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Unbearable Witness: Toward a Politics of Listening

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On Wednesday, 6 December 1989, around 5 P.M., Marc Lepine (né Gamil Roderigue Gharbi) dressed in hunting garb entered a classroom in the École Polytechnique. Disturbing a presentation by Eric Chavarie, he waved a .22-caliber rifle and ordered the men and women into opposite corners of the classroom. Thinking it was a joke arranged to relieve the tedium of the last hour of the term, no one moved. A single gunshot persuaded them otherwise. Next, Lepine ordered the men to leave. Alone with the women, he stated, "I am here to fight against feminism that is why I am here." Nathalie Provost, a 23-year-old mechanical engineering student, argued, "Look, we are just women studying engineering, not necessarily feminists ready to march on the streets to shout we are against men, just students intent on leading a normal life." Lepine responded, "You're women, you're going to be engineers. You're all a bunch of feminists. I hate feminists." He then opened fire, killing six women—and closing the discussion. After leaving the classroom, Lepine stalked through the halls of the school saying, "I want the women." Lepine killed himself at approximately 5:35 p.m., his gun still loaded and the police not yet in sight. The total death count: fourteen women and Marc Lepine.

And then the discussion reopened.

The unexpected horror of this "American-style carnage" (Pelletier 33) shocked most Canadians and defied them to make sense of the worst one-day massacre in Canadian history. To those whose complacency had been shattered, it was imperative that some lesson, some understanding be extracted from the events of 6 December 1989. In response, the Montreal police launched a full-scale investigation, centered on the life of Marc Lepine. The day after the massacre, the police released a brief biography that described Lepine as "an intelligent but deeply troubled young man with no known psychiatric history" and alluded to a suicide note, found on his person, which blamed feminists for his life's misery (Malarek and Aubin A1). The authorities, however, soon aborted their investigation. On 11 December 1989, the chief coroner, Jean Grennier, told the press that he preferred not to call for a public inquiry since an inquiry would rehash "some of the gruesome and sickening aspects of the tragedy for no good reason. It would mean more pain and suffering for the families." The coroner did say that he would call for a public inquiry if he felt the public was not being properly informed, but he argued that so far "the public is very well informed" (Malarek "More Massacre Details" A14). The next day, the Montreal police refused to answer reporters' questions and stated that they "will provide any further pertinent information when it

becomes available" (Malarek "Police Refusal" A18). According to the authorities, retelling the event equaled reinflicting pain upon the bereaved families. For the sake of those who had suffered most, the authorities argued, discussion must be closed--again.

The authorities, however, never consulted the families in question: the following June, nine of the fourteen families would join the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (nac) in calling for a public inquiry into the massacre ("Demanding Answers" 17). As the police psychologists would later explain, the authorities had closed down the investigation because they feared that continuing the discussion would unleash an unstoppable flow of antifeminist violence ("Police Won't Confirm" A16). They interpreted retelling not only as re-enacting the violence against the bereaved, but also as propagating violence by calling others to identify with and act as Lepine. Moreover, by insisting that the already dead Lepine was and should be the only person implicated in the massacre, they were trying to make it so. Accordingly, the only way to contain the contagious potential of Lepine's example--the only way to re-repress the desire to kill feminists--was to make the entire Montreal Massacre taboo. Thus, while they were claiming that the massacre was an isolated and incomprehensible event that no amount of investigation would ever render comprehensible, the authorities were also assuming that the desire to kill feminists was already present in segments of the general public. Hence, for their own safety, female reporters and newscasters were advised not to dwell on the matter. [1](#)

To the surprise of the authorities, it was not male antifeminism that refused to be contained; it was female testimony. Testimony by women who identified with his victims flooded the media; vigils were held in almost every city; and anniversaries were and still are marked religiously. [2](#) Eventually, the Canadian government would establish a Royal Commission to investigate violence against women, and declare December 6 an official day of commemoration for female victims of male violence. This essay recounts the events that led to the Canadian government's about-face and analyzes the conflict between feminists and postfeminists that emerged as an aftermath of the Montreal Massacre. This ensuing conflict reveals that when feminism makes the sovereign subject its goal, it produces postfeminism. To be more precise, it produces postfeminists, who take on postfeminism as a means to survive uneven playing fields. This strategy, however, far from ensuring equality renders many postfeminists incapable of acknowledging discrimination.

This essay also complicates theories of testimony and trauma by addressing multiple and infelicitous testimonies: what happens when an event seems to invoke testimony not only from its survivors (who are eerily silent), but also from those who were never physically present, from those who seem to be testifying belatedly to another event? What happens when those witnessing to the event seem called by the *proximity* of this event to their own real or imagined experiences? Most importantly, this essay argues for a politics of listening as a necessary complement to the politics of speaking. To date, feminism has concentrated on consciousness raising, on producing speech that breaks one's silence and inaugurates one as a feminist. Although important, the question of how to listen and respond to these testimonials has been largely unaddressed, possibly since the question of listening in general tends to be under-theorized and/or undervalued: more often than not, we assume we know how to listen. [3](#) The aftermath of the Montreal Massacre, this essay argues, brings out the disastrous consequences of assuming, rather than listening to, testimony.

