

The Women's Room

Alexandra Fremont

Ever since my arrival at UNB I have felt the need for a sounding board, or page, for women's issues in *The Brunswickan*. I envisioned a place where I could openly express my views on topics which are relevant to the lives of women.

Such an undertaking, I felt, would not be difficult since there are so many issues which warrant discussion. For months, I made lists of topics on which I wanted to express my totally "biased" opinions. I sat at my desk and eagerly wrote the first paragraph, then the second; but the third never came easily. I began to think I could never fulfil my desire to write a women's column and justified my very conscious fear of failure by blaming a hectic schedule.

But then, on December 6, 1989, fourteen women were massacred at l'Ecole Polytechnique at the Universite de Montreal. I was shocked and appalled that this could happen; "Not in this day and age," I thought. The next few weeks I spent hours, and sometimes days, reflecting on this tragedy, and how it had affected me and my life. Despairingly, I felt that I could not possibly write the women's column I had visualized, because of the fear of being identified, and perhaps persecuted, as a feminist. Possibly the time had not come for me to voice my sentiments. Perhaps the environment would be too hostile. Regardless of all my fears, I have had a change of heart, along with a change in gameplan.

"The Women's Room" is to be a reality. The column will run weekly. However, I believe that this page should be available to all who are interested in women's issues. Therefore I invite any interested person - man or woman - to express their opinions in "The Woman's Room".

Opinions may be expressed by means of an article, a poem, a short story, or any other desired format. I acknowledge any person's hesitancy in expressing feminist views, therefore a request for anonymity will be respected. For editing purposes, your identity will be required by myself, however, every effort will be made to assure confidentiality. Submissions for "The Woman's Room" can be placed at the English Department, care of Alexandra Fremont, Carleton Hall.

During the week following the tragic murder of fourteen women at l'Ecole Polytechnique at the Universite de Montreal, the Dean of Arts Peter Kent invited interested members of the faculty to an informal discussion on the significance of the event.

Two faculty members were asked to offer their personal reflections on the significance of the tragedy. Dr. Gail Campbell (History) and Dr. Barry Cameron (English) have agreed to share their comments in "The Woman's Room".

Reflections by Dr. Gail Campbell

Originally these remarks were addressed to my colleagues in the Faculty of Arts, for the purpose of initiating discussion concerning the issues raised by the murder of 14 women at the Universite de Montreal. I have revised them slightly to make them more applicable to a wider audience. And in doing so, I decided to focus on a single question, one I think we have all asked ourselves since the shooting. How should we—indeed, how can we—respond to this attack against women? In asking that question, I mean to try to get beyond the fundamental and very personal response that I, as a woman, and as a feminist, cannot avoid. I believe very strongly that we cannot merely dismiss this terrible attack as the action of a madman, totally alienated from his society. Thus, while I do not expect men with guns to start invading our campuses, I believe that the massacre in Montreal must be recognized as an act of misogyny and deep-seated anti-feminism, taken to its most extreme end. We must not ignore the women's issue here.

Last weekend I talked to my elderly mother about the murder of these young women. Her strongest statement on the tragedy may seem unrelated to the women's issue, but as events have unfolded, I have come back to it again and again. She was appalled at the statement that kept recurring among those interviewed: "At first I thought it was some kind of joke". My mother asked, "What kind of sick jokes are they used to?"

I think back to the banners, dismissed by many as 'just a joke', that were displayed by young men at Queen's University in response to an anti-rape campaign slogan earlier this semester. Since the tragedy in Montreal we have already heard the story of the Radio Canada journalist, one of the feminists on Lepine's list, who had to listen, the next day, as one of her male colleagues quipped, 'I've been wanting to shoot the feminists for a long time myself'; the story of the high school student, the only young woman in her grade 12 electronics class, shot with a water pistol by one of her classmates after he announced, 'You're a feminist'; and the story of a 16 year old girl, waiting in a bus shelter, who was shot at by a man with what turned out to be a starter's pistol. And there have been other, similar stories.

What kind of sick jokes are we used to? There should be no room for such jokes in our society. 'We didn't mean anything by it' is an unacceptable excuse. Why should women believe 'they didn't mean anything by it?' What proof do we have? How are we to know who means something by it and who doesn't? I am not suggesting that we should jail, or even expel young men such as those who participated in the Queen's incident. But I think it is time for every one of us, as members of the academic community, to stand up and be counted in speaking out against such jokes. And we need men to speak out as strongly and as often as women do.

