The Mother of All Questions

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Further feminist essays from the author of
Men Explain Things to Me

Contents

A Short History of Silence

"What I most regretted were my silences. . . . And there are so many silences to be broken."

—**Audre Lorde**

THE OCEAN AROUND THE ARCHIPELAGO

Silence is golden, or so I was told when I was young. Later, everything changed. Silence equals death, the queer activists fighting the neglect and repression around AIDS shouted in the streets. Silence is the ocean of the unsaid, the unspeakable, the repressed, the erased, the unheard. It surrounds the scattered islands made up of those allowed to speak and of what can be said and who listens. Silence occurs in many ways for many reasons; each of us has his or her own sea of unspoken words.

English is full of overlapping words, but for the purposes of this essay, regard *silence* as what is imposed and *quiet* as what is sought. The tranquility of a quiet place, of quieting one's own mind, of a retreat from words and bustle, is acoustically the same as the silence of intimidation or repression but psychically and politically something entirely different. What is unsaid because serenity and introspection are sought is as different from what is not said be-

cause the threats are high or the barriers are great as swimming is from drowning. Quiet is to noise as silence is to communication. The quiet of the listener makes room for the speech of others, like the quiet of the reader taking in words on the page, like the white of the paper taking ink.

"We are volcanoes," Ursula K. Le Guin once remarked. "When we women offer our experience as our truth, as human truth, all the maps change. There are new mountains." The new voices that are undersea volcanoes erupt in open water, and new islands are born; it's a furious business and a startling one. The world changes. Silence is what allows people to suffer without recourse, what allows hypocrisies and lies to grow and flourish, crimes to go unpunished. If our voices are essential aspects of our humanity, to be rendered voiceless is to be dehumanized or excluded from one's humanity. And the history of silence is central to women's history.

Words bring us together, and silence separates us, leaves us bereft of the help or solidarity or just communion that speech can solicit or elicit. Some species of trees spread root systems underground that interconnect the individual trunks and weave the individual trees into a more stable whole that can't so easily be blown down in the wind. Stories and conversations are like those roots. For a century, the human response to stress and danger has been defined as "fight or flight." A 2000 UCLA study by several psychologists noted that this research was based largely on studies of male rats and male human beings. But studying women led them to a third, often deployed option: gather for solidarity, support, advice. They noted that "behaviorally, females' responses are more marked by a pattern of 'tend-and-befriend.' Tending involves nurturant activities designed to protect the self and offspring that promote safety and reduce distress; befriending is the creation and maintenance of social networks that may aid in this process." Much of this

is done through speech, through telling of one's plight, through being heard, through hearing compassion and understanding in the response of the people you tend to, whom you befriend. Not only women do this, but perhaps women do this more routinely. It's how I cope, or how my community helps me cope, now that I have one.

Being unable to tell your story is a living death and sometimes a literal one. If no one listens when you say your ex-husband is trying to kill you, if no one believes you when you say you are in pain, if no one hears you when you say *help*, if you don't dare say *help*, if you have been trained not to bother people by saying *help*. If you are considered to be out of line when you speak up in a meeting, are not admitted into an institution of power, are subject to irrelevant criticism whose subtext is that women should not be here, or heard. Stories save your life. And stories are your life. We are our stories, stories that can be both prison and the crowbar to break open the door of that prison; we make stories to save ourselves or to trap ourselves or others, stories that lift us up or smash us against the stone wall of our own limits and fears. Liberation is always in part a storytelling process: breaking stories, breaking silences, making new stories. A free person tells her own story. A valued person lives in a society in which her story has a place.

Violence against women is often against our voices and our stories. It is a refusal of our voices, and of what a voice means: the right to self-determination, to participation, to consent or dissent, to live and participate, to interpret and narrate. A husband hits his wife to silence her; a date rapist or acquaintance rapist refuses to let the "no" of his victim mean what it should, that she alone has jurisdiction over her body; rape culture asserts that women's testimony is worthless, untrustworthy; anti-abortion activists also seek to silence the self-determination of women; a murderer silences forever. These are assertions that the victim has no rights, no value, is not

an equal. These silencings take place in smaller ways: the people harassed and badgered into silence online, talked over and cut out in conversation, belittled, humiliated, dismissed. Having a voice is crucial. It's not all there is to human rights, but it's central to them, and so you can consider the history of women's rights and lack of rights as a history of silence and breaking silence.

Speech, words, voice sometimes change things in themselves when they bring about inclusion, recognition, the rehumanization that undoes dehumanization. Sometimes they are only the preconditions to changing rules, laws, regimes to bring about justice and liberty. Sometimes just being able to speak, to be heard, to be believed are crucial parts of membership in a family, a community, a society. Sometimes our voices break those things apart; sometimes those things are prisons. And then when words break through unspeakability, what was tolerated by a society sometimes becomes intolerable. Those not impacted can fail to see or feel the impact of segregation or police brutality or domestic violence: stories bring home the trouble and make it unavoidable.

By *voice*, I don't mean only literal voice—the sound produced by the vocal cords in the ears of others—but the ability to speak up, to participate, to experience oneself and be experienced as a free person with rights. This includes the right not to speak, whether it's the right against being tortured to confess, as political prisoners are, or not to be expected to service strangers who approach you, as some men do to young women, demanding attention and flattery and punishing their absence. The idea of voice expanded to the idea of agency includes wide realms of power and powerlessness.*

* Once, talking to cultural historian Joel Dinerstein while he was researching his *American Cool* project, I asked why there were so few women on the list, and then I realized that the refusal to reach out or react that is the essence of much masculine cool would too often be read as catatonia or unacceptable arrogance from a woman. What makes him cool makes her cold.

Who has been unheard? The sea is vast, and the surface of the ocean is unmappable. We know who has, mostly, been heard on the official subjects: who held office, attended university, commanded armies, served as judges and juries, wrote books, and ran empires over the past several centuries. We know how it has changed somewhat, thanks to the countless revolutions of the twentieth century and after—against colonialism, against racism, against misogyny, against the innumerable enforced silences homophobia imposed, and so much more. We know that in the United States class was leveled out to some extent in the twentieth century and then reinforced toward the end, through income inequality and the withering away of social mobility and the rise of a new extreme elite. Poverty silences.

Who has been heard we know; they are the well-mapped islands, the rest are the unmappable sea of unheard, unrecorded humanity. Many over the centuries were heard and loved, and their words disappeared in the air as soon as they were spoken but took root in minds, contributed to the culture, like something composting into rich earth; new things grew from those words. Many others were silenced, excluded, ignored. The earth is seven-tenths water, but the ratio of silence to voice is far greater. If libraries hold all the stories that have been told, there are ghost libraries of all the stories that have not. The ghosts outnumber the books by some unimaginably vast sum. Even those who have been audible have often earned the privilege through strategic silences or the inability to hear certain voices, including their own.

The struggle of liberation has been in part to create the conditions for the formerly silenced to speak and be heard. An Englishwoman tells me that Britain has a growing prison population of old men, because countless victims whom no one was willing to hear before are now telling of sexual abuse. The most notorious British case is of

BBC entertainer Jimmy Savile, who was knighted and lauded and made into a celebrity. He died before more than 450 people charged him with sexual abuse, mostly young women but also younger boys and adult women. Four hundred and fifty people who were not heard, who perhaps did not think they had the right to speak out or even to object or to be believed. Or rather knew that they lacked those rights, that they were the voiceless.

John Lydon, aka Johnny Rotten of the Sex Pistols, said to the BBC of Savile, in 1978, "I bet he's into all kinds of seediness that we all know about, but are not allowed to talk about. I know some rumors. I bet none of this will be allowed out." Lydon's words weren't allowed out until 2013, when the unedited interview was released. Around that time other stories surfaced of pedophile rings involving prominent British politicians. Many of the crimes had happened long before. Some reportedly resulted in the deaths of child victims. Scandals involving public figures provide national and international versions of what are otherwise often small, local dramas about whose story will prevail. They are often how the winds of opinion change, as they prompt conversations. Sometimes they lay the groundwork for others to come forward to speak of other damage and other perpetrators. Lately, this has evolved into a process using social media to create collective tribunals, mass testimony, and mutual support that could be seen as a version of that "tend-and-befriend" behavior outlined above.

Silence is what allowed predators to rampage through the decades, unchecked. It's as though the voices of these prominent public men devoured the voices of others into nothingness, a narrative cannibalism. They rendered them voiceless to refuse and afflicted with unbelievable stories. *Unbelievable* means those with power did not want to know, to hear, to believe, did not want them to have voices. People died from being unheard. Then something changed.

The same story could be told of innumerable North American figures, of whom the famous recent examples are Fox News CEO Roger Ailes, charged by several women with workplace sexual harassment and persecution, exploitation, blackmail, and psychological abuse over a half century; Bill Cosby and his serial drug-aided rapes over the same time span; and Jian Ghomeshi in Canada, charged by several women with brutal assaults—powerful figures who knew their voices and credibility could drown out those they assaulted, until something broke, until silence was broken, until an ocean of stories roared forth and washed away their impunity. Even when the evidence was overwhelming some still hurled abuse and threats at the victims and found ways to deny the merits of their stories. Because to believe them would mean questioning foundational assumptions. It would be uncomfortable, and many speak of comfort as a right, even when—especially when—that comfort is built upon the suffering and silencing of others.

