ooking back now I see that...had I wanted to have got any farther I would only have had to say, ‘Well, you know...’”⁷⁴ Norah Dickinson (white, working-class) remarked: “I know that I could have got maybe to the top if I’d... slept with some of the agents that booked me or some of the managers, but you don’t do that sort of thing if it’s not with you.”⁷⁵

When respondents were asked specifically about their own experiences, their words were often marked by euphemisms and pauses, suggesting more than was immediately stated:

Mosley: Oh, I did have some terrific experiences, but somehow or other I think [inaudible].

Vicinus: What kind of experiences?

Mosley: Oh you know, sort of... very near the mark.⁷⁶

Mosley shifted frequently between “you,” “I,” “one” (and later “we”), allowing her account to fleet across subjectivity. (Ahmed identifies the same slippage in her own writing: “when I discuss some of my own experiences of sexual violence and harassment, I keep using *you* and

⁷² Isabel Barrie interviewed by Martha Vicinus

⁷³ Vera Kennett interviewed by Martha Vicinus, British Library Sound Collection, F2280, June 24, 1976.

⁷⁴ Vera Kennett interviewed by Martha Vicinus; Isabel Barrie interviewed by Martha Vicinus

⁷⁵ Norah Dickinson interviewed by Martha Vicinus, British Library Sound Collection, F2272, June 30, 1975.

⁷⁶ Marian Mosley interviewed by Martha Vicinus.

not *me*, allowing the second person pronoun to give me some distance. [...] that *me* felt too strained.”)⁷⁷ Mosley remarked:

Well, you’ve got to sort of take it, now they say, ‘Yes there’s this marvelous job.’ Well, you think about it, that is the marvelous job itself, there’s always an if and a but, em... ‘Well, we’ll give you a ring and then make arrangements.’ And then you have, ‘I’d like to take you out for some dinner-supper or dinner or something like that.’ And sometimes one found that you did go to dinner and accepted all that, but there *was* always that in the background that there was a reason, so you didn’t, so there was no job.⁷⁸

Mosley’s repetition and vagueness mirror the harassment, implied but never fully expressed.

Acrobat Annie Hartley (white, working-class), described a similarly insidious interaction with an agent:

Only twice—once, my brother took me... We were out together and he said, ‘Just a minute, just sit in this chair.’ It was kind of an outer office and I was sitting there while he went in the big office and a chap came along and he said, ‘Oh, I’ve seen you before.’ I said, ‘No, I’m just waiting for me [my] brother.’ And he chucked me under the chin, he said, ‘It won’t do for you to come too often to these places.’ You see?⁷⁹

Hartley hinted at the behavior she might have found had she been conducting negotiations herself.

Gladys Milton (white, class status unclear) described how she responded to an agent’s explicit harassment:

Vicinus: What did you mean by ‘there were strings attached when women [inaudible]’?

Milton: Well, I really meant that some of the agents wanted more than your talent [chuckle] if you know what I mean [chuckle]. They used to—they used to, you know sort of... Well, I had a very—you needn’t take this down—but I had a very, very good agent, who came to my bedroom in the middle of the night and [inaudible] and I had to... Oh, I had such a lot of talking to do! I

⁷⁷ Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 14. Italics original.

⁷⁸ Marian Mosley interviewed by Martha Vicinus.

⁷⁹ Annie Hartley interviewed by Martha Vicinus, British Library Sound Collection, F2301, June 21 & 23, 1976.

said, ‘Now you wouldn’t like this to happen to your daughter’, mind that sort of thing.⁸⁰

To find expression for what took place, Milton initially deployed euphemism and laughter. She concealed the identity of the agent and suggested Vicinus might not record what she says. The story then focuses on the techniques she used to defend herself against sexual coercion and violence, invoking a mode of patriarchal responsibility and feminine respectability—“a structure of conventional expectation”—to shame him into stopping.⁸¹ Perhaps Milton was only able to communicate this experience in the context of the interview because this defense worked.

