Comparing innocent ‘mansplaining’ to the global epidemics of rape and femicide might seem like a long shot to any level-headed, legitimate thinker such as yourself. But how do we express ourselves as ‘level-headed’ and ‘legitimate’ in the first place? In her collection of essays Men Explain Things to Me, Rebecca Solnit hones in on a central problem in the gender wars: the silencing of women and its subtle but dangerous repercussions. She begins with a lighthearted anecdote that reveals a patronizing ‘mansplainer.’ We watch with discomfort as an older, ‘established’ man attempts to teach Solnit about the book she herself wrote, about a topic he has briefly skimmed but over which she has full domain. It seems she cannot rebut this laughable condescension as she begins to feel the effects of the insidious “presumption that…keeps women from speaking up and being heard when they dare” (“Men Explain Things To Me” 4). To persuade us of the true danger of this presumption, she draws parallels between this female-silencing in the inter-personal sphere and larger global trends that sustain massive inequity. She suggests that personal expression, especially that of public female figures, could be harnessed as a means of illuminating and correcting issues of gender inequity. The relationship between patterns of female-silencing and women’s struggle to use personal expression to end those patterns reveals Solnit’s ultimate belief that feminist writers like herself must carefully choose their
mode of personal expression in order to breach a silencing, patriarchal world.

Solnit occupies the bulk of her collection with a critical look at patterns of female-silencing in the context of global inequity. First, she turns to the epidemic of gendered violence in her essay “The Longest War.” Discussing sexualized harassment on the Internet, Solnit argues that “the difference between these online gamers and the Taliban men who, last October, tried to murder fourteen-year-old Malala Yousafzai for speaking out…is one of degree. Both are trying to silence and punish women for claiming voice, power, and the right to participate” (“The Longest War” 32). We too often view incidents like the attack on Malala as outrageous and unthinkable, unrelated to everyday problems like online bullying. Yet these issues stem from a shared cause. Both result from men trying to maintain control over a woman, attempting to exert total influence over her right to speak up. In her essay “Worlds Collide in a Luxury Suite,” Solnit examines international economic hegemony and asks us: “How can I tell a story we already know too well? Her name was Africa. His was France . . . Her name was Asia. His was Europe. Her name was silence. His was power” (42). The massive inequity that exists between the privileged belt of Euro-American countries and the Global South can be seen as an extension, Solnit argues, of the gap between male and female power. Solnit suggests that Africa and Asia are continents plunged into poverty by economic giants that silence them, just like women have been silenced for centuries. As we begin to connect the dots, we can see the deeper roots of less harmful incidents like “mansplaining” attempts and try to address them by revealing one of their root causes: the silencing of women.

Implicitly, female-silencing serves as a springboard for Solnit’s examination of how personal expression—the ability to voice opinions through text, media, and conversation in the public sphere and, furthermore, to be heard as credible—is central to the liberation of modern day women. In her essay “Cassandra Among the Creeps,” she urges: “If we could . . . name this pattern of discrediting, we could bypass recommencing the credibility conversation every time a woman speaks” (116). Women find their stories, complaints, and experiences discredited time and time again because of a fundamental
devaluing of their speech and its credibility. In instances of rape, violence, and often death, language and power go hand in hand, because these global trends flourish, as Solnit persuaded us earlier, in an arena where victims are kept from voicing their legitimate concerns. With the concrete example of “#YesAllWomen,” Solnit shows how the power of language has indeed served as a tool for feminist liberation: “The term ‘sexual entitlement’ was suddenly everywhere, and blogs and commentary and conversations began to address it with brilliance and fury . . . the entry of the phrase into everyday speech . . . will help identify and discredit manifestations of this phenomenon. It will help change things. Words matter” (132). With terms like sexual entitlement, rape culture, and domestic violence being adopted into the common vernacular, we are able to recognize these horrible phenomena as patterns rather than isolated events. And if everyone can get on the same linguistic page, then it will be more likely that we will be able to understand and believe the victims of these patterns. The words we use shape our perception of a sexually violent world, and Solnit empowers language with the capacity to produce long lasting change. We will only be able to address these recurring patriarchal trends if equipped with the proper language to describe them.