If the right to speak, if having credibility, if being heard is a kind of wealth, that wealth is now being redistributed. There has long been an elite with audibility and credibility, an underclass of the voiceless. As the wealth is redistributed, the stunned incomprehension of the elites erupts over and over again, a fury and disbelief that this woman or child dared to speak up, that people deigned to believe her, that her voice counts for something, that her truth may end a powerful man's reign. These voices, heard, upend power relations. A hotel cleaning woman launched the beginning of the end of International Monetary Fund chief and serial assailant Dominique Strauss-Kahn's career. Women have ended the careers of stars in many fields—or rather those stars have destroyed themselves by acts they engaged in with the belief that they had the impunity that comes with their victims' powerlessness. Many had impunity for many years, some for lifetimes; many now have found they no longer do.

Who is heard and who is not defines the status quo. Those who embody it, often at the cost of extraordinary silences with themselves, move to the center; those who embody what is not heard or what violates those who rise on silence are cast out. By redefining whose voice is valued, we redefine our society and its values.

My subject in this book is that subspecies of silence and silencing specific to women, if anything can be specific to more than half of humanity. If to have a voice, to be allowed to speak, to be heard and believed is essential to being an insider or a person of power, a human being with full membership, then it's important to recognize that silence is the universal condition of oppression, and there are many kinds of silence and of the silenced.

The category *women* is a long boulevard that intersects with many other avenues, including class, race, poverty and wealth. Traveling this boulevard means crossing others, and it never means that the city of silence has only one street or one route through it that matters. It is now useful to question the categories of male and female, but it's also useful to remember that misogyny is based on a devout belief in the reality of those categories (or is an attempt to reinforce them by demonstrating the proper role of each gender).

Genocide is a great silencing, and so is slavery. And it was in opposition to slavery that American feminism arose, born at the intersection. Elizabeth Cady Stanton went to the World's Antislavery Convention in London in 1840, one of many women abolitionists who traveled to participate, only to find that they could not be seated and could not speak. Even people who considered themselves champions of the oppressed could not see what was oppressive about an order so old it was perceived as natural. A controversy arose. Stanton wrote in her autobiography of the remarkable women gathered there, who were "all compelled to listen in silence to

the masculine platitudes on women's sphere." She went home furious, and that fury at being silenced and shut out, and the insight that resulted, gave rise to the first women's rights movement.

Along with gaining voting rights and access to schools and education, a significant part of the civil rights struggle was—and is—to include people of color on juries, both to give them the right of full participation and to give people on trial the right to be heard by people who might have some understanding of who they are and where they came from—a jury of their peers, as guaranteed in the Constitution. The racial makeup of juries was still being contested in the Supreme Court in 2016. The struggles around gender are analogous.

In 1927, seven years after women gained the vote nationally,† only nineteen states allowed women to serve on juries, and, even in 1961, the Supreme Court upheld Florida's automatic exemption of women jurors. Which means that many, many trials for gender violence and discrimination were heard by all-male juries in courtrooms with male lawyers presided over by male judges, a setup in which a woman victim's voice was extraordinarily likely to be discredited and silenced (unless she was testifying against someone in another silenced group: white women were sometimes used by white men as weapons against Black men). And that in this as in so many other ways, women did not have a voice in their society.

† It's sometimes said that Black women didn't get the vote until the civil rights era, which is true for both Black women and Black men in much of the South, but not of the nation as a whole; Black women in Chicago were organizing voting blocs before 1920, because Illinois women won the vote in 1913. Four Western states—Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, and Idaho—gave women the vote in the nineteenth century. Asian and Native women were disenfranchised in other ways well into the twentieth century, and some white women in the suffrage movement denigrated and excluded Black women. After the Civil War, founding feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton did not want to support the right of Black men to vote as an issue separate from the right of women to vote, which meant she and a sector of the women's movement did not support this struggle or even actively opposed it. Racist voter disenfranchisement became a major issue again in the twenty-first century.

Silence was the historic condition of women, denied education and a role in public life—positions as judges, priests, or almost any other speaking role—with rare exceptions. Women were silent in the houses of the spirit. In I Corinthians, St. Paul ordered, "Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak." Elsewhere the New Testament declares, "But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence." No woman became a priest in the Anglican Church in the United States until 1944, none in the Church of England until 1994. The first woman rabbi in the United States was ordained in 1972. No woman has been ordained in the Catholic Church.

Women were silent in the courts. No woman served on the US Supreme Court until 1981, and women currently only hold a third of the seats, the most ever. At Harvard Law School, where so many of the lords of the earth were groomed, the first petition for a woman's admittance was in 1871, and the first woman entered in 1950. Women were excluded from undergraduate enrollment in many of the Ivy League universities, where global power alliances are formed. The first woman undergraduate at Yale entered in 1969. The reception women received there was so hostile that in 1977 the nation's first Title IX lawsuit for campus sexual harassment and rape by professors, *Alexander v. Yale,* was filed. It set a precedent requiring campuses across the country to address these abuses as discrimination (but not enough changed: thirty-nine years later, in the summer of 2016, 169 philosophers signed a letter decrying a twenty-seven-year series of alleged sexual harassment incidents by Yale professor Thomas Pogge, whose specialty is the field of ethics).

New recognitions required new language, and feminism coined a plethora of words to describe the individual experiences that the conversations of the 1960s and 1970s were beginning to flush out of hiding. Susan Brownmiller coined the term *date rape* in 1975. The

term *sexual harassment* was perhaps coined in 1974 by Mary Rowe to describe misconduct at MIT, or by a group of women addressing the same problem at Cornell in 1975. The legendary lawyer Catherine MacKinnnon took the concept forward with her 1979 book *Sexual Harassment of Working Women.* The term and the concepts behind it would only become well known to the public with the Clarence Thomas–Anita Hill hearings in 1991. In 1993, Oklahoma and North Carolina became the last states to make raping one's spouse a crime. Lack of jurisdiction over one's own body is a form of silencing, a way of making what one says have no value, and words without value are worse than silence: one can be punished for them.

II: EVERY MAN AN ISLAND: MALE SILENCE

Silence is present everywhere under patriarchy, though it requires different silences from men than from women. You can imagine the policing of gender as the creation of reciprocal silences, and you can begin to recognize male silence as a tradeoff for power and membership. No one ever put it better than bell hooks, who said:

> The first act of violence that patriarchy demands of males is not violence toward women. Instead patriarchy demands of all males that they engage in acts of psychic self-mutilation, that they kill off the emotional parts of themselves. If an individual is not successful in emotionally crippling himself, he can count on patriarchal men to enact rituals of power that will assault his self-esteem.

That is, patriarchy requires that men silence themselves first (and perhaps it's worth noting again that, though patriarchy is a system that privileges men and masculinity, many women are complicit in it, some men rebel against it, and some people are undoing the rules of gender that prop it up). This means learning not only to be silent to others but also to themselves, about aspects of their inner life and self.

Reading hooks's passage, I was chilled, as though I suddenly understood that this is the plot of a horror movie or a zombie movie. The deadened seek out the living to exterminate feeling, either by making their targets join them in numbness or by intimidating or assaulting them into silence. In the landscape of silence, the three realms might be silence imposed from within; silence imposed from without; and silence that exists around what has not yet been named, recognized, described, or admitted. But they are not distinct; they feed each other; and what is unsayable becomes unknowable and vice versa, until something breaks.

A certain kind of emotional wholeness is the price men pay for power, and the renunciations begin early. When I questioned a nephew, as neutrally as possible, just before he turned five, about why pink was no longer among his favorite colors, he knew exactly what we were talking about: "I like girls. I just don't like girl *things*," he exclaimed, and he knew what girl things were and that he must not let them define him. In fact, he already despised them and segued into a tirade against My Little Pony.

I thought five was early to be bombarded until I shopped for a friend's unborn son and was reminded that our roles seize us at birth. Girls get being cuddly, pretty, attractive, and maybe passive: warm colors, kittens and flowers and flourishes. Boys get distance: cool colors and active figures, often menacing ones or ones that are removed from intimacy and emotion—sports figures, balls and bats, rocket ships, cold-blooded animals like reptiles, dinosaurs, and sharks, strange choices for helpless mammals who depend on nurture.

Masculinity is a great renunciation. The color pink is a small thing, but emotions, expressiveness, receptiveness, a whole array of possibilities get renounced by successful boys and men in everyday life, and often for men who inhabit masculinized realms—

sports, the military, the police, all-male workforces in construction or resource extraction—even more must be renounced to belong. Women get to keep a wider range of emotional possibility, though they are discouraged or stigmatized for expressing some of the fiercer ones, the feelings that aren't ladylike and deferential, and so much else—ambition, critical intelligence, independent analysis, dissent, anger. That is to say, silence is a pervasive force, distributed differently to different categories of people. It underlies a status quo that depends upon a homeostasis of silences.