Exposed

After the Montreal police refused to hold an inquest, it appeared that the crisis of truth and evidence resulting from the massacre would only be addressed through the media, through a mediatization of the event. There would be no juridical counterpart to the media coverage. Only in the glare of publicity could victims, experts, and the police offer their testimony--that is, "*vow to tell*, to *promise* and *produce* one's own speech as material evidence for truth" (Felman and Laub 5).⁴ Because of this, those who testified, those who tried to expose, produce, and circulate the truth, found themselves exposed, produced, and circulated in turn. Because there would be no privileged juridical space that demarcated eyewitnesses from commentators or expert witnesses, the task of comprehending the massacre and placing it within historical or societal context would be open to the public.⁵

The media followed the police's example by treating Lepine as key to understanding the massacre. Within the first week after the murders there were three main narratives competing for the public's support: that the massacre was an isolated, incomprehensible act of a madman; that it was a case of child abuse reproducing its violence in a disturbed young man; that it was a crime against women and, as such, representative of Canadian misogyny.

The first narrative, of Lepine as a Mad Killer, coincided with the Montreal police interpretation and gained a fast hold on Québécois opinion. According to this explanation, there could be no political motivation behind the killings since an insane subject could not act rationally and thus politically. There could be no answer to the question, "Why did this happen?" The fact that all of Lepine's victims were female was incidental: it was unfortunate that these particular young women died, but any group could have been targeted--who can understand the logic of a madman? What was particularly frightening about the massacre in light of this interpretation was that Lepine had no prior psychiatric history and that his insanity could only be determined, after the fact, by his murderous act. Nonetheless, there were lessons to be learned: mass murder is not only an American problem; stiffen gun control laws; and invest in police psychology so that dangerously insane but apparently normal people cannot get gun permits.

The second interpretation also portrayed Lepine as insane, but as an insane victim. Numerous articles describing the childhood of Marc Lepine cited the testimony of child psychologists to show how the physical abuse he suffered at the hands of his Algerian father combined with his steady diet of war movies had shaped him into an antifeminist mass murderer. As a victim of abuse, it was argued, Lepine could not help but repeat the violence around him. Once again, any larger responsibility for the Montreal Massacre disappeared, for, as the product of an aberrant family, Lepine's actions were comprehensible but in no way representative of Canadian society. Rather, Lepine represented the possible ramifications of "cultural differences" and the potential for violence lurking within all abused children. Again, the specificity of his victims vanished, since any group could have been targeted. Particularly frightening about the massacre in light of this interpretation was that Lepine had undergone therapy as a young boy after his parents' divorce precisely to prevent the repetition of violence. Nonetheless, there were lessons to be learned: treat children as the "final frontier"; keep old war movies away from young children; teach them that violence is not to be tolerated; and stiffen gun control laws just in case.

The last interpretation, produced and supported by most feminists, argued that Lepine's actions were both comprehensible and reprehensible. Feminist analysts, such as Francine Pelletier, emphasized the premeditated nature of the massacre in order to downplay the significance of Lepine's insanity: "He was crazy when he started shooting but it was a cold, rational and calculated act on his part" (Lamey "Lepine Rampage" A1). Accordingly, the Montreal Massacre, as representative of the violence inherent in patriarchal society, was an intense, spectacular instance of a routine event--the killing of women by men. What made this event particularly tragic to feminists was the innocence and youthful potential of the victims, for, instead of killing prominent feminists, Lepine had killed "fourteen of our bright and shining daughters . . . [who] were doing things that we, their mothers, [had] only dreamed of" (Cameron 161). Lepine, it seemed, had killed the wrong women: the so-called "crimes" of the feminist mothers had been visited upon the postfeminist daughters. The violence of the massacre, however, was not limited to these fourteen deaths, since, as Nicole Brossard argued, "each woman cried over having been symbolically put to death" ("The Killer" 31).

