MASS MURDER IN MONTRÉAL

The Sexual Politics of Killing Women

It is very hard to think of an adequate way to mourn, but we know that tears are not adequate. We know how to cry. The question is: how do we fight back?

We might have wanted to claim the benefits of liberal feminism. We might have wanted to say, "Look at us—aren't we wonderful? Do you know how many women are now in law schools? Do you know how many women are now on construction sites?" Well, not enough. But in the last year, since these fourteen women were murdered,* feminists cannot stand up with any sense of pride and say: "Look at what we have done." We stand today with grief and terror and rage. There is no liberal feminist credit to claim. We want to say: "They were in that school because of us. You see, we broke down the barriers." That is now a two-edged sword. Yes, they were in the school because of us; we did break down the barriers. And this man, who was not crazy, who was political in his thinking and in his action, understood the meaning of those barriers coming down, and he committed a political act so that we would retreat, so that new barriers could be built, and so that women would not have the heart or courage or patience or endurance to keep breaking barriers.

*Fourteen women students were murdered on December 6, 1989, at the École Polytechnique, the Université de Montréal's engineering school.

We have been asked by many people to accept that women are making progress, because one sees our presence in these places where we weren't before. And those of us who are berated for being radicals have been saying: "That is not the way we measure progress. We count the number of rapes. We count the women who are being battered. We keep track of the children who are being raped by their fathers. We count the dead. And when those numbers start to change in a way that is meaningful, we will then talk to you about whether or not we can measure progress."

All of the accomplishments of feminism—for which, by the way, we are not often thanked (and that is why we rush in to claim anything we can)—have been made not always with deep politeness, but they have been made with extraordinary patience and self-restraint, by which I mean: we have not used guns. We have used words. We have marched saying words. And we are punished for achieving everything we achieve; we are punished for every statement we make; we are punished for every act toward self-determination. Every assertion of dignity is punished either socially by the great media out there—when they choose to recognize us, it is usually through ridicule and contempt—or by the men around us, who are the foot soldiers in this very real war in which the violence is almost exclusively on one side. The purpose of the punishment is very clear, whether the punishment itself is an act of forced sex or being beaten or being insulted with words or being harassed walking down the street or being sexually harassed in your place of work: "Get inside. Shut your mouth. Do what I tell you." Which is usually reduceable to: "Clean the house and open your legs." Many of us have said no. We say it in different ways. We say it at different times. But we say no and we've said it loudly enough and collectively enough that it has begun to resonate in the public sphere. No, we will not. No.

There is an answer to our no. A semiautomatic gun is one answer. There are also knives. This is not a pleasant conversation that we're having.

The press, the establishment politicians, and the social pundits are using differences between this mass murder and the usual patterns of violence against women to confuse the issues, as if the differences are what matter and not what is the same. We know what is the same. So, first,

let us talk analytically about the differences, instead of just letting them manipulate the differences to make this slaughter into an event that simply will never be replicated in all the history of the world.

Women, as you know, are usually killed in our own homes, in what is called private, because a man and a woman together are not considered a *social* unit. It is him, he is the human being. She is his subordinate. The privacy is his, and in it he can do what he wants to her. We are usually hurt without the scrutiny of cameras and announcements. We are usually hurt by men we know and especially by men with whom we have been intimate, by which I mean sexually involved. In the society in which we live, intercourse is a phenomenon of ownership of women. Men who have had sex with women believe or feel or think—whatever the right word is—that that woman, then, in some way, belongs to them. And, indeed, all of the euphemisms for sexual intercourse in English express ownership: *possession*—I possessed her; the verb *to have*—I had her; *take*—I took her; sex as *conquest*—I conquered her; *violation*—I violated her. All of these words and expressions are used as synonyms for sexual intercourse. None of these words are the so-called dirty words.

Women are usually killed in isolation, not in a public place. Women are usually killed simply for being women, not for being feminists. The women who are most often killed by strangers are women who live out on the streets—women in prostitution or homeless women. This population of women is overwhelmingly characterized by being doubly disenfranchised, which is to say that they come from racially stigmatized groups. They are impoverished even by the standards of women, and I think that it is really a mistake to say that they are being hurt by strangers, because in fact, when you look at the transaction, what happens to prostitutes on the streets is a form of date rape—or date death, really. A man buys a date and he hurts or kills the woman. A significant number of those women who are killed are called "Jane Doe." No one knows where Jane Doe came from. No one knows who her people are. There is no place for her. She has no home in which to be killed.

It used to be that women were sexual chattel under the law, so that the man had the backing of the state. Now, men exercise their sense of

possession and ownership in a more laissez-faire manner. They bear more personal responsibility for making sure that you stay subordinate. It's hard on them: you know how rebellious you are, and they have to work twenty-four hours a day at this, which can't be easy. That is what you are reading in the newspapers even as men write about these murders—that they, the men, are suffering. But not enough. Not yet.