Misogyny and homophobia are both forms of hating that which is not patriarchy. "What causes heterosexuality?" asked one of the stickers put up around my hometown as part of Queer Nation's insurgent campaign against homophobia a quarter century ago. It was a brilliant question reversing the conventional one, recognizing that heterosexuality was also socially constructed and did not have to be regarded as an unquestionable norm. I've been blessed to be around gay men since I was thirteen, around people who have resisted the indoctrinations of heterosexual masculinity, since at least some of its privileges excluded them or didn't interest them or weren't worth the tradeoff to them, or because dissenting erotically opened up the possibility of other kinds of dissent. Knowing them has been a long encounter with what else men could be.

Many of the gay men in my life have seemed more whole than most of the straight men I've known. They have been more able to experience and express a full range of emotion and to understand and appreciate it in others (and often to have honed perception of nuances and shades of meaning beyond the rest of us as well as the wit to express it). They have been soldiers who defected from patriarchy's war, people with the binocular vision we call humor: the ability to recognize the gaps between how things are and how they are supposed to be.

Masculinity itself was and is open to question in a culture that includes the spectrum from drag queens to aestheticized hypermasculinity, and in which men recognized themselves as subject of the male gaze. Beneath it all lies a sense that all identities are a costume you don, and behind that lies latitude about who you want to be. Of course everyone in every category of human being has the right to be awful, and the mere fact of one's orientation, like one's race, class, religion, and gender, doesn't necessarily generate liberation or insight; I am speaking not of all gay men but of my own friends and community.

In the heterosexual mainstream, women have performed the labor of holding and expressing emotion for others. When I was very young, I went on a road trip with my boyfriend, whose father, seeing us off, said, "Keep in touch. Your mother will be worried." She was the stand-in for his inexpressible emotions. She had the feelings that could be acknowledged. She was the one who filled in the home's silence with chatter to try to keep people connected, to be open in a house full of kind but shut-down men, decent men who were at worst uncomfortable with emotional expression and felt that connection was not their work.

If emotion must be killed, this is work that can make women targets. Less decent men hunt out vulnerability, because if being a man means learning to hate vulnerability, then you hate it in yourself and in the gender that has been carrying it for you. *Girl* and *pussy* have long been key insults used against boys and men, along with *gay* and *faggot*; a man must not be a woman, must not cry, must not be weak; and the fear of being gay was of being sexual in some way that might not be about domination and penetration, might be about being penetrated, being equal, being open. As if openness were weakness rather than strength. In ancient Greece and some contemporary cultures, masculinity has been defined by being he who penetrates. Being he

or she who is penetrated is regarded as degradation equivalent to not being masculine—which makes being heterosexually female a perpetual state of degradation and, perhaps, equates the penetrator to he who degrades. (In medieval Iceland, the insult "a troll uses you like a woman" was considered so deadly that the insulted party was granted the legal right to kill.)

Love is a constant negotiation, a constant conversation; to love someone is to lay yourself open to rejection and abandonment; love is something you can earn but not extort. It is an arena in which you are not in control, because someone else also has rights and decisions; it is a collaborative process; making love is at its best a process in which those negotiations become joy and play. So much sexual violence is a refusal of that vulnerability; so many of the instructions about masculinity inculcate a lack of skills and willingness to negotiate in good faith. Inability and entitlement deteriorate into a rage to control, to turn a conversation into a monologue of commands, to turn the collaboration of making love into the imposition of assault and the assertion of control. Rape is hate and fury taking love's place between bodies. It's a vision of the male body as a weapon and the female body (in heterosexual rape) as the enemy. What is it like to weaponize your body?

If you have not been taught to collaborate, to negotiate, to respect and pay attention, if you do not regard the beloved as your equal, endowed with certain inalienable rights, you are not well equipped for the work of love. We are in a world where men until recently in the industrialized world assumed that access to women's bodies was a right that women should not impede. It's still common to hear heterosexual men complain of the onerous unreasonableness of having to earn sexual access, and maybe we should remember that until recently in the United States husbands had unrestricted rights to their wives' bodies, which is the other way to

say that wives had almost no rights over their own bodies.

Only in California and New York in recent years did affirmative consent become the statewide standard for consensual sex on college campuses. When affirmative consent was signed into law, a host of men in the United States (and on the London-based *Guardian*'s website) raised a shriek of indignation that both parties had to be consciously, actively in favor of what was going on. It was telling that they regarded this as a terrible obstacle, newly erected. The previous criterion had been the absence of dissent, which of course meant intimidation, intoxication, and unconsciousness could all be read as consent. Silence was consent, in other words, as though silence said one thing when it can say so many, as though the burden was to issue a *no* rather than elicit a *yes*.

It's traditional to separate out rape from domestic violence from murder from institutional misogyny. But women being raped and beaten and harassed on the street and stalked often fear, with good reason, that they are also going to be killed, and sometimes they—we—are. The distinctions between the kinds of violence don't serve us when they prevent us from talking about what gets called *gender violence* as a broad and deep phenomenon. And that even calling it all gender violence obscures that violence is only a means to an end, and that there are other means as well. If the subject is silence, then how some silence others broadens the query into one that can include shame, humiliation, exclusion, devaluation, discrediting, threats, and the unequal distribution of power through social, economic, cultural, and legal means.

Domestic violence expert Evan Stark argues that the very term is wrong; he writes in his 2009 book *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life,*

> This book reframes woman battering from the standpoint of its survivors as a course of calculated, malevolent conduct deployed almost exclusively by men to dominate individual women by interweaving repeated physical abuse with three equally important tactics: intimidation, isolation, and control. . . . The primary harm abusive men inflict is political, not physical, and reflects the deprivation of rights and resources that are critical to personhood and citizenship.

He compares it to kidnapping, its victims to hostages, often cut off from access to other people, to freedom of movement, to material resources such as money or cars, punished for infractions by the dictator of the household. Often the most dangerous time is when victims of coercive control try to leave. Many are killed for trying, or for succeeding in reaching freedom, a freedom that is not safety. Stark adds,

> The women in my practice have repeatedly made clear that what is done to them is less important than what their partners have prevented them from doing for themselves by appropriating their resources; undermining their social support; subverting their rights to privacy, self-respect, and autonomy; and depriving them of substantial equality. . . . Coercive control is a liberty crime rather than a crime of assault.

The actress and feminist activist Patricia Arquette noted in 2016,

> There's a ripple effect in being underpaid for women. Ten thousand women are turned down every day for domestic abuse shelters. Part of domestic abuse is often economic suppression; the male might take your paycheck every week and never give you money or allow you to work because he's too jealous. The number-one reason women say they returned to their abuser is financial insecurity. Often they have kids with them.

We can expand on Stark's framework to see many forms of attack on women—by strangers and acquaintances, by politicians and the

state, not just by intimate partners—as coercive control. The endless war against reproductive rights—against not only abortion but also birth control and access to family planning and sex education—is an attempt at institutional coercive control. Violence sometimes plays a role, but coercion occurs by many other means, including the making of punitive and rights-denying laws. It's not hard to see legislation that pretends to focus on the rights of the unborn over the rights of women in whom the unborn are situated as actually focused on the rights of men and the state over women's bodies; or to see, in the effort to deny access to birth control and abortion, an attack on women's autonomy, agency, and right to choose what sex means to them, to control their own bodies, to pursue pleasure and connection without submitting to the enormous demands of maternity, or to choose that maternity on their own terms.

The widespread existence of gender violence and sexual violence serves to curtail the freedom and confidence of those who must navigate in a world where threats become a background element to their lives, a footnote on every page, a cloud in every sky. These are not "crimes of passion," as they were often called, or of desire, but of the fury to control and to reinforce or reimpose the power structure. A lot of domestic violence homicides are punishment for or attempts to continue controlling women who have announced they are leaving, tried to leave, or left. Killing someone is killing her freedom, her autonomy, her power, her voice. That many men believe they have the right and the need to control women, violently or otherwise, says much about the belief systems they inhabit, about the culture we exist within.

In recent years, from Brazil to Canada, rapists have filmed their sexual assaults. The video is then circulated among male peers as evidence of the agency of the rapists and the lack of agency of the victim, the subsequent humiliation and loss of control over her privacy and dignity (and much mainstream heterosexual porn reiterates this scenario in endless variations, with excitement seeming to come from homoerotic power, not heterosexual pleasure). This shaming drives some rape survivors to suicide—and it says a lot that a sexual assault is supposed to be shameful for the victim and not the perpetrator. These videos remind us of the coexistence of two wildly different worlds: when they circulate in the legal system, they are evidence of crimes, but when they circulate in the perpetrators' peer group, they demonstrate to the others the perpetrators' conformity to norms of masculinity.

