

HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT

Female students challenged by an unwelcoming campus

by Nikki Gershbain

Imagine that you are a woman living in residence:

You wake up and under your door is a letter — addressed to you personally — from an anonymous group of men in your building. "In order to avoid being sexually mutilated," the letter reads, "you had better start putting out."

Outside the door of your room — of your home — is a "No Means No", anti-rape poster covered with shit.

You walk to the library and you travel past a wall graffitied with the message, "Rape Girls."

At the library you are unable to look up any sources because the only words that come up on your terminal are "Kill Women."

You walk to the reference section and pull out a Webster's Dictionary: "Misogyny", the definition reads; "hatred of women."

Now you go to your English literature class. Your professor is explaining why a feminist critique of Norman Mailer is not legitimate. You happen to know that Mailer is infamous for his anti-women attitudes.

You begin to wonder just how much your prof knows about feminism, or even

about women writers in general, given that your reading list is entirely male.

As you debate the merits of verbalizing your reservations, a group of male students emphatically lend their support to the prof.

As the class ends, your professor encourages people to pick their own essay topics.

So, what do you do?

Do you challenge the prof or his supporters? Do you attempt to lend legitimacy to an alternative analysis of Mailer? Do you ask if you can write your paper from a feminist perspective, or on a female author? Do you even say a word?

Yeah, right.

You are a woman on a campus full of Norman Mailers. Perhaps you are a feminist, but chances are that you are not. Either way, you are a potential target for rape, violence, and verbal abuse — just because you are a woman.

The environment that women experience on our university campuses (yes, that includes *this* university campus), is inextricably linked to how we think, feel and behave. When this environment is misogynist in nature, women respond with silence and fear: the last thing we are going to do is make ourselves more vulnerable and exposed than we already are.

The disastrous result of this self-censorship is that our educational experience is profoundly compromised.

In one *Excalibur* editorial this year, examples of misogyny on Canadian university campuses were given. For a more thorough (although certainly not exhaustive) calendar of recent misogynist events, consider these examples:

September 1989: At Wilfred Laurier University, an organized panty raid culminates when male students hang a banner of women's underwear in the dining hall. Slogans like "Do you take Visa?" accompany the artwork. The underwear is smeared with ketchup and chocolate pudding, intended to resemble blood and faeces.

October 1989: During a Queen's University anti-date rape campaign, men in residence respond to "No Means No" posters with banners that read: "No Means Yes", "No Means Dyke", "No Means Harder", and my personal favorite, "No Means Fuck Me From Behind." As a result, "No Means No" becomes the preferred slogan for anti-date rape campaigns.

November 1989: Women at Queen's hold a sit-in to protest the administration's inaction regarding the "No Means No" incident. A group of men gather outside and yell; "All you bitches need is a good rape" and "We know who you are; we're going to hunt you down and kill you."

December 1989: At the L'École Polytechnique, Marc Lépine murders fourteen women. Opening fire he screams; "you're all a bunch of feminists. I hate feminists." We know this day as the Montreal Massacre.

December 1989 (just weeks after the Massacre): At the University of Alberta, in the presence of faculty, a female engineering student is shouted off the stage during skit night. The chant? "Shoot the bitch." Why this particular woman? A

few days earlier she had publicly accused male students in her faculty of sexism. Terrified, she drops out of school.

January 1990 (also just weeks after Montreal): At the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, a poster announcing new research in feminism is defaced with the words: "Shoot them."

July 1990: During a "slave auction" at the University of Waterloo, a woman is forced to read sexually explicit letters aloud. She is threatened with abuse if she does not comply.

September 1990: At the University of British Columbia, 300 women in residence find "invitations" under their doors, written by 22 men. The invitations include threats of rape and violence such as; "We will pound your cervix into a pulp" and "We will suck your nipples until they bleed."

September 1990 - May 1991: At York University, a rash of misogynist graffiti is found on construction boards around campus. What is perhaps one of the more disturbing comments asks; "So what if I want to have sex with a consenting four year old?"

August 1991: At a hockey game at the University of Waterloo, men hold up a banner that reads "Stop means please", and another that reads "No means harder", mimicking the slogan used by men at Queen's a year earlier.