One of the differences in the way Marc Lépine killed these women is that when women are killed, it is almost never called murder. There are many euphemisms: "it was a family fight," "father kills wife and children." We're told that there has been a "domestic tragedy" instead of a mass murder. Marc Lépine was a mass murderer. This was not some little family soap opera in which one man has killed several people and what those people have in common is a shared powerlessness in relation to him and the fact that, as far as society is concerned, he owns them or has an implicit right to own them.

We are frequently told that the man has been under terrible stress. He's been having a terrible time. It's very pathetic and pitiful—for him. We are also told that his wife provoked it. And when prostitutes are raped or killed, the policy of the police in the United States has been not to begin to take the murders seriously until the number of corpses are in the double digits. That has been official state policy.

These women were murdered—because they were women but also because they were engineering students; because they were learning a male science; because they wanted sacred male knowledge. They were trespassing on sacred male ground. They wanted to be engineers, and that was taken to be a militant act of aggression on their part.

What is the same in their deaths is that Marc Lépine, along with other men who hurt or kill women, cannot, could not, coexist outside a context in which women were completely submissive. He couldn't tolerate it. And when men can't stand something, they do something about it. And here is the deepest criticism of us: when we can't stand something, we often don't. Marc Lépine felt he had a right to do what he did. He said: "Life does not bring me joy." The boy was looking for joy; he wanted to bring the fun back into his life. But there is a precondition for

joy in masculine terms, and that precondition is that women are in their place, a subordinate place. You can't have a lot of fun in the world as a man if women anywhere in your perception are getting out of control.

I have seen a lot of the press up here say the equivalent of "I don't want to be associated with Marc Lépine." Well, yes, it is true that not every man picks up a semiautomatic gun, but a lot of them don't have to, because they have pens. And a lot of them don't have to, because they exercise destructive, annihilating power in other ways over women. They destroy women body and soul, but yes, the shells are allowed to keep walking around. The shells are useful. Remember the part about lying down and spreading your legs. You don't have to have a heart. You don't have to have a spirit. Marc Lépine reacted the way that white people in the Amerikan South reacted when the "Whites Only" signs started coming down—that is to say, with violence. And feminists are the active agents of change. We're the people who are responsible for polluting his environment. We have done that—by introducing women into the professions, into working-class jobs from which women were excluded, and by introducing women into history. I hope you have read Marc Lépine's letter, which was just recently published [released by the police to the press one year after the murders], in which he said that war is a male territory, part of masculine heroism, male identity, and even the suggestion that women had behaved heroically in a situation of war was a deep political insult to him. This is a masculinity that is based on the erasure of women, metaphorically and literally, and what I want you to note about it is its extraordinary cowardice, its unbelievable cowardice. In the massacre of fourteen women, the cowardice is clear, but the cowardice is clear in every act of rape as well. In the United States, of the rapes that are reported, 43 percent are pair or gang rapes. Of that, 27 percent are committed by three or more men; 16 percent by two men. We are living in the world as it is not because men are physically stronger than we are but because they gang up to attack us and hurt us. In every act of brutality toward us, what we see is a coward. The husband who batters his wife needs the support of the state to keep doing it. And he gets it—he gets the compliance of the society; he gets reinforcement from the media that

tell him battery is really a sexy thing to do; he gets his $10-billion-a-year pornography industry in which women are the raw material bought and sold for him, so that he can have some of that joy Marc Lépine talked about. The men who use women as prostitutes are also big, bad, and brave. They take women who have been sexually molested as children, who are poor, who are homeless, who have no help or solace in this society, and they use them. If you look at male violence against women, what you will see is the cowardice of that violence.

The way men use women in prostitution is a lot like gang rape, in the sense that what men do to women they do for the sake of each other: "I am a man, another man was here before me, another man will be here after me, he and I have masculinity in common because we both use her—she is simply the vehicle by which I experience our collective superiority to anyone who is like her. I own her because I have bought her. I own her because I have bought her—both the wife and the prostitute; I am morally superior to her because I have bought her; she belongs to me and her behavior is mine to control."

I saw a sociologist on television last night, a male sociologist, perfectly fine guy. In his learned opinion, which was exceptionally erudite, the massacre was the "first"—and I wrote it down because I didn't want to exaggerate—"the first political act against women." The courts don't commit political acts against women when they are organized to support the rapists and the batterers, no; nor when they take women's children away from them, and, as is happening in the United States, give them to fathers who are raping them. That's not political. Nothing that has ever happened to us before is political. We are supposed to believe that we have our private lives and, well, a good man is hard to find. But you just keep searching and searching and eventually, hopefully before you are brain-dead from being beaten, you will find him. That's not political; it's personal, which is why everyone talks about psychologists. They are here to convince you that this is personal, not political. And the authorities here in Montréal are trying to convince you that if you organize politically against male violence, you will be responsible for making men angrier. On every television show, in every newspaper, at

the forum last night at which city officials spoke and answered questions, we were told: "Men haven't really gotten used to these new roles for women. That's why they're hurting women."