But the law and the rapists are not so different in other ways. Many rape cases bring victims into court or university proceedings where the administrators perpetuate the discrediting and devaluing of the victim with questions that treat her like a perpetrator, cast her as an inherently untrustworthy person, attack her with intrusive, irrelevant, and prurient questions, often about her sexual history. University and legal authorities sometimes express more concern over the future of campus rapists than that of their victims and are often more inclined to grant credibility to the former than the latter. The consequent unwillingness of many survivors to cooperate with the legal system results in a loss of their legal rights, in silencing, in allowing rapists to go unpunished and often to act again, and in a society (the United States) in which only 3 percent of rapists serve time for their crimes.

Thus does coercive control happen at a societal level as it does in the home. Women are instructed, by the way victims are treated and by the widespread tolerance of an epidemic of violence, that their value is low, that speaking up may result in more punishment, that silence may be a better survival strategy. Sometimes this is called *rape culture*, but like *domestic violence*, the term narrows the focus to one act rather than the motive for many; *patriarchy* is a

more useful overarching term.

The pandemic of campus rape reminds us that this particular kind of crime is not committed by a group that can be dismissed as marginal in any way; fraternities at elite institutions from Vanderbilt to Stanford have been the scenes of extraordinarily vicious acts; every spring the finest universities graduate a new crop of unpunished rapists. They remind us that this deadness is at the heart of things, not the margins, that failure of empathy and respect are central, not marginal.

Empathy is a narrative we tell ourselves to make other people real to us, to feel for and with them, and thereby to extend and enlarge and open ourselves. To be without empathy is to have shut down or killed off some part of yourself and your humanity, to have protected yourself from some kind of vulnerability. Silencing, or refusing to hear, breaks this social contract of recognizing another's humanity and our connectedness.

Contemplating a book of lynching photographs published a few decades ago, I imagined the white people who brought their children and picnics to the torture scenes were celebrating their numbness, their separation. The people making or consuming rape videos and misogynist porn must be doing the same. Our humanity is made out of stories or, in the absence of words and narratives, out of imagination: that which I did not literally feel, because it happened to you and not to me, I can imagine as though it were me, or care about it though it was not me. Thus we are connected, thus we are not separate. Those stories can be killed into silence, and the voices that might breed empathy silenced, discredited, censored, rendered unspeakable, unhearable. Discrimination is training in not identifying or empathizing with someone because they are different in some way, in believing the differences mean everything and common humanity nothing.

In his book *Love and War: How Militarism Shapes Sexuality and*

Romance, Tom Digby argues that ours is a militarized society in which men are pressured in a thousand ways to take on the mores and skills of soldiers. A soldier surrounded by the deaths of others and the possibility of his own mangling and death shuts down. So do many survivors of atrocities, individual and collective, atrocities often committed by those who shut down in order to perpetrate atrocities. Robert Jay Lifton described this emotional numbness as *Death in Life*, the title of his book on Hiroshima survivors. He argues that they survived the horror by shutting down, but that remaining shut down meant being the walking dead, the unalive. This brings us back to hooks's critique of men's "acts of psychic self-mutilation." Maybe the question is what it means to be alive, and how to be fully alive.

Soldiers are trained to wither away empathy in order to make them killing machines; it dispatches them to do their work in war; it sends them home with trauma that is itself often unspeakable. David Morris, in *The Evil Hours*, his remarkable book on trauma, notes, "Part of trauma's corrosive power lies in its ability to destroy narrative, and . . . stories, written and spoken, have tremendous healing power for both the teller and the listener. Normal, nontraumatic memories are owned and integrated into the ongoing story of the self. These are, in a sense, like domesticated animals, amenable to control, tractable. In contrast, the traumatic memory stands apart, like a feral dog, snarling, wild, and unpredictable."

Morris notes that rape victims and soldiers have much in common. Trauma disrupts the narrative of a life because it shatters memory into shards that will not be recognized as a credible story, sometimes even by the teller—thus some survivors of rape and other atrocities emerge with fractured stories that are seen as signs of their unbelievability, unreliability, untrustworthiness. Thus rape is an act that seeks to shatter the self and its narrative, sometimes followed by legal proceedings that require the self to reassemble as a coherent

narrative (but not too coherent: successful testimony must be neither too clinically cool nor too emotionally overloaded). A friend who works in the field says that many women report sexual assault for altruistic reasons: to prevent it from happening to someone else. Sometimes they come forward to support the testimony of someone who's spoken out first. Speaking up is, in other words, often an act of empathy.

Morris continues, "Despite the fact that rape is the most common and most injurious form of trauma, the bulk of PTSD research is directed toward war trauma and veterans. Most of what we know about PTSD comes from studying men." There is, in other words, a silence about who suffers this affliction that further silences women. Silences build atop silences, a city of silence that wars against stories. A host of citizens silencing themselves to be accepted by the silenced. People meeting as caricatures of human beings, offering their silence to each other, their ability to avoid connection. Dams and seawalls built against the stories, which sometimes break through and flood the city.

III: SILENCE: THE CAGES

There are those who are literally silent.

"Who, if I cried out, would hear me," begins Rainer Maria Rilke's first *Duino Elegy*, and there are those who hear no one, not even themselves, who have repressed, forgotten, buried the knowledge and thereby buried themselves. When we look for silence we constantly find the dead. Who would hear them? Only people who would punish them further. Sarah Chang wrote of watching child pornography as part of her job as a prosecutor of sexual abuse crimes against children. She noted their silence.

> In video after video, I witnessed silent suffering. I later learned that this is a typical reaction of young abuse victims. Psychiatrists say the silence conveys their sense of helplessness, which also manifests as a reluctance to report the incidents and their tendency to accommodate their abusers. If children do disclose their abuse, their reports are often ambivalent, sometimes followed by a complete retraction and a return to silence.

She speaks of one victim whose brother threatened to kill her if she screamed. Maya Angelou was mute for five years after she was raped, at age seven.

In his childhood, Barry Lopez was raped repeatedly over a period of years by a family friend. He writes of his rapist,

> He told me, calmly but emphatically, that he was a doctor, that I needed treatment, and that we were not going to be adding to Mother's worries by telling her about my problem. From time to time, often on the drive back to my home, Shier would remind me that if I were ever to tell anyone, if the treatments were to stop, he would have no choice but to have me committed to an institution. . . . It would be best, I thought, if I just continued to be the brave boy he said I was.

He was silenced for years, and when he spoke up in his mid-teens, his stepfather wavered and then decided not to believe him. Half a century passed before he spoke publicly of his ordeal and its traumas.

When the mouth may not speak, the body sometimes reveals: silent testimony.

Kelly Sundberg wrote about her violent ex-husband and her shifting relationship to that violence:

> Two years after we moved, I started graduate school and finally made some friends, but it was hard to spend time with them. I had to lie: I shut my arm in the door. I tripped on a rug and hit my face on the table. I don't know where that bruise came from. I

think I did it in my sleep. I think I'm anemic. I just bruise so easily.

Once, Caleb said to me, "You probably wish that someone would figure out where those bruises are coming from. You probably wish someone knew, so that things could change." He said it with such sadness.

He only hit me in the face once. A red bruise bloomed across my cheek, and my eye was split and oozing. Afterwards, we both sat on the bathroom floor, exhausted. "You made me hit you in the face," he said mournfully. "Now everyone is going to know."

She had been silent. But her face told. The truth was a menace to her husband, her marriage, the comfort and assumptions of those around her. Sundberg broke the silence and wrote about it in a widely acclaimed essay that served as an invitation to others to tell their own stories about violence from spouses and parents. A solo voice became a chorus.

One disturbing aspect of abuse and harassment is the idea that it's not the crime that's the betrayal but the testimony about the crime. You're not supposed to tell. Abusers often assume this privilege that demands the silence of the abused, that a nonreciprocal protection be in place. Others often impose it as well, portraying the victims as choosing to ruin a career or a family, as though the assailant did not make that choice himself.

There are voices raised in the absence of listeners.

In 2015, a Stanford University student sexually assaulted an unconscious woman. The woman testified at his trial, "I tried to push it out of my mind, but it was so heavy I didn't talk, I didn't eat, I didn't sleep, I didn't interact with anyone. After work, I would drive to a secluded place to scream. . . ." She had somehow absorbed the idea that her trauma and fury did not belong, that her screams should not be heard. But then she was heard around the world. She

wrote a letter to her assailant that, after she read it aloud in court and it was entered in the court record, became, in June 2016, perhaps the most widely viewed first-person account of rape and its aftermath ever. She regained the voice taken away from her and with it rehumanized her dehumanized self. She spoke words that built a cage around him, erected a monument to his casual malice, words that will likely follow him all his life. Her voice was her power.

She broke the silence (though she didn't break the shame and fear that often keeps rape victims anonymous). She spoke of him and his evasions and lies with fury and outrage, but she ended with tenderness: "To girls everywhere, I am with you. On nights when you feel alone, I am with you. When people doubt or dismiss you, I am with you. I fought every day for you. So never stop fighting, I believe you. . . . you can't be silenced." *I am with you* is the voice of empathy, the words that say we are not separate from each other.