Like Solnit, feminist scholar Kelly Wilz sees language and personal expression as fundamental weapons in the gender wars. In her blog post “A Feminist’s Guide to Critiquing Hillary Clinton,” Wilz pinpoints the unique treatment of female voices in the public sphere, particularly that of presidential nominee Hillary Clinton. Wilz examines how “pundits and others criticize her shrillness, her voice, and her ‘masculine’ speaking style” as a ruse for discrediting “her ‘likeability’” in a particularly harsh and unfair way. Clinton is unfairly attacked for the literal manifestation of her voice because this vocal expression is central to her ability to be seen as credible and thus win the favor of our citizens. Like all public female figures, she is at a disadvantage because credibility is an honor that men exclusively have held for centuries. Solnit quotes Laurie Penny to describe this threat to women’s voices in the public sphere: “An opinion, it seems, is the short skirt of the Internet. Having one and flaunting it is somehow asking . . . male keyboard-bashers to tell you how they’d like to rape, kill, and urinate on you” (“The Longest War” 31). This helps explain Clinton’s strug-
gle to join and be heard in the ‘boys’ club’ of American politics, to confront the loud backlash of a thousand misogynistic keyboard-bashers. Wilz’s opening line says it all: “Fair warning: This blog post is not going to be angry. It will not be written in all caps. There will be no vulgarity. And it probably won’t go viral. I don’t care.” Consider Wilz’s self-reflection: she realizes that even her own blog post about the unfair treatment of female voices could be interpreted by readers as the angry, all-caps-shrieking of a dramatic female who simply wants the attention of going viral. She understands the nature of her audience and struggles to vocalize a problem that, as a female writer with a short-skirted opinion, she struggles with herself.

If the problem is that silencing personal expression is a tool used against women to perpetuate inequity, then how can women express this problem of inequity in the first place? Solnit herself struggles with this vicious cycle because, as a woman trying to express her voice, she is torn between declaration and accommodation. On the one hand, she seeks authority, using at least ten factual statistics in her first two short essays alone so that she is not labeled as she was earlier in life for objection to a man’s behavior: “subjective, delusional, over-wrought, dishonest—in a nutshell, female” (“Men Explain Things to Me” 7). On the other hand, she accommodates readers whom she fears may find her ethos too impersonal: “But maybe you’re tired of statistics, so let’s just talk about a single incident that happened in my city” (“The Longest War” 26). Throughout many of her other essays, she continues to thread a tale of literary narrative, using both personal vignettes and telling the vivid tales of others, as a way of personalizing her argument and sounding more human. In a restrictive, patriarchal environment, Solnit is scared of a potentially restricting audience, one whom she must accommodate with an open-minded, investigative writing style. She frequently asks rhetorical questions and qualifies her own argument to invite defensive readers into her thought process. Solnit’s hidden fear reveals itself in this rhetorical accommodation: she wants to ensure that her voice seems less stringent and more nuanced, less tyrannical and more democratic.

Critics like Stevie Davies and Helen Lewis notice a similar trend. In Davies’ book review, subtitled “Fearless Feminist Gives the Misogynists a Good Talking-to,” she describes Solnit’s voice as
“open, communicative and democratic.” Despite the “hard facts and harder truths” Solnit writes about, Davies describes her arguments as “often [proceeding] by indirection,” perhaps because, as Lewis predicts in her essay review “The Essay That Launched the Term ‘Mansplaining,’” she is concerned that critics might “[caricature] her as a shrieking harpy.” Solnit’s fear fuels a rhetorical balancing act between sounding like a “clear and cool” authority while remembering to express that “these are my thoughts, now what are yours?” (Lewis, Davies). She feels as though she must coax her audience into democratic agreement rather than employing the scarier alternative: outspoken confidence. And so, as Solnit uses more and more rhetorical techniques to lighten the harsh, truth-bearing load on her readers, her voice becomes quieter and quieter. She herself undergoes a sort of self-silencing, the kind she felt when confronting that first “mansplainer,” that first male authority figure who convinced her that yes, of course she should be quiet. In this sense, female-silencing has become normalized to the extent that Solnit cannot help but project her fears onto her own writing. She is not only aware of the threat to female voices in the public sphere, but she also shows a fear of confronting it.