Well, men used to have the legal right to beat their wives, so why were they doing it then? Something has changed, but their behavior has stayed the same. They beat their wives when the state said they could beat their wives, and now that the law has changed, they beat their wives.

I think that what all these male authorities are trying to say is this: "We don't understand why he killed them, because he hadn't fucked them. If he had fucked them, we would understand it. And it would have something to do with us. It would be private—it would be none of your business. But we would understand it. But when a man kills a woman with whom he doesn't have that relationship, he's crazy. Not stressed; *crazy*."

Male control of women through law and through the church has broken down considerably. Now, that's the kind of statement one can make as long as one doesn't say, "We did it." But we did it. The reason we are not chattel in marriage is that we changed those damn laws. We have created a rebellion of women in marriage. There are women who do not accept that marriage means that men have bought sexual access. We changed that; we did that. So, what do men do if they don't have the law that they had before, the police that go with the law that they had before, the power of the church that they had before? Well, let me tell you: a $10-billion-a-year pornography industry in the United States turns each man into his own state, his own church, and tells him how to control and hurt women. Systems of power are capable of reorganizing themselves, and the fact that things look different does not mean that the hierarchy has changed. It's the hierarchy we have to look at, not the fact that some social patterns of behavior are different. We have to look at who is on top and who is on the bottom, and then, if we have heart enough to do it, we have to look at what he is doing to her while he is on top and she is on the bottom.

I am astonished, of course, that these intelligent people who keep this

machine going don't understand why we recognize in this massacre something familiar instead of something completely anomalous. What we recognize as being familiar is the hate that is in the act, the hate for women, the bitterness and resentment against women who are not being sexually submissive—at that moment at least—and the rage, his rage toward us. I doubt that there are any women in this room who don't recognize from our own lives those elements in men, and we see it in this act, and therefore this act seems familiar, not bizarre and entirely unique.

Some of the women who were murdered may have been feminists and some not. Women do not get the right to say, "I am, I am." We are all just the same, one way or another. We can look at this and we can understand that the men around us will widely experience any act of dignity on our part as an act of feminism, whether it is or it is not; any act of stepping outside the circle of submission as an act of feminism, whether it is or it is not. I want us to understand that as well as Marc Lépine did.

There are two usual strategies for dealing with a dead woman when she has been murdered by a man. One is the one you are seeing here, which is: we look at the man and we socially create sympathy for him. The other is that we look at the woman or women and we find out what's wrong with her or them. Maybe if three women had been killed, we would be reading about all the terrible things they had done—by the age of twenty-one. And the media would be trying to convince the public-at-large that the victims deserved what happened to them because, after all, were they virgins? How many men had they been with? This is the way murdered women are usually treated. But because of the rootedness of these women in this community, because of the social power of their families, because of the fact that, with respect to other people, they themselves are part of an elite, these women are not being treated this way—yet. The newspapers won't do it. Books by misogynist men will. Our intrepid investigative reporter or sociologist or psychologist will go out there and find the men who know the real dirt and publish a book. This is not over yet.

I would like to say something that I find very difficult to say. It is not a cheap remark. I think that one of the most important commitments that anyone can make to life or to feminism is to make sure that you deserve your death if you die at the hands of a misogynist, that you have done everything that he in his mind accuses you of, that every act of treason he is killing you for is one you have committed. Like many women, I have a long history of violence against me, and I say, to my increasing shame, that everyone who has hurt me is still walking around. They're fine. Nothing has happened to them. And when I look at my own life, I think about the difference between being beaten because I didn't clean the refrigerator and having my life threatened because I am fighting the pornographers. There is a better and a worse, and it is better to encounter anything when you have made a choice that puts you where you want to be, fighting for your own freedom and fighting for the freedom of the women around you. Feminists should remember that while we often don't take ourselves very seriously, the men around us often do. I think that the way we can honor these women who were executed, for crimes that they may or may not have committed—which is to say, for political crimes—is to commit every crime for which they were executed, crimes against male supremacy, crimes against the right to rape, crimes against the male ownership of women, crimes against the male monopoly of public space and public discourse. We have to stop men from hurting women in everyday life, in ordinary life, in the home, in the bed, in the street, and in the engineering school. We have to take public power away from men whether they like it or not and no matter what they do. If we have to fight back with arms, then we have to fight back with arms. One way or another we have to disarm men. We have to be the women who stand between men and the women they want to hurt. We have to end the impunity of men, which is what they have, for hurting women in all the ways they systematically do hurt us.

The feminist is the woman who is there not because she is his woman, but because she is the sister of the woman he is being a weapon against. Feminism exists so that no woman ever has to face her oppressor in a vacuum, alone. It exists to break down the privacy in which men

rape, beat, and kill women. What I am saying is that every one of us has the responsibility to be the woman Marc Lépine wanted to murder. We need to live with that honor, that courage. We need to put fear aside. We need to endure. We need to create. We need to resist, and we need to stop dedicating the other 364 days of the year to forgetting everything we know. We need to remember every day, not only on December 6. We need to consecrate our lives to what we know and to our resistance to the male power used against us.