But there are those who scream in vain.

The famous case of Kitty Genovese, raped and stabbed to death by a stranger, while people in the surrounding apartments ignored her screams, was turned into a mythic example of bystander indifference. Catherine Pelonero revisited the case in 2014. In a review of her book, Peter C. Baker pointed out:

> The same month that Genovese was murdered, Pelonero points out, United Press International ran a story about a judge in Cleveland who had ruled that "it's all right for a husband to give his wife a black eye and knock out one of her teeth if she stays out too late." Pelonero also quotes more extensively the many witnesses who explicitly justified their inaction in terms of expectations about women and their place in the world. "I figured it was a lovers' quarrel, that her man had knocked her down. So my wife and I went back to bed."

Baker comments,

> The story was retold again and again by college professors and pundits, almost always in such a way that it was never specifically about violence against women, or the complex latticework of legal and cultural arrangements that allows such violence to flourish. Instead, it became a classic tale of human "nature"—and like most such tales, it has almost nothing to say about the fine grain of human practice or experience.

In other words, the story was noise filled with silence about the real causes of Genovese's death and that of many other women.

Along with those who are accused of lying, imagining, making things up out of malice, confusion, or madness, there are people who are believed but told their suffering and rights are of no consequence.

Many years before, my mother had approached a policeman to tell him that her husband, my father, was beating her. The officer gave her some platitudinous advice—I think it was about cooking nice dinners—and made it clear that this was one kind of assault to which the law was indifferent. There was no use to speaking up. In her 1976 book on domestic violence, when the silence around the subject was just being broken, the great lesbian-rights activist Del Martin wrote, "These women bear the brutality of their husband in silence because they have no one to turn to and nowhere to go."‡ Feminism changed the laws. But turning to the police, who have their own high incidence of domestic violence and limited tools to make restraining orders mean anything, is a strategy that often fails.

‡ Martin, in 1955 a cofounder of the Daughters of Bilitis, the nation's first lesbian-rights group, married her partner of fifty-one years, Phyllis Lyon, in February 2004 in the first of San Francisco's season of same-sex weddings that launched the momentum for marriage equality that culminated in the Supreme Court's 2015 decision.

There are people who speak and are believed, and the consequence is that they disappear.

There is somewhere to go in many communities, the secret sanctuaries that are women's shelters, places into which women disappear as a result of violence, losing their home and quite literally their place in the world as a result of their partner's violence. Many women are refugees in their own country; many women are forced to disappear from their own homes and lives and take up secret lives in secret locations. *Battered women's shelters*, as they were then called, sprang up in the 1970s. They exist by the thousands in North America and Britain, if not on a scale to receive all the victims of domestic violence. My mother volunteered at one for years after her divorce. She did the accounting.

And there are people who speak up and are silenced under the law.

"The Little Mermaid" is a story written by Hans Christian Andersen, a man who was queer in many senses, the awkward, immense, sexually ambiguous illegitimate son of a peasant woman, who became the darling of aristocrats. It is a tale of how a mermaid trades her voice for a chance at life on earth. She comes out of the sea with legs, without words. Like the silenced heroine of Andersen's "The Wild Swans," she must not, she cannot advocate for herself. In 2011, when Nafissatou Diallo, a room cleaner at an upscale hotel in Manhattan, was sexually assaulted by the head of the International Monetary Fund, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, she was vilified and discredited in the media, and the prosecutors backed down from the case, but she won a civil suit against Strauss-Kahn. The price, as with so many of these cases, was silence.

The Center for Public Integrity reported in 2009, "But while the vast majority of students who are sexually assaulted remain silent—just over 95 percent, according to a study funded by the

research arm of the U.S. Justice Department—those who come forward can encounter mystifying disciplinary proceedings, secretive school administrations, and off-the-record negotiations." At the University of Virginia, accusers were told that they had to remain silent about all aspects of their cases and risked penalties for disobedience, until the federal government intervened. And Buzzfeed reported in 2015, "A Bard College graduate filed a formal complaint with the U.S. Department of Education this week, saying she wasn't permitted to discuss her alleged rape with a school official until she signed an agreement preventing her from discussing the assault" elsewhere.

In 2013, ten of the thirty-seven students and alumni who filed a lawsuit against Occidental College received cash payments but were barred from participating in the campus group, the Occidental Sexual Assault Coalition, that organized the campaign that resulted in the federal investigation. They were paid to be silent. Criminology professor Danielle Dirks told the *Los Angeles Times* that requiring "the women to remain silent and not to participate in campus activism could have a chilling effect at Occidental. Part of the reason so many women have come forward is because other assault survivors have been able to speak openly about their treatment."

What does it mean when what's supposed to be victory includes the imposition of silence? Or should we call it reimposition?

There are other ways victims are silenced: by being ridiculed, threatened, discredited, ostracized.

Rebecca Donner recently broke her own silence with an essay in the online magazine *Guernica* about being raped by her uncle when she was a teen, about how she was unable to speak and just nodded to her mother's questions, about how her family both blamed her for what happened and refused to believe it had happened, the familiar

cognitive dissonance of victim-blaming. "I was told to get over what happened. I was told to remain silent. And until now, I've kept my mouth shut like a good girl." There are a million stories like this with their own sad details but the same pattern of denial and silencing.

Shame is a great silencer.

Silence is a burden that belongs or belonged to most of us, though some are more loaded with it than others, and some have become experts and geniuses in how to shove it aside, drop it, disown it. Elizabeth Smart, who at fourteen was kidnapped from her Salt Lake City home and raped for a period of months, said that the abstinence-only sex education she was given taught her that she was worthless and contaminated if she had sex before marriage. "And that's how easy it is to feel you no longer have worth. Your life no longer has value." That sense of worthlessness helped keep her captive, hopeless, with a sense that she had no good life to go back to. The campus antirape movement arose, in part, out of young survivors' refusal to be shamed into silence, and then to refuse shame altogether as at least a stance if not a psychic state.

So is politeness.

What we call politeness often means training that other people's comfort matters more. You should not disturb it, and you are in the wrong to do so, whatever is happening. I heard a short story read on the radio decades ago that stayed with me, a first-person narrative of a woman being groped on the New York subway, who was trying to figure out how to remove herself without implying the groper was in the wrong or offending him. It was a wry incident about how deeply ingrained are the instructions on being polite, comforting, pleasant, and unthreatening and how they can interfere with survival. I remember an incident in my early twenties where I was being menaced by a terrifying man on the street in the middle of the

night, and I think of how it did not occur to me to flag down cars, make a ruckus, all the things that I would do when I was older and more confident about my assessments and my rights and less afraid to make a scene. Politeness, self-doubt, internal silencing can make younger women better targets. The philosopher Martha Nussbaum began graduate school at Harvard in 1969; she recalled recently that when her advisor "reached over to touch her breasts . . . she gently pushed him away, careful not to embarrass him."

Silence is also a legal status of powerlessness.

In 2015, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg brought up a 1982 Supreme Court case while hearing the case for same-sex marriage rights. "Marriage today is not what it was under the common law tradition, under the civil law tradition," said Ginsburg when Justices Roberts and Kennedy began to fret about whether the court had a right to challenge centuries of tradition. "Marriage was a relationship of a dominant male to a subordinate female," she explained. "That ended as a result of this court's decision in 1982 when Louisiana's Head and Master Rule was struck down."

Ginsburg, the second woman ever to serve on the Supreme Court, was referencing Louisiana's "head and master" law, which gave a husband unfettered right to dispose of jointly owned property without his wife's knowledge or consent. The test case involved a husband who mortgaged the house his wife had purchased with her earnings, to defend himself against charges of molesting their daughter. She had no voice in the disposal of her home, her earnings, the course of her life; what should have been hers or theirs was his alone.

Individuals and societies serve power and the powerful by refusing to speak and bear witness.

When witnesses refuse to speak up, they consent to another's loss of rights, agency, bodily integrity, or life. Silence protects violence.

Whole societies can be silent—and as with the Armenian genocide in Turkey, speaking about crimes can be made dangerous or illegal. The writer Orhan Pamuk was charged with "insulting Turkish identity" and forced to flee the country for speaking of a crime written out of textbooks and the official record.

There are specific ways in which specific people are silenced, but there is also a culture that withers away the space in which women speak and makes it clear men's voices count for more than women's. There are expert witnesses to the phenomenon.

In classical literature, Tiresias was a priest who was transformed into a woman as punishment, lived as one for seven years, and was then transformed back into a man. The gods went to him for firsthand testimony about gender and sexuality. In this era, trans people are expert witnesses to the way gender roles are enforced and reinforced. One whose testimony made a major impact more than a decade ago is Ben Barres, formerly Barbara Barres, a biologist at Stanford University. In 2006, he wrote in the journal *Nature* about the bias he had experienced as a woman in the sciences, from losing fellowships to less qualified male candidates to being told a boyfriend must have helped her with her math. He was told that he was smarter than his sister by a man who confused his former, female self for that sister. Some things he didn't notice until they stopped.

