

Hunting Horcruxes: Cancel Culture as a Means of Destruction

by Emma Piersanti

In many different stories, there are several ways that people strive for immortality. A spell. An ancient elixir. Bathing in fountains of magical waters. Or, a much more gruesome task, the ripping apart of one's soul into multiple fragments to then be hidden in various objects, allowing a person to be anchored to the mortal world forever. If you have ever watched or read the *Harry Potter* series, you may recognize this path of immortality as the creation of horcruxes. Voldemort was known for creating seven; squeezing parts of his soul into objects like a necklace and a diary in the hope to outlive those around him and gain insurmountable power. I remember being fascinated with this idea when I watched *Harry Potter* for the first time. The fact that someone would go to such lengths to live forever; the elusive and mysterious objects scattered around with souls lurking inside them; and the hunt that Harry, Ron, and Hermione went on to find them all. And in the end, the clean kill of Voldemort after they found and destroyed all the horcruxes.

Today, years after I watched the series for the first time, I have noticed that these fantastical ideas can be found in our everyday, digital society – in the all-consuming, ever-present phenomenon of cancel culture. People cancel others – hunting their horcruxes, seeking to eradicate a person's social or professional life completely. But these people don't go down like Voldemort did. They persist on through their cancellation – creating newly made horcruxes, insisting upon their immortality among digital and physical spaces. Through this analogy, I can inspect and uncover the power dynamics, destructive behaviour, and overall ineffective cyclical patterns within cancel culture. Specifically, I will be focusing on the creator of horcruxes herself – not Voldemort, but JK Rowling.

JKR was once best known for her creation of the *Harry Potter* series, but recently she has garnered attention for something much less magical: her various tweets and online statements regarding the transgender community. Her relationship with cancel culture as a result of her transphobic views has been long and complex, and this is only mirrored by the long and complex transformation of cancel culture into the hunt for horcruxes.

The Hunt

The idea that cancel culture is equivalent to hunting horcruxes means people want to completely get rid of those they feel do, say, or believe something wrong. But the origins of cancel culture reveal this was not always the case. Cancel culture has roots in Black Twitter, where it developed from concepts such as ‘reading’ and ‘calling out’ (Clark, 89). These terms signify when people in online spaces identify, evaluate, and seek accountability for major instances of inequality (Clark, 89). It is viewed as a productive form of activism that aims “to protect the particularly vulnerable in online spaces” (Clark, 89), and can be associated with JKR’s cancellation. JKR’s journey with cancel culture is cited as beginning from multiple different online interactions, but was most notably sparked by her tweet from 2019 supporting Maya Forstater.

Forstater is a researcher whose contract with the Center for Global Development was not renewed because of her tweets opposing the U.K.’s Gender Recognition Act and her overall value of biological sex over personal gender identification (Ivy). There was obviously a varied response to JKR’s support, but they included ones that acknowledged the large-scale inequality at play, and aimed to protect the targets of it. There were Twitter users who stated that their goal

was “not to cancel JK Rowling as a person and stoke mob outrage” (@eugenegu), but to inform, debunk misinformation, and discuss the harm transgender people already face and the potential harm JKR could facilitate.

In these responses there is a flicker of cancel culture’s predecessors, as well as what might be seen as its original sentiment or at least the sentiment of some who participate in it: to remove one’s support from someone or something you disagree with.

But JKR didn’t stop, and neither did cancel culture. In 2020, JKR tweeted a litany of opinions about the transgender community. This included taking issue with an article that discussed issues women, non-binary people, and trans individuals faced because it used the phrase ‘people who menstruate’.

There is not a clean divide between the previous approach to cancel culture and what I describe as hunting horcruxes. There are instances of both in the 2019 Maya Forstater fiasco and JKR’s numerous tweets from 2020, but I want to use the latter to show how the hunt truly began.

As a result of her tweets, JKR received death threats and people who condemned those sending death threats were sometimes condemned or critiqued themselves. *Harry Potter* books were burned and videos of it were posted on TikTok, remarkably reminiscent of how Rowena Ravenclaw’s diadem, Voldemort’s horcrux, was destroyed in a rampant fire in the Room of Requirement. And literal fires were paired with figurative ones, as many small disputes occurred between internet users everywhere. Long Twitter chains were posted of people arguing over whether the author is talentless or not, throwing around words like “spoilt brat” and “bully” (@zwitterio), and picking apart whether one person’s tweet conveys support for JKR or not. More recently after the release of the game *Hogwarts Legacy*, a video game associated with the *Harry Potter* universe, a website was published so people could monitor which streamers were

playing it and presumably cancel them for it (Gwilliam). I am not trying to discredit the anger the people carrying out these actions have towards transphobia, nor am I arguing whether or not boycotting or monitoring the use of *Hogwarts Legacy* is the correct course of action. What I am doing is noticing a hunt; one that aims to destroy. There is a stark difference in these examples of behaviour than those associated with seeking accountability or consciously removing one's support. The basis of these actions is still to critique JKR for transphobia, but their execution reveals a shift in focus. Often in these scenarios the issues facing trans individuals are not directly discussed; the purpose now seeming to be to eliminate JKR and anything or anyone that is or seems to be associated with her. To find her horcruxes and smash them to the ground. The problem, among many, is unlike Voldemort's seven finite objects, the horcruxes I am discussing are not as easily destroyable. If anything, the hunt for them makes it easier to create more.