Both Hartley and Mosley were aware of the effects of their social status: Hartley had patriarchal protection in that she always performed with her husband or brother, while Mosley was independently wealthy and had the security of knowing that she could “always go home.”⁸² A story Mosley told about performers who didn’t have her financial security was more rooted in a comedic genre than her other recollections, suggesting that the class difference between Mosley and her colleagues was part of what enabled this experience to become comic. She described how on some occasions, she joined performers on poverty wages in accepting offers of dinner from agents or audience members:

We had the most awful trick ever. I was in a show with some very young girls and they didn’t have much money and were always very hungry. So we used to accept invitations to go out for dinner and then go and spend a penny [urinate] and go out the other entrance! [Raucous laughter.] And they were so hungry they’d have eaten a horse!⁸³

⁸⁰ Gladys Milton interviewed by Martha Vicinus, British Library Sound Collection, F2279 and F2302, June 20, 1975 and June 24, 1976.

⁸¹ Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 4.

⁸² Marian Mosley interviewed by Martha Vicinus.

⁸³ Marian Mosley interviewed by Martha Vicinus.

The story is at once a depiction of performers meeting their basic needs through the possibility of social and sexual exchange, and an entertaining tale of quick wits and farce-like scampering through doors. Mosley deployed comedy in a similar manner to Smith, protecting optimism about the agency of the performers involved, and drawing on a comic impermeability which was implicitly classed and racialized.

The role of low wages in creating conditions for sexual exploitation and violence was described in multiple interviews. Hartley recalled her husband's assistance of the Manchester group, the Tiller Girls, who experienced comparable pay and conditions:

I remember one place and we had the Tiller Girls, they were... We used to meet them in different parts of the world and my husband has helped them many, many a time when they've been... and they were having a quarrel over something, and I heard one of the girls say, 'What does he [inaudible]-does he expect on 30 shillings a week?' They were getting 30 shillings a week about ten girls. Now they had to live, pay their rooms and they expected them to lead a decent life. I mean, I... Now if you wasn't friends with the management, you know, you were out.⁸⁴

The impossibility of surviving on performance wages, Hartley implied, sometimes made additional sex work a necessary part of earning a living, and rendered performers highly vulnerable to the whims of management. Sexual exploitation on the part of management was conveyed in a frank account by singer and comedian Claire Ruane (white, working-class):

I remember the shows that that man [Fred] Karno used to put on and this was really positively true, I worked for Karno too with another girl and we were careering for a job, and they paid us 30 bob a week, imagine! And you had your rent to pay and your food and clearly [inaudible], but my girlfriend was

⁸⁴ Annie Hartley interviewed by Martha Vicinus.

such a dear, I think she sort of gave them what they wanted and of course we got five bob extra, but when it was discovered of course we were fired. Well, we weren't fired: we came home from Manchester. We had to come because the girls would've given us *merry hell* if they'd known that we'd been getting five bob more than them, you see.⁸⁵

Ruane demonstrated that the disapprobation of others was a further risk, incentivizing silence. Explaining why she wouldn't want her (hypothetical) daughter to become a performer, Dickinson described an industry which rendered working-class women objects of patriarchal exchange:

Well...it's a rat race, for the simple reason that, not to beat about the bush, there's a lot of young people have to give their body and *soul* to get something, we all know. That happened even in the olden days... It happened to me. But I didn't want to do that sort of thing, I didn't do it. But if you are very beautiful and you go out with your agent for a few nights, etc etc, you're *in*, because you—he—you belong to *him*, not the profession, you're *his* and he can do a lot for you. That's how it goes, love [laughs].⁸⁶

Interviewees had differing views on whether the power structure had changed by the 1970s: while Dickinson was bleak about the possibility of improvement, Hartley insisted, "There's none of that now, none of that, because there's so many dancing schools."⁸⁷ She suggested that professionalization—the development of training, fairer wages, and fairer employment structures for performers—had eradicated the structural need for supplementary income and made women less vulnerable to exploitation.

⁸⁵ Claire Ruane interviewed by Martha Vicinus, British Library Sound Collection, F2221, June 13, 1975.

⁸⁶ Norah Dickinson interviewed by Martha Vicinus, British Library Sound Collection, F2272, June 30, 1975.

⁸⁷ Annie Hartley interviewed by Martha Vicinus.