Then, like a good scientist, he observed carefully: "Anecdotes, however, are not data, which is why gender-blinding studies are so important. These studies reveal that in many selection processes, the bar is unconsciously raised so high for women and minority candidates that few emerge as winners." He spoke up to counter Harvard president Larry Summers's 2005 assertion that innate biological differences in aptitude explained why men did better than women in mathematics and the sciences. (At the time, the

Guardian noted, "During Dr Summers's presidency, the number of tenured jobs offered to women has fallen from 36% to 13%. Last year, only four of 32 tenured job openings were offered to women.") In a sidebar about his personal experience, Barres said wryly, "By far, the main difference I have noticed is that people who don't know I am transgendered treat me with much more respect: I can even finish a sentence without being interrupted by a man."

Men and women are given different kinds and amounts of space to occupy, literally, geographically, conceptually, and conversationally. This is measurable in movies, but exists in real life as well.

In 2010, the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media reported statistics from three years of Hollywood family films: "Of all speaking characters, 32.4% are female in G-rated films, 30% are female in PG-rated films and 27.7% are female in PG-13-rated films. Of 1,565 content creators, only 7% of directors, 13% of writers, and 20% of producers are female." In 2014, the institute conducted another study of films from the ten largest movie markets worldwide and found that more than two-thirds of speaking and named characters were male, and less than a quarter of films "depicted a girl or woman in the lead or sharing the story's journey with another main character."

A similar study of the 700 most successful movies from 2007–2014 by the Annenberg School for Communications found "In 2014's 100 most popular movies, 21 featured a female lead, about the same percentage as the 20 found among the top films of 2007. Of the top 100 films in 2014, two were directed by women. In 2007 there were three. Of the 700 films examined, three were directed by African Americans." None of the top 100 films of 2014 starred a woman over forty-five. A 2016 study of 2,000 films by *Polygraph* found that men had 88 percent of the leads.

When women are on the screen, they don't necessarily speak, and even when they speak they don't necessarily speak to each other, or they speak to each other about the men who remain central to the film. Graphic novelist Alison Bechdel came up with what's now well known as the Bechdel Test, the requirement that a movie have two female characters who talk to each other about something other than a man. It's a ridiculously low standard many films fail to meet. In the original *Star Wars* trilogy, women other than Princess Leia speak for 63 seconds of the films' 386 minutes, a recent investigation concluded. Those 63 seconds are divided among three women in the three films for what amounts to about a third of 1 percent of the running time.

But such films are not described as boys' or men's films, but as films for all of us, while films with a similarly unequal amount of time allocated to female characters would inevitably be regarded as girls' or women's films. Men are not expected to engage in the empathic extension of identifying with a different gender, just as white people are not asked, the way people of color are, to identify with other races. Being dominant means seeing yourself and not seeing others; privilege often limits or obstructs imagination.

The space to speak and the public sphere are intertwined, and this goes back millennia.

Classics scholar Mary Beard has analyzed the geographies of gender over the millennia. In a landmark essay from 2014, "The Public Voice of Women," she notes that silencing women begins almost as soon as Western literature does, in the *Odyssey*, with Telemachus telling his mother, Penelope, to shut up. Penelope is already chastely stranded at home and besieged by suitors while her husband leisurely wanders around the Mediterranean getting laid. (You can imagine a feminist revision in which Penelope enjoys her autonomy,

takes some of the suitors as lovers, and maybe doesn't yearn for her husband's return; Margaret Atwood tried out a version of this with her *Penelopiad*.) Beard describes how having a voice—preferably a deep one—was considered definitive of masculinity, and the public sphere is the masculine sphere: "A woman speaking in public was, in most circumstances, by definition not a woman."

She became a much-attacked public figure herself in the twenty-first century, with the rise of social media:

> It doesn't much matter what line you take as a woman, if you venture into traditional male territory, the abuse comes anyway. It's not what you say that prompts it, it's the fact you're saying it. And that matches the detail of the threats themselves. They include a fairly predictable menu of rape, bombing, murder and so forth. But a significant subsection is directed at silencing the woman—"Shut up you bitch" is a fairly common refrain. Or it promises to remove the capacity of the woman to speak. "I'm going to cut off your head and rape it" was one tweet I got.

Which probably distinguishes her from most of the male classics professors at Cambridge. She told the *New York Times* in April 2016, "We have never escaped a certain male cultural desire for women's silence."

Women are often disqualified from participation in the kind of public life Beard speaks of.

There are myriad ways to remove women from public and professional life. Women who work in engineering speak of the ways in which their access to training and meaningful roles was denied; women who competed in chess speak of sexual harassment and denigration; the same stories emerge from women in many other fields. Women in politics are criticized for their appearances, for their voices, for being ambitious, for not serving their families

full-time (or for not having families). Words like *strident* and *bossy* are largely reserved for women, the way that words like *uppity* are reserved for African Americans. Women in politics must not be too feminine, since femininity is not associated with leadership, but they must not be too masculine, since masculinity is not their prerogative; the double bind requires them to occupy a space that does not exist, to be something impossible in order not to be something wrong. Being a woman is a perpetual state of wrongness, as far as I can determine. Or, rather, it is under patriarchy.

I have looked at the reception of Rachel Carson's landmark 1962 book about the devastating effect of pesticides, *Silent Spring*, many times, appalled at the ways she was dismissed as hysterical, emotional, unqualified. As I was writing this book and researching another project, I read an oral history in which a man who had been on the board of the Sierra Club at the time *Silent Spring* was published, making Carson perhaps the best-known environmentalist of the 1960s, said: "I can't think of her name now but some woman who is not a scientist wrote a story about terrible pesticides." The only description he wanted to associate with this scientist—who held a master's and only for financial reasons failed to complete a PhD in zoology and genetics at Johns Hopkins, who had worked as a scientist for the federal government and then for Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution—was that she was "not a scientist."

That was an old man talking about a bygone era, but the idea that women are not qualified regardless of their qualifications is rampant now, as it was in Carson's time. Investigative journalist Suki Kim went undercover to report on conditions in North Korea, but her publishers insisted on casting her 2014 exposé as a memoir. A book about public and collective life was reframed as a personal journey for marketing reasons, but also with a sense that women

belonged in the personal realm and, by extension, did not belong outside it. In 2016, she wrote in the *New Republic*,

> By casting my book as personal rather than professional—by marketing me as a woman on a journey of self-discovery, rather than a reporter on a groundbreaking assignment—I was effectively being stripped of my expertise on the subject I knew best. It was a subtle shift, but one familiar to professional women from all walks of life. I was being moved from a position of authority—What do you know?—to the realm of emotion: How did you feel?

She was kicked out of thinking about and knowing others, confined to her own emotions, as though the only realm in which she was competent was that of herself.

The imprisonment echoed the old order in which women were confined to the home and to private life, and public life was men's business. Of course the corollary is the exclusion of men, often, still, from emotional and personal life. Both realms matter, but economic, political, and social power depend on one's standing in the public realm. The revolution is for free movement of everyone, everywhere. It is not finished; it is under way; it has changed all the maps; they will change more.

IV: THE FLOODED CITY

"I want to write a novel about silence.
The things people don't say."

—Virginia Woolf

A feminist literature investigates the nature of those silences, their causes, and their effects, peaking in the 1970s and early 1980s with a plethora of essays on silence. Mary Wollstonecraft and nineteenth-century feminists addressed exclusion and powerlessness, including the exclusion from education. Suffragists pointed out that to be without the vote was to be silenced politically, excluded from full citizenship, self-determination, and the public sphere. Charlotte Perkins Gilman spoke in 1911 of women "hedged in with restrictions of a thousand sorts . . . the enforced ignorance from which women are now so swiftly emerging." In the era when women had gained the vote—in 1920 in the United States, in 1918 in Britain—but lacked so much else, the investigation of silence continued.

Virginia Woolf sounded the alarm in two landmark essays. The more famous *A Room of One's Own* came out in 1929, based on a pair of talks in 1928, about the practical, financial, social, and psychological restrictions on women writing and, by implication, having a voice. But what kind of a voice could she have? Adrienne Rich wrote, half a century later,

> I was astonished at the tone of effort, of pains taken, of dogged tentativeness in the tone of that essay. And I recognized that tone. I had heard it often enough, in myself and in other women. It is the tone of a woman almost in touch with her anger, who is determined not to appear angry, who is willing herself to be calm, detached, and even charming in a roomful of men where things have been said which are attacks on her very integrity. Virginia Woolf is addressing an audience of women, but she is acutely conscious—as she always was—of being overheard by men.

Woolf's "Professions for Women," originally delivered as a speech to the National Society for Women in 1931, addresses the other kind of voice, not the convincing one Rich criticized (and women's tone of voice is so often criticized), but the comforting one. She describes the internalized instructions to women to be pleasant, gracious, flattering, that can silence a real voice and real thoughts: a real self. She indicates that there are ways to speak that

are silence's white noise: the platitudes and reassurances, the politenesses and denials that lubricate a system that perpetuates silence. You speak for others, not for yourself. Woolf talked about the voice within women that tells them, "Be sympathetic; be tender; flatter; deceive; use all the arts and wiles of our sex. Never let anybody guess that you have a mind of your own." She called that voice the Angel in the House and boasted of murdering her, out of necessity, so that she might have a voice. So that she might break the silence.