September 1991: At York University, "No Means No" posters hung up in Stong College residence are torn down. They are found covered in excrement and vomit.

September 1991: In both York and UofT library computer terminals, a virus is created that repeats, over and over again, "Kill Women."

September 1991: At Carleton, the men's lacrosse team is overheard during their initiation chanting "Chain the pregnant woman to the bed, fuck her until the fetus gives you head."

October 1991: At York University, posters promoting the feminist band Two Nice Girls are torn down, placed in a pile, and urinated upon. The director of programming at the Student Centre receives over sixty threatening messages on her answering machine for having booked this and other feminist events.

October 1991: At Carleton University, students awake to a campus covered with graffiti that reads "Rape girls and fuck their tiny assholes".

November 1991: At the University of Toronto's Trinity College, a Sri Lankan woman is made to crawl on her hands and knees, sporting a sign reading "to-ken ethnic."

November 1991: At Queen's University, a letter is sent to the women editors of *Surface*, a progressive bimonthly newspaper, that reads: "Congratulations! Here's your politically correct death notices...we're gonna rape u dykes. In fact, we will kill any and all feminists slowly."

No one can deny that misogyny is a reality on university campuses.

MEMORIAL CALENDER

WEDNESDAY DECEMBER 4

LOVED, HONOURED AND BRUISED

A newly-released National Film Board production dealing with violence against women in relationships. Discussion to follow. Facilitator Roxanne Gow. Student Centre Common Room, 12 noon.

THE COMPANY OF SIRENS: FEMINIST THEATRE

In honour of the fourteen women who were murdered at L'École Polytechnique in Montreal. Student Centre Common Room, 2 p.m.

CELEBRATING OUR VICTORIES

Women at York University are invited to join together for a special opportunity to celebrate our accomplishments in the struggle to end violence against women and children. Featuring Nicole, a Native Indian Poet reading from her own work, and Anita Smith, a folk singer and musician, in performance. All women welcome (A women-only event.) Student Centre Common Room, 4-7 p.m.

THURSDAY DECEMBER 5

AFTER THE MASSACRE

A half hour documentary of the events which unfolded after the Montreal Massacre. Discussion to follow. Facilitators: Jennifer Lawrence and Ellen Baptie. Student Centre Common Room, 12 noon.

BLACK WOMEN IN STRUGGLE

Activists Judy Montreuil and Karen Carter invite you to work toward an understanding of Black women's experiences in the Women's Movement and the Black community. Graduate Student Lounge, Student Centre room 430, 1 p.m.

THE RAPE SHIELD LAW

Kimberly Armstrong of CLASP discusses the defeat of the Rape Shield Law. GSA Lounge, Room 430 Student Centre, 3 p.m.

SANDRA'S GARDEN

A newly-released National Film Board Production dealing with child abuse and incest. Discussion to follow. Facilitator: Ruth Pentiga. (Women-only event) York Women's Centre, Room 328 Student Centre, 5 p.m.

FRIDAY DECEMBER 6

CANDLELIGHT VIGIL & MEMORIAL SERVICE

Service will be held on the third floor of the Student Centre, East end, 12 noon.

MINUTE OF SILENCE

There will be a minute of silence in honour of Genevieve Bergeron, Helen Colgan, Natalie Croteau, Barbara Daignealt, Anne-Marie Edward, Maude Haviernick, Barbara Maria Kleuznick, Maryse Leclair, Maryse Leganiere, Anne-Marie Lemay, Sonia Pelletier, Michele Richard, Annie St-Arnealt, Annette Turcotte and in honour of all women whose names we do not know that have died as a result of male violence.

WOMEN'S HEALING CEREMONY

Drawing upon each other's strengths, women are invited to come together to heal one another and ourselves. Led by Judith Lewis. (A women-only event.) Student Centre Common, 1 p.m.

MEN AGAINST VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN: A WORKSHOP FOR MEN

An interactive on men's role in ending violence against women. All Welcome. GSA Lounge, Room 430 Student Centre, 1 p.m.