Having established this change, however, Hartley went on to hint at a more complicated contemporary picture, viewed through the perspective of her son-in-law who ran an agency in Blackpool:

Young girls, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, they're so different to what we... seemed to be in that time... They'll do anything to get in. We had to show talent. I never did an audition in my life, but I've seen others do it. And they'll do anything, any amount of thing... to get in... these days. Before an agent [inaudible] would want to, 'Let me see what you can do.' They don't get a chance now, the girl's there first. She's making up first. It's really a peculiar business now.⁸⁸

Sexual exploitation had not gone away, she implied, but was more insidious in its operations. It was a “peculiar business,” invoking the etymology of “peculiar” as relating to what is “one’s own, personal, private.”⁸⁹ Hartley’s description of “young girls” who will “do anything, any amount of thing” and “mak[e] up first” repeats some of the tropes of “casting couch” in its presentation of ambitious and immoral actresses. This relates to a wider trend in the imaginary of women’s professionalization in the early-to-mid twentieth century, which gave women the responsibility of professionalizing through their own personal conduct: “It is a time for women to think clearly and resolutely about the requirements and obligations of professional life; to recognize that they cannot expect at the same time full professional recognition and the full privileges of leisure,” wrote Ida Noyes Hall in 1921.⁹⁰ Hartley’s

⁸⁸ Annie Hartley interviewed by Martha Vicinus.

⁸⁹ "peculiar, adj. and n.". OED Online. Oxford University Press, June 2021. Available at <https://www-oed-com.uea.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/139494?redirectedFrom=peculiar&>

⁹⁰ Ida Noyes Hall, *Women Professional Workers* (USA: Women’s Education and Industrial Union, 1921), 18. In the UK, while younger women joined the workforce in greater numbers in the early twentieth century, professionalization was hampered by marriage bars, which persisted in most industries until the Second World War (Selina Todd, *Young Women, Work, and Family in England 1918-1950* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005], 26). In the performing arts, this was a social pressure rather than a rule, but intra-industry marriages,

account—like the “casting couch” cliché—situates responsibility with women and girls, and elides those perpetuating the exploitation. Sexual exploitation was at once confined to the past—“there’s none of that now”—and carried over into the present, lending it an anachronistic quality, as expectations about professionalization starkly contrasted reality.

While interviewees drew on some of established facets of the “casting couch” cliché, at times their accounts strained its limits. Kennett described:

Well, yes, I do believe it, because it happened—it happened with [music hall performer and agent] Archie Pitt because um speaking... openly, he used to find out which girls in the troupe hadn’t been with a man. And one of them pulled my leg one day and they said, ‘We’re going to tell’—AP they used to call him—‘about you.’ I said, ‘Don’t you dare.’ But uh he had a room and there was a couch in the room and the wall all greasy, it’s perfectly true.⁹¹

The chorus girls’ joke is both threatening and potentially protective, in that it enables the circulation of information. Such “intimate speech” or gossip demands attention as an archive of sexual exploitation, because it allows knowledge to circulate without the consequences of a public statement.⁹² As in the “casting couch” cliché, scenic detail—the couch, the greasy wall—is deployed to convey information without connecting it to a particular woman, but here the focus remains on Pitt as perpetrator rather than erasing him. The emerging picture is of a very powerful agent systematically raping women in his employ. Kennett immediately retreated from this, however, with the comment, “You get more that way,” returning to the

deaths of spouses, and the breakdown of relationships meant that many women did continue to work while raising children or alternatively remained single.

⁹¹ Vera Kennett interviewed by Martha Vicinus.

⁹² Elizabeth Horodowich, “Gossip,” in *Information: Keywords*, ed. Michele Kennerly, Samuel Frederick, and Jonathan E. Abel (New York: Columbia University Press: 2021): 89; see also Liam Grealy, “Cliché, gossip, and anecdote as supervision training,” *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 38, no. 4 (2016): 348; and Christina Scott, “Gossip,” *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity* 7, no. 17 (1993): 5.

configuration of responsibility and ambition associated with “casting couch.”⁹³ In this sense, the cliché defended Kennett from fully recognizing the violence implicit in the story that she was telling.