Half a century later, in her book *Pornography and Silence*, Susan Griffin quoted Norman Mailer on Marilyn Monroe: "She is a mirror of the pleasure of those who stare at her." Meaning that Monroe appeared, and she spoke, but how she appeared, what she said, was not to express herself, to be herself, but to serve others. Griffin comments, "Yet knowing that her symbolic existence was a mask he refuses to look behind this mask. And yet, had another self not existed, a self to be lost and a self to be violated, the life of this actress would not have been a tragedy." It was an analysis of how someone can be visible, audible, yet silenced.

Monroe can stand in for any woman, all women who silence, hide, disguise, or dismiss aspects of themselves and their self-expression in pursuing male pleasure, approval, comfort, reinforcement. This is not only erotic business; it's how a woman in the workplace or the classroom or on the street may have learned to navigate around male expectations, knowing if she is too confident, commanding, or self-contained she may be punished. It has its analogies—my friend Garnette Cadogan has written eloquently, excruciatingly, about how he as a Black man in public has to incessantly perform "not-a-criminal, not-a-threat" to assuage white fear and preserve himself. To be Black and a woman is to do double duty in this business of serving others.

Mailer, in calling Monroe a mirror of pleasure, fails to question what happens when the pleasure is routinely someone else's. It's a death of pleasure disguised as pleasure, a death of self in the service of others. It's silence wrapped in pleasing nothings. The portrait of Monroe, who died young in 1962, is a sort of bookend to bell hooks's observation about men's "psychic self-mutilation"—it is a portrait of the other kind of self-mutilation, to make a self to meet and serve those mutilated selves. A silence to meet the silence, silences that fit each other like a mold and casting, a ghost story.

Tillie Olsen gave a talk in 1962, published in 1965 in *Harper's*, that became part of her bestselling 1978 book *Silences*. Silence, or the desire to interrogate and annihilate it, had come of age. It begins, "Literary history and the present are dark with silences: some the silences for years by our acknowledged great; some silences hidden; some the ceasing to publish after one work appears; some the never coming to book form at all." In other words there were kinds of silence, one kind for what was said and what remained unsaid and another for who said it and who was permitted to speak.

She takes time to come to her real subject, as though she must establish her credentials first, her knowledge and care for the great literature by men. Then she turns to the silence of women in literature, noting that most who had literary careers had no children, because time to oneself and for oneself and one's voice is crucial to creation. That was about practical silence—the lack of time to build the palace of words that is an extended piece of writing—but there are many kinds of silence that pertained to women's experience at the time. The second half of the book is a broad collection of "asides, amulets, exhumations, sources," broadening the evidence for the silencing of women, and its consequences not only to women but to literature. A brief for the defense.

Betty Friedan's 1963 *The Feminine Mystique* was about "the problem that has no name," about American women who lived in material comfort yet in social and political annihilation in their exclusion from public life and power at home and in the world. It can be and has been critiqued as a book about middle-class white women; it can also be appreciated as a book that, during the war on poverty and the civil rights movement, said that gender was also a problem worth contemplating, and that naming is a crucial part of transformation.

In her 2010 book *At the Dark End of the Street*, Danielle L. McGuire argues that the Civil Rights Movement was itself silenced, in a way, when it was rewritten as a history of what a movement led by men (and forgotten women) did about everyone's rights. She restarts the history with Rosa Parks as an investigator of rape cases for the NAACP, thereby recasting the whole movement as launched by Black women for Black women's rights, an intersection ordinarily erased from the history of that boulevard.

In contrast, in 1969 Susan Sontag published an essay, "The Aesthetics of Silence," that is silent about gender. It's about male artists and uses the male pronoun to describe "the artist." She wrote about artists choosing silence, artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Arthur Rimbaud, for whom silence was a gesture of scorn or transcendence, a departure—but then she notes, "An exemplary decision of this sort can be made only after the artist has demonstrated that he possesses genius and exercised that genius authoritatively." It's the quiet some choose after being heard and valued—the antithesis of being silenced.

What gets called *second-wave feminism* is full of accounts of revelations about oppressions that were not previously named or described, and of the joy in recognizing even oppression: diagnosis is the first step toward cure and recovery. To speak of, to find definitions for what afflicted them brought women out of isolation and into power. The writings of the 1960s and 1970s are a literature of exploration, even revelation: people stumble forward, not sure what they are encountering, describing it awkwardly, reaching for new language for things that have not been described before, seeing the new undermine assumptions about the familiar, becoming people who belong to this new territory as much or more than to the old one, crossing over to a world being invented as they go.

Voyages of discovery: a key part of the feminist movement of the 1970s was "consciousness-raising groups," in which women talked to each other about their experience. Susan Griffin, an important participant in that era's feminism, told me that first they complained about housework, and then they started talking about rape and violence and the grim stuff, breaking through the shame that had kept them silent and alone. The poet Muriel Rukeyser's lines, "What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? The world would split open," were often cited. What happened when many women told the truth about their lives? Silence itself became a key topic.

In 1977, Audre Lorde addressed the Modern Language Association with her landmark talk and essay considering race, gender, and orientation together, "The Transformation of Silence Into Language and Action" (published in 1984). It's a brief, dense, aphoristic essay with some of the urgency of a manifesto:

> My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you. But for every real word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed, bridging our differences. And it was the concern and caring of all those women which gave me strength.

Lorde addressed the way that breaking silence was not only an act of courage but also of creation: "What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? . . . Each of us is here now because in one way or another we share a commitment to language and to the power of language, and to the reclaiming of that language which has been made to work against us."

In 1978, Jamaican-born Michelle Cliff published "Notes on Speechlessness," which dealt with both avoidance and exploration of difficult truths. "Both withdrawal and humor are types of speechlessness. The obscuring and trivialization of what is real is also speechlessness." She wrote about bad dreams, wrote in fragments, wrote about herself but also about political and literary history, outed herself as a lesbian and addressed the way that passing as straight was a masquerade, another route around truth. Cliff's essay concludes that she will seek to eliminate what has eliminated her: "This means nothing more or less than seeking my own language. This may be what women will do."

Her lover and partner, Adrienne Rich, titled one of her books of poetry *The Dream of a Common Language*. The crucial poem in that book is "Cartographies of Silence": it opens, "A conversation begins/with a lie" and speaks of "the scream of an illegitimate voice." At the end of the long piece, truth breaks out like a new-growing thing, green. Many of the women who spoke up about silence were lesbians, including Griffin and Rich; some were also Black, including Cliff and Lorde. Though *intersectionality* is a term that has only recently come into wide use, these women understood what it means to operate at an intersection or at many. Rich's book came out the year before Cliff's essay; it includes, for the first time in her abundant body of work, lesbian love poems.

Two years later, in 1979, Rich published the essay anthology *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, in which her critique of Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, quoted above, appears. Elsewhere in the book she wrote,

> I believe any woman for whom the feminist breaking of silence has been a transforming force can also look back to a time when the faint, improbable outlines of unaskable questions, curling in her brain cells, triggered a shock of recognition at certain lines, phrases, images, in the work of this or that woman, long dead, whose life and experience she could only dimly try to imagine.

Once unaskable, the questions were being asked. In 1980, Rich added to her critique with the landmark essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," looking at the way that the identity and activity of a significant sector of women were overlooked or excluded and how that distorted the possibilities of living and understanding for all of us. She wrote of one popular feminist book of the time that it "ignores, specifically, the history of women who as witches, *femmes seules*, marriage resisters, spinsters, autonomous widows, and/or lesbians—have managed on varying levels not to collaborate. It is this history, precisely, from which feminists have so much to learn and on which there is overall such blanketing silence." She was a great explorer.

She questioned heterosexuality as a norm: "The assumption that "most women are innately heterosexual" stands as a theoretical and political stumbling block for many women . . . the failure to examine heterosexuality as an institution is like failing to admit that the economic system called capitalism or the caste system of racism is maintained by a variety of forces." She writes of how lesbian lives had themselves been silenced, along with the possibility that heterosexuality is not natural "but something that has had to be imposed, managed, organized, propagandized and maintained by force." A new city of ideas and possibilities was being built, like

a material city, by an accretion of projects, labors, decisions, and desires, and women were taking up residence in it.

The feminism of the 1970s is full of the joy and fury of recognition and the power that comes with recognition even of terrible things. What can be recognized can be remedied or resisted. In the third novel of her Naples quartet, Elena Ferrante describes her protagonist's discovery of feminist analysis in the 1970s: "How it is possible, I wondered, that a woman knows how to think like that? I worked so hard on books, but I endured them, I never actually used them, I never turned them against themselves." She sees, for the first time, what the world might look like from outside the assumptions that circumscribed her sense of possibility for herself, for her gender, for her language.