Women are more vulnerable in our society than are men. And they are more vulnerable on our university campuses than are men. We cannot easily change that. But surely we have an obligation to take whatever steps we can to make the university environment a place where women can, at the very least, be assured that such jokes will not be tolerated. What I am suggesting is a small and perhaps inadequate step, but I am not sure that I could realistically expect, or ask for, more.

A week after the Montreal shootings I called on my colleagues who attended a noon hour discussion of the issues raised by the murders to join together in taking that small first step. Through this forum, I am calling on the wider university community, faculty and students together, to do the same.

Reflections by Dr. Barry Cameron

What follows is less a series of assertions than a series of questions, beginning, since I am a man, with all the questions men in feminism raise. This is a devastating moment for WOMEN! Should I as a man be saying anything on the Montreal massacre? Should men have said anything at the UNB vigil? Am I running the risk of inappropriately—appropriately—speaking for women, and if I am read as appropriating, am I then also read as doing women a sort of violence? It's not a question of rights—that is, do I have the right to speak? It's a question of power—am I exercising power once again over women by constituting them as the subject of my discourse here today in a moment that should not really be mine but is mine because I am speaking? These are some of the first questions that came to mind when Peter Kent asked me to participate in a discussion on the significance of the Montreal massacre and why I feel uneasy doing so.

But I shall nevertheless begin, first with a quotation that might serve as an epigraph for the following remarks:

"It does not matter that the man who decided to kill fourteen women—and he clearly did decide to do that—killed himself afterward; it is not of him I am afraid. I am afraid of what he represents [emphasis mine], of all the unspoken hatred, the pent-up anger that he expressed". — Diana Bronson in *The Globe*.

"What he represents", what the event represents, what it signifies—it's the various ways the event has been read (and by whom) that I think is worth opening up for discussion, for it is surely, in terms of meaning, one of the most overdetermined public events in recent Canadian history. It has produced an astounding range of frequently contradictory meanings, and each of these meanings is particularly interesting because of the ideologies that seem to be inscribed in them and because of the people who offer them.

What do you make of the following readings of the event? Are they strategies of displacement? Are they alibis for men, whether enunciated by men or women? Do they diminish the deep meaning of the event?

1. This was the isolated act of a single deranged person, one man, and that the victims of his assault were women is irrelevant; it could have been anyone he attacked.
2. This is just a problem for women in engineering or perhaps other male-dominated occupations. (How many occupations aren't male-dominated, we might ask in an aside?)
3. This is, a la Barbara Frum and some of the speakers at the vigil, a gender neutral human problem. Many others are also the victims of violence.
4. Feminists in their stridency are really to blame for this event and the backlash against feminism this event represents. If they were a little more ladylike, they wouldn't have all these problems.
5. Feminists are exploiting this sad occasion that affects us all to gain political advantage.
6. There is no necessary connection between this act by one man and his apparent problems with women and the acts of othering, all forms of violence, physical or otherwise, that women experience everyday of their lives, including in the classroom where power of course is always operating—not least in the way it recesses, elides, obscures, or trivializes gender issues in all the disciplines. Think, for instance, of the absolutist way we tuck off, say, Women's Studies into a corner of the curriculum so we won't necessarily have to deal with women's issues in the regular curriculum. (Of course, this is also a way to control women's issues because the program is part of a larger, authoritarian and therefore patriarchal structure.)

And so I ask are these alibiing strategies, and how do they differ from the strategies the University itself seems to use in its refusal to admit that the institution and all its structures—academic, curricular, and administrative—are themselves patriarchal. (Take a look, for example, at some of the explanations the administration at Queen's University has been offering about the behaviour of many of its male students.)

I think many men in the University, both professors and students, see women as a threat to their power and that it is not necessarily a conscious wilful resistance that is being enacted because men have so naturalized power in the classroom, in the corridors, in the meetings halls that they really don't know what it would be like without it. I think part of the answer, at least for us in the University, is self-education, self-reflexivity, and an inscription of gender issues across the curriculum. Most women come to feminism because of their experience. It's harder for men to come to it because, though many men have been oppressed or marginalized, they have not been marginalized because they are men. Men have to learn feminism.

Let me end with one final, provocative question and another quotation, this time from a man, Emil Sher in that same issue of *The Globe*. First the question, and then the quotation:

Could it have happened here? . . .

"...We can begin with our own feelings, and recognize that there are ways other than violence to express them. Women have always spoken out against the violence they encounter at home, at school, at work, on the street. Every year they hold rallies and candlelight vigils to demand their right to Take Back The Night. It's time men began to talk about how we can give back the night, and return what was never ours to begin with".