5. Genre as Defense

The #MeToo movement, writes Leigh Gilmore, was “as much a new hearing as a new telling,” given that in narrating their experiences, survivors of sexual abuse are frequently accused of “bad timing [...] always too much, too soon or too late.”⁹⁴ For Williams, (mis)timing is a key aspect of body genres: the pathos of melodrama stems from realisation coming “too late!” while in horror the arrival of a threat is “too early!”⁹⁵ And all three body genres are characterised by their perceived excessiveness—too much. In other words, the accusations thrown at people recounting experiences of sexual abuse are, in part, expressions of genre trouble.

Women who worked as performers in the early-to-mid-twentieth century made use of comedy, clichés, and euphemisms to attempt to communicate their experiences of sexual exploitation, which were often difficult to relate. The cliché “casting couch” may seem an unpromising start for this task: minimizing and obfuscating exploitation and violence, it offers their familiarity as a source of pleasure by situating them in farcical, pornographic, and melodramatic genre scenes. For those articulating experiences of sexual exploitation however, said aloud to a sympathetic listener, as in the Vicinus interviews, the cliché’s gesture towards joke afforded sexual exploitation discursive presence.

⁹³ Vera Kennett interviewed by Martha Vicinus.

⁹⁴ Leigh Gilmore, “Visual and Verbal Testimony in the #MeToo movement,” in *The New Feminist Literary Studies*, ed. J Cooke (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020): 27-8

⁹⁵ Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” 11.

Dodie Smith's memoir demonstrates how she used comedy both to convey and to conceal sexual exploitation, in a manner that allowed her to maintain her "achieved self," in Postlewait's words. By focusing on her own actualization within a sexual adventure both thrilling and disappointing, Smith's comic memoir manifests a form of cruel optimism which recalls Berlant's "genre as defense." The autobiography expresses Smith's enduring hope for an escape from gendered exploitation, enacted through attachment to acting work and heterosexual love and desire, which emerge as gendered exploitation in their own right.

The contrast to Vicinus' interviews and Bourne's biographies indicate that these comic scenes and the optimism they contain were both classed and racialized, drawing on affiliations between whiteness, financial independence, and comedic impermeability. While Bourne's biographies suggest that concealing sexual exploitation constituted racialized labor for his subjects, Vicinus' interviews indicate how class and material need undercut farcical stories of quick wits and circular chases. The discursive means available, however, meant that assumptions embedded in "casting couch" continued to shape interviewees' responses, concealing violence and repeating the trope of the ambitious, sexually subversive women, even as the same accounts evidenced endemic sexual exploitation and the impact of low wages.

Berlant's theorization illuminates the role of affect in the creation of a historical present from which a subject can speak, while Ahmed reminds us that such looking back is always, at least nascently, political. Berlant's concept of genre spans literary, textual, and performative modes, embracing both quotidian performativity and the aesthetic conventions and codifications of performance art, animated by Berlant's impulse to "stage incommensurate approaches to a problem/object in order to attend to its instability, density, and openness."⁹⁶ Applying Berlant to these sources demonstrates that the feminine modes the

⁹⁶ Berlant, *Desire/Love*, 2.

subjects enact simultaneously perform gender, racialization, and class: the notion of “cruel optimism” reveals more about the experiences of white, middle-class women than any other group. Nonetheless, viewing these sources through an expanded concept of genre also allows us to hear the silences. Sexual exploitation and violence in proximity to casting practices were (and remain) simultaneously a matter of violence and illegality, workers’ rights, and scenes of fantasy projected onto and within the performing arts. Historical investigation of such abuse requires multi-layered theorisation because this off-stage abuse has been excused, elided, normalised, and codified through on-stage genre conventions. While its traces are textual, they invoke bodily sensations through apparently excessive genre conventions which work to inscribe what can be known. Perhaps this is part of what Berlant means when they describe melodrama as “realist,” defined as the “presence of a relation that invests an object/scene with the prospect of the world’s continuity.”⁹⁷ The casting couch cliché has offered this assurance for a century, providing a limited, distorted mode in which to allow the discursive existence of sexual abuse. It is for Theatre and Performance Studies to attend to the “ruptures and gaps” in these representations, to quote Peggy Phelan, and offer a new hearing to the complex individual experiences in the archive.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 52.

⁹⁸ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: the Politics of Performance* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2003), 2.