Some of the feminists of that era, notably Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, spoke out against one form of speech and representation—pornography—on the grounds that it contributed to the subjugation of women. Their work led to marches, demonstrations, legal cases, and bans that were overturned on free-speech grounds. Others in the movement defended pornography, either in and of itself or as free speech. (The defiant title of the journal *Off Our Backs* was mocked by the lesbian erotic magazine *On Our Backs*.) The antiporn feminists were much vilified, and they were also misremembered as a monolith with puritanical arguments, the foil to a liberatory libertinage.

It was more complicated than that (and the position that misogynistic pornography can encourage and model actual misogyny only requires you to accept the reasonable idea that representations have power and influence). As with Internet harassment in the present, the question was raised as to what is free speech, when some speech is designed to crush others' right and ability to speak and be heard.

Susan Griffin's 1981 book *Pornography and Silence* made an original argument: that mainstream pornography could be imagined not as liberatory speech, as free voices that should be heard, but as a particular kind of repression. She wrote that "pornography is an expression not of human erotic feeling and desire, and not of a love of the life of the body, but of a fear of bodily knowledge and a desire to silence eros." Pornography, in her view, was not erotic—if erotic meant the full and open experience of the body, the self, the emotions, and the other—but its opposite, full of "the metaphysics of Christianity . . . a modern building built on the site of the old cathedrals, sharing the same foundation."

That foundation includes loathing for the flesh, fury at desire, and a projection of that desire and that fury onto women. "We will come to see that 'the woman' in pornography, like 'the Jew' in anti-Semitism and 'the black' in racism is simply a lost part of the soul, that region of being the pornographic or the racist mind would forget and deny." Griffin's work since then has often sought the opposite: to remember, to admit, to enlarge the spaces in which we might be, dream, think, love, and celebrate the erotic and sensual.

The debate over pornography never stopped. In 1993, philosopher Rae Langton took up the topic in a remarkable, rigorous essay, "Speech Acts and Unspeakable Acts." Her exploration and analysis shed light far beyond pornography. She begins by refocusing the debate from what the content of speech is to what it does, what its power is. She points out that with language we marry, vote, render verdicts, give orders—or don't, if we lack the power to do so. A master saying, "I want food" to a slave is giving an order, the slave uttering the same words is making an appeal; the power each holds has everything to do with what their words mean and do. Or cannot do.

Langton makes the case that pornography carries authority as instruction as well as entertainment. She cites evidence to suggest

that a high percentage of boys and young men regard men's satisfaction as a right and women's rights as an irrelevancy, as well as statistics on date rape and men who find women in pain erotic, and ties these things to porn culture. She outlines three kinds of silence. The first is the literal silence of intimidation or defeat. The second is when the speaker lacks a listener, a response. Then she concludes, "If pornography silences women, then it prevents women from doing things with their words."

This third kind of silence "happens when one speaks, one utters words; and fails . . . to perform the very act one intends." That act is of forbidding, of saying no. "It is indeed possible to silence someone . . . by making their speech acts unspeakable. . . . Consider the utterance 'no.' We all know how to do things with this word. However, in sexual contexts something odd happens. Sometimes a woman tries to use the 'no' locution to refuse sex, and it does not work. Refusal—in that context—has become unspeakable for her. In this case refusal is not simply frustrated but disabled." She explores the ramifications. "Someone learning the rules of the game from this kind of pornography might not even recognize an attempted refusal."

In her 2016 book *Girls and Sex*, Peggy Orenstein confirmed this erasure of voice, writing, "In a study of behaviors in popular porn, nearly 90% of 304 random scenes contained physical aggression toward women, who nearly always responded neutrally or with pleasure. More insidiously, women would sometimes beg their partners to stop, then acquiesce and begin to enjoy the activity, regardless of how painful or debasing." Elsewhere she notes, "Male and female college students who report recent porn use have been repeatedly found to be more likely than others to believe 'rape myths'; that only strangers commit sexual assault or that the victim 'asked for it.' . . . Female porn users are less likely than others to intervene

when seeing another woman being threatened or assaulted and are slower to recognize when they're in danger themselves." That is, pornography has become instructional to women as well as men, and the instructions can deafen them to the voices of women, even to their own voices. Silence travels through many avenues.

I sometimes imagine porn as a compensatory parallel universe where male privilege has been augmented and revenge on female power is incessantly exacted. (Several years ago, Sam Benjamin wrote of his career as a young director in the capital of mainstream porn, the San Fernando Valley, "While my overt task at hand was to make sure that the girls got naked, my true responsibility as director was to make sure the girls got punished.") The immeasurably vast quantity of porn now in existence takes innumerable forms, and there are undoubtedly many exceptions. The mainstream product, however, seems more about the eroticization of power than the power of eros. Much in it that is described as heterosexual has a homoerotics of masculine triumph; it's like a sport in which the excitement is that women are endlessly defeated.

Silence and shame are contagious; so are courage and speech. Even now, when women begin to speak of their experience, others step forward to bolster the earlier speaker and to share their own experience. A brick is knocked loose, another one; a dam breaks, the waters rush forth. In the 1970s and 1980s, women talking about being molested as children and harassed and assaulted as adults had a huge practical impact. Laws and the enforcement of laws shifted. But these stories were also an assault on the impunity of authority, an authority that had often been indistinguishable from patriarchy. These stories said that authority was not necessarily to be trusted; that power was liable to be abused.

They were part of the great anti-authoritarian uprising that sometimes gets called *the sixties*, though *the sixties* are often reduced to young white men or to college students opposing a war, not acknowledging the breadth of many movements—civil rights and racial justice, including Native American and Latinx and Asian American as well as Black constituencies, gay and lesbian rights, disability rights, and environmental and anticolonial and anticapitalist critiques—that changed the foundations of our conversations. It was like wealth redistribution, but the redistribution was of audibility, credibility, value, participation, power, and rights. It was a great leveling, still going on—with backlashes seeking to shove people back into the silence from which they emerged.

Sometime in the teens of the twenty-first century, a new round of feminist conversation began, in part in response to atrocities and to the breaking of silence about atrocities, including campus rape (thanks to campus organizers, many of them rape survivors themselves). A number of stories garnered attention on an almost unprecedented scale, and the intersection of a less misogynistic mainstream media and feminists on social and alternative media generated a fiercely lively new conversation.

On a number of occasions in recent years, a notable case of gender violence—the Isla Vista massacre in Santa Barbara, Ghomeshi's attacks in Canada, football player Ray Rice's domestic violence in New Jersey, the Stanford rape case—has led women to testify on social media. Some just share the hashtags: #yesallwomen; #whyIstayed and #whyIleft, about domestic violence; #ibelieveher, in support of Ghomeshi's victims; #iwasrapedtoo, in response to the 2016 Stanford case; #notokay, the label for more than 27 million tweets from women telling their own stories about being sexually assaulted, in response to the videotape of presidential candidate Donald Trump talking about grabbing women "by the pussy."

Sometimes men participated in the sharing of the hashtags or supporting the speakers. As detailed elsewhere in this book, men actively speaking and acting on behalf of women's rights and feminism has been one of the steps forward in recent years (while there were also so many steps back). Social media also became the scene of furious campaigns to silence women who spoke up about violence against women and misogyny, and Twitter in particular tolerated extended campaigns of rape and death threats. It has become a new platform both for breaking the silence and trying to enforce it through threats and intimidation. "Online harassment has become the intellectual equivalent of street harassment," said media critic Jennifer Pozner after the Black actor Leslie Jones was harassed, insulted, and bullied into leaving Twitter. "It is the attempt to police and punish women for being in a public space. It's men and boys saying, 'Stay out of my playground.'"

Even the *Guardian* took stock of its vitriolic comments section in 2016 and reported that eight of its most attacked columnists were women, two were men of color, and the most attacked of all was feminist Jessica Valenti. This recent campaign to silence women online is far from over, though many things suggest that it is a backlash, an attempt to push back what has marched forward, to silence what has been heard.

There is always something unsaid and yet to be said, always someone struggling to find the words and the will to tell her story. Every day each of us invents the world and the self who meets that world, opens up or closes down space for others within that. Silence is forever being broken, and then like waves lapping over the footprints, the sandcastles and washed-up shells and seaweed, silence rises again.

We make ourselves in part out of our stories about ourselves and our world, separately and together. The great feminist experiment of remaking the world by remaking our ideas of gender and challenging who has the right to break the silence has been wildly successful and remains extremely incomplete. Undoing the social frameworks of millennia is not the work of a generation or a few decades but a process of creation and destruction that is epic in scope and often embattled in execution. It is work that involves the smallest everyday gestures and exchanges and the changing of laws, beliefs, politics, and culture at the national and international scale; often the latter arises from the cumulative impact of the former.

The task of calling things by their true names, of telling the truth to the best of our abilities, of knowing how we got here, of listening particularly to those who have been silenced in the past, of seeing how the myriad stories fit together and break apart, of using any privilege we may have been handed to undo privilege or expand its scope is each of our tasks. It's how we make the world.