Essential to the gradual acceptance and dominance of the last narrative was the publication of Lepine's suicide letter nearly one year after the event. An anonymous source sent Francine Pelletier a copy of the letter, which named her as an intended target. Working against the wishes of the police psychologists and some of the survivors, she made the note public since she "was upset by the extent of the denial about the real nature of the event--denial that this was a crime against women. . . . And publishing the note makes Lepine's motive impossible to ignore . . . unlike the police and the psychologists, I don't believe it is dangerous to have a window inside Marc Lepine's head. Personally, I think it is dangerous not to, to continue pretending the Polytechnique (massacre) had nothing to do with anything but the insanity of Marc Lepine" (Lamey "Lepine Rampage" A1, A4). According to Pelletier, only by publishing Lepine's suicide letter could Canadians understand the true nature of the massacre, and thus begin to deal with the trauma this event provoked. By privileging the letter and the *intentions* of Lepine, feminists treated Lepine as their star witness ⁶: —

Would you note that if I commit suicide today 89-12-06 it is not for economic reasons (for I have waited until I exhausted all my financial means, even refusing jobs) but for political reasons. Because I have decided to send the feminists, who have always ruined my life, to their Maker. For seven years life has brought me no joy and being totally blasé, I have decided to put an end to those viragos. . . .

Even if the Mad Killer epithet will be attributed to me by the media, I consider myself a rational erudite that only the Grim Reaper has forced to take extreme acts. For why persevere to exist if it is only to please the government. Being rather backward-looking by nature (except for science), the feminists have always enraged me. They want to keep the advantages of women (e.g. cheaper insurance, extended maternity leave preceded by a preventive leave etc.) while seizing for themselves those of men.

Sorry for this too brief letter.
Marc Lepine

[The letter is followed by the nineteen-name list, with a note at the bottom.]

Nearly died today. The lack of time (because I started too late) has allowed these radical feminists to survive.

Alea Jacta Est. (Malette and Chalouh 180–81)

Pelletier hoped that endorsing the validity of Lepine's confessed intentions, if not the validity of his accusations, would force Canadians to discuss the massacre as a politically motivated crime against women.⁷ And it did (in Anglophone Canada, at least). With the publication of the suicide note, more Canadians endorsed the feminist interpretation of Lepine's actions as primarily an act of violence against women, as a political act.⁸ As well, the very narrative of the event changed. Lepine writing his suicide note began the events of 6 December 1989, rather than his invading the classroom on the second floor of the École Polytechnique.⁹

Lepine's list of the nineteen intended if not actual victims legitimated Francine Pelletier and other prominent Québécois feminists' claims to testify on behalf of, and as, victims of Lepine. They could no longer be accused of taking the massacre personally, because they had been personally implicated by Lepine. Thus, their interpretation of the event could no longer be construed as self-serving, as "outside" the events of 6 December 1989, since only an *accident* prevented them from being Lepine's victims; only an accident made these other women Lepine's target. Their interpretation of the event thus moved from "ideology" to victim testimony. Because they linked this event to other acts of violence endemic to a patriarchal society, the public outpouring of testimony by women who had been abused by men--or who felt vulnerable to male violence--became essential to establishing the historical and national significance of the massacre. In essence, validating Lepine turned feminist testimony from a misfired or failed testimony--testimony that does not register as producing the truth--to a successful one. Their testimony became largely felicitous after it had been sanctioned by Lepine's words. Lepine thus was not only a star witness, but also *the* adjudicator. Two years after the massacre, under the pressure of these witnesses and their supporters, the Canadian government would declare December 6 an official day of commemoration for female victims of male violence and would launch a Royal Commission to investigate violence against women. Final(?) lessons learned: never again; don't be silent about violence against women; mourn, then look into society and yourself; question your misogyny; and don't forget.

Accepting Lepine's actions as representative of violence against women has brought much needed attention to the question. On the second anniversary of the Montreal Massacre, male Members of Parliament (MPs) wearing white ribbons to remember the dead listened silently as MP Margaret Mitchell brought the issue of battered wives to the floor. Nine years earlier, she had been met with jokes such as, "Do you beat your wife, George?" On 6 December 1991, though, "No man in the House would dare to laugh" (O'Neill A15). In a "Post-Montreal-Massacre" Canada, violence against women emerged as a category in the Canadian News Index. It was a new, comprehensive, gendered name for abuse that was formerly hidden under the label domestic violence, or undifferentiated from violence in general, or pinned to an identity category such as "battered women." To this day, Canadian articles about violence against women, sexual harassment, and antifeminism refer directly or indirectly to the Montreal Massacre.

The massacre also caused many engineering societies, albeit reluctantly, to abolish

more offensive practices such as strippers at Iron Ring Stag parties; mascots called "The Ridgid Tool" (University of Waterloo); and racist and sexist jokes published in society newspapers (University of Calgary and University of British Columbia). The massacre tore down the walls of secrecy and arrogance that had protected engineering societies from outside scrutiny and forced these societies to respond to "lay" complaints. Engineering was forced to look critically, rather than nostalgically, at former decades in which the traditional Lady Godiva Parade (featuring a prostitute riding naked on a horse) and pornography in the school newspaper had been normal practices. Lastly, the massacre motivated more women to enter engineering and also motivated universities and government to provide incentive programs for these women