

# Notes on the massacre

On December 6th, 1989, a male student, Marc Lépine, shot and killed 13 female engineering students and a female clerical worker at the University of Montreal's Ecole Polytechnique. Thirteen others were injured. Lépine's targets and his statements left no doubt that this was an attack on women and particularly women he perceived as feminist. Not surprisingly, the massacre has generated widespread debate and some long overdue scrutiny of violence against women on university campuses. At our 25th annual general meeting in March 1990, members of the association were asked to submit short statements in response to the massacre. It was our intention to produce a short, edited composite of these statements as a memorial to these students and a reminder of the need for reflection, action and change in the future. I have fused the statements submitted into a collage of reflections and responses under Jim Overton's title, *After Montreal*. **barbara n.**

## NOTICE

**barb m**  
I first heard about the Montreal massacre on the car radio. I was driving home from a graduate course at Dalhousie. I had been engaged in a disturbing classroom discussion about racism and was already pensive and sombre. My reaction was immediate: 'No! I'm a graduate student, a part-time university lecturer and a feminist. They've declared open-season on us'. I felt afraid and wanted to hide. At home, I rushed to view the horrible scenes on television. I was not dreaming, it had really happened. I felt numb.

**Jim s**  
I wanted to talk with my students about the Massacre right away but classes were over for the term. Blocked, I wondered, 'was the date chosen deliberately to disenfranchise university women and men from dealing with this in the classroom'? I wanted both men and women to talk about our sense of violation. I wanted all of us to use our 'sociological imaginations' to understand our reactions. I wanted to discuss one of my own first responses: 'Why the hell weren't the people (read men) trying to stop him?'

**barb m**  
I met a feminist faculty member the next morning on my way into my last graduate seminar of the term. We exchanged teary sympathetic stares. She said, 'I know it's wrong but I feel like punching out the first man I see'. Again, numbness.  
After class, I began the hour drive home searching for emotional shelter and a place to deal with this monstrous nightmare. A cold front had hit. The roads were coated in ice and the wind was whipping snow onto the highway. I slowed to a crawl, slid a blues tape into the cassette deck, and concentrated on getting home. I was thinking, 'I've almost made it', when I saw a speeding pick-up truck, out of control, sliding broadside down the highway towards me. I looked at the steep embankment to my right and chose instead to brace myself for the impact. The car was totalled. I was in shock with bumped knees.

The young man in the pick-up apologized profusely for almost killing me, and a constable took me home. Still shaking, I soaked in a hot tub. I began to cry and cried until I could cry no longer. I cried for the women of Montreal, for my own survival and for all women trying desperately to survive patriarchy and capitalism. I cried about the violations we encounter daily in our lives.

**barbara n**  
I hardly reacted at all. I heard about it on the radio, voiced anger and upset but felt nothing but numbness for almost twenty-four hours. The following night I went to the film Romero. It was while watching the brutal and senseless killing of Salvadoran peasants that the numbness finally broke and I began to feel my anger and grief. I tried to talk to my partner about it in the car on the way home; vocalized the connections between peasants, the women in Montreal, and myself. He suggested that his men's group should organize a public forum. Although logically I could see the need for this I did not want, then, to hear what men had to say. I wanted a place to go to be with women, to share, to grieve. I felt outraged when almost the first local person the media interviewed about the Massacre was a member of the men's group rather than of a women's organization.

**georgina m-d**  
The days following December 6th blended into a mesmerized period in this city, as Montrealers attempted to deal with the full impact of the Massacre of 14 women at the Ecole Polytechnique. Men, as horrified as women, responded in grief, wanting to help, not knowing how, expressing feelings of guilt because they were men.

As experts struggled to fit together the bizarre pieces, the realization that this was an act perpetrated specifically against women slowly dawned on a stunned populace. Its magnitude gave visibility to violence against women. Was such an action the inevitable outcome of the cumulative effect of blaming women for others' failures?

**barbara n**  
I heard the student's council had organized an ecumenical service in a local church. Blocked with grief and anger I went, seeking an outlet, forgetting the problems I always have with the church establishment. Instead of allowing release the service just added to my anger. The speakers ignored or distanced themselves from the mounting debate about whether or not the killings were a feminist issue. Politics belonged outside of the church doors, they suggested. But I was unwilling and unable to perform the act of exorcism required to divorce myself from my powerful feelings of shared sisterhood and to grieve politely. As the service droned on, my mind flipped between depression and rage. They hadn't left politics outside. This refusal to identify the killings as a feminist issue was a political act that I felt with my entire being. My conviction deepened as we moved from hymn to hymn about men, a male God and female supplication to this male hierarchy. I searched the hymn book. Surely there was something more appropriate - there was! Right there, on a page opposite to the hymn they had chosen, was one about women and women's strength. Throughout the service and on the way out I studied the faces of the women I know and understood my feelings of outrage were shared. There *had* to be, there *would* be another memorial service.

A day later the women's community brought us together. We cried and sang and spoke our feelings. There was no more denying what we all felt and would carry with us in the years to come. These were our sisters. Like us, their only crime was the choice of life over death, activity over passivity, often tentative unsuspecting steps into streets and buildings and jobs they thought they had a right to occupy. For all of us, their murders brought into the forefront of our consciousness the memories of assaults, harassment, threats when we crossed a line we were often only vaguely aware of, into territory some man defined as his. They reminded us of the fears that are the constant companion of our nighttime walks and daytime search for privacy. They made the classroom and the cafeteria seem threatening in a new way. Finally the grief and anger that were choking me began to melt. Finally I could listen a little bit to the few men who were willing to talk about their grief and their responsibility.

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