Remaining Immortal

It's fitting that the creator of horcruxes can so efficiently make more. Movies based on JKR's books have continued to be released, games like *Hogwarts Legacy* have come out, and reunion specials like *Return to Hogwarts* have aired. Although JKR is distant from these continuations – as she wasn't in the reunion and she wasn't directly involved in the creation of *Hogwarts Legacy* – she still makes a profit because from them, her ideas are still a part of them, and therefore her career is far from dead. This happens all the time; cancel culture aims to kill a public figures career, but they revive themselves with a movie, or game, or whole brand with a piece of their soul sitting inside. But there is another way people with power can create horcruxes.

When Voldemort tried to kill Harry Potter as a baby, he accidentally turned him into a horcrux. What was meant to destroy him became a part of what was keeping Voldemort alive. Celebrities like JKR do the same with cancel culture, but not by accident.

A month after JKR's Twitter tirade, she was one of many individuals who signed "A Letter on Justice and Open Debate" from Harper's magazine. The letter cautions the polarization, intolerance, and severe punishment movements like cancel culture can facilitate. In theory, the letter promotes a society that is able to communicate and find reasonable solutions to controversial issues; however, there is another possible side to the sentiment.

Instances of calling out and cancel culture have often been looked on by outsiders, specifically journalists, who then "narrativize(d) being canceled into a moral panic akin to actual harm" (Clark, 89). These outsiders create and spread unfounded fear around rights to free speech and people's safety. But what happens when these fears manifest, and harmful behaviour does take place? We can see it in the death threats directed towards JKR or the sites made to monitor an individual's private activity. It seems like, just as Voldemort's attempt to kill Harry, it backfires. In these attempts at destruction, avenues for fear mongering and distraction are created instead. This can be seen in JKR's own letter she published on her website following her tweets.

The piece covers a lot, including her opinions on gender and free speech, but what I want to focus on is the discussion of her experience with cancel culture. JKR states that she was on her "fourth or fifth cancellation by then" (Rowling), that she was being called "cunt and bitch" (Rowling), and that she received "persistent low level (of) harassment" (Rowling). Anyone, including JKR, is free to discuss and post about their experiences online. But through these statements it can be seen that the focus once again drifts from the trans community and JKR's

beliefs involving them to the threat of cancel culture. There is a clear connection between the hunt for horcruxes, and how those hunted can use it to their 'advantage'. To pull away from their controversial online interactions and focus on how others are trying to destroy them as a person. In this way, cancel culture used as a tool to fear monger and distract becomes a horcrux; a way to live on and through cancellation.

It doesn't help that hunting horcruxes has seemed to become a hobby. When Harry, Ron, and Hermione set out to hunt horcruxes it was a fight for survival. But many hunts across digital landscapes can feel as if they are for sport. An example comes from the TikTok beauty community. Mikayla Nogueira, a beauty influencer who has a large following on TikTok, was the target of a brief hunt earlier this year because of a tube of mascara. She praised a new mascara product in a video review, but it was highly suspected she wore fake eyelashes and lied about it.

The comment section was filled with accusations and many videos were posted speculating and bashing her. When cancel culture appears in situations like this it fuels the ability to use the phenomenon to fear monger; to validate panic around free speech or public shaming. More significantly, when individuals truly need to be held accountable for harmful behaviour, such as transphobia, those calls for action can begin to be confused with these frequent and unproductive hunts. It can be easy to label the identification of injustice and need for accountability as simply a case of cancel culture – especially by those with power and influence.

The Hunt is not Over

Voldemort's life and death were presented as complex, elusive ordeals, but they are actually sort of simple. A finite amount of horcruxes were hunted and destroyed and led to Voldemort's body evaporating into ashes. The real-life hunt and creation of horcruxes is what is not so simple. JKR's experience cannot be denoted as merely cancel culture. There are instances of productive 'call out' work, as well as harmful attempts of destruction. There is the use of cancel culture to create fear and distract, as well as a validation of those fears. By viewing cancel culture through the framework of horcruxes, we can reveal and investigate these complex and interactive layers, as well as identify the spiraling, ineffective, and harmful effects everyone faces when cancel culture takes the form of a hunt. And the hunt is not over. People are seeking out horcruxes to destroy every day in digital environments, even though those they hunt will likely remain immortal. There is no clear solution to this now fractured and complicated approach to justice and communication, but through looking at instances with curiosity and the possibility for multiple answers we can begin to understand it better.

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