In fearfully shaping and editing her voice to accommodate an audience’s status quo, Solnit’s rhetorical strategies actually perpetuate female-silencing. In Jessica Valenti’s “Not All Comments are Created Equal: The Case for Ending Online Comments,” the author’s response to silencing comes in the form of a proposition to ban online comment threads, where sexist harassment is rampant. Valenti quotes Laurie Penny’s short skirt idea, as Solnit does, in order to expose the “never-ending stream of derision that women . . . endure” online. Valenti sees online comments sections as breeding grounds for the oppression of female voices, often in the political arenas that matter most, so she calls for banning them altogether. She quickly admits, “It’s true, I could just stop reading comments. But I shouldn’t have to. Ignoring hateful things doesn’t make them go away.” Valenti sees ignoring backlash as akin to accommodating it, and her rejection of online accommodation hearkens back to Solnit’s emphasis on the “difference . . . of degree” between the tacit acceptance of female-silencing on the Internet and larger instances like Malala Yousafzai’s
attack. Solnit explicitly focuses on ending these patterns of accommodation and would join Valenti in her outrage. Yet her writing implicitly suggests that she herself cannot escape these patterns. With twisted irony, Solnit projects her own fears of misogynistic backlash toward her writing and makes accommodations in order to avoid it instead. While she may recognize, like Valenti, that she should not have to self-censor to accommodate readers, fear—especially unspoken fear—is a powerful force.

In fact, Solnit struggles with a fear of what Katha Pollitt describes as “no-platforming.” In her article “Feminism Needs More Thinkers Who Aren’t Right 100 Percent of the Time,” Pollitt explores various recent controversies at universities in which feminist speakers were “no-platformed,” or banned from presenting, as a result of their political views. Pollitt asks: what happens to “the questions they raise and the productive lines of thought they open up” when they are, then, attacked with every view they allegedly got wrong? What happens to the Valenits and the Solnits who are scared to enter the public sphere without fear of retort? Whether it is banning comments or “no-platforming,” the issue of free speech arises in a world where the right to personal expression is linked to power. But in choosing the extreme solution of elimination, of banning some forms of dissent as suggested by Valenti, we are committing the very acts of silencing that sustain, in Solnit’s eyes, a massively gendered world. And choosing the other extreme, Solnit’s self-silencing, could foster what Pollitt sees as a feminist “movement that has no room for controversy.”

This controversy is indeed reflected in the confidence with which Solnit spews statistical facts, the bravery with which she examines the historical roots of troubling phenomena. Nevertheless, her hidden fears prevent her from declaring feminist truth in the outspoken manner that she wants other women to feel comfortable acting in. Clearly, language and personal expression are major sources of power in the public sphere, whether they are used as silencing weapons or whether they are harnessed by feminist figures for the greater good. In publishing her essays, Solnit has already taken a major step toward vocalizing the patterns of female-silencing that have remained hidden for so long. Even her creation of the term “mansplaining” symbolizes an effort to liberate women using the previously constricting constructs
of language. Yet she is limited by her audience who must be lured into confronting a difficult truth and by a society who suggests that her truth is not as credible as she believes it to be. She treads a difficult line between expressing her voice with strength yet with nuance, with pointedness at her targets yet awareness of her detractors. She is caught in a Catch-22, one that forces her to move to an even scarier alternative.

This alternative is reflected in our history. As with any major social change, we look back with admiration at its first pioneers, the ones who were brave enough to speak up when it mattered. We forget how dangerous, how lonely, and how rare it is for a loud, singular voice—not to mention a female one—to resist those patriarchal fears, to evade the normalized instinct toward accommodation. What is important to realize, however, is that the more Solnit and writers like her accommodate this status quo, the more power it will have. So perhaps she must follow some examples: Betty Friedan, bell hooks, Coretta Scott King, and so many more who have opted to keep their voices loud without resorting to silencing others or themselves. As Pollitt notes, “a movement that has no room for controversy is a movement that risks talking only to itself.” When Solnit is empowered to inhabit the true volume of her voice, to express the actual extent of her controversial views as a writer and as a woman, we will have one more leader showing us how to stop talking to ourselves and start talking to each other. We will have a world in which men will stop explaining and women will stop accommodating. And hopefully, we can lead ourselves to a fascinating conversation about equality.

WORKS CITED


“Cassandra Among the Creeps.” 103-17.
“#YesAllWomen.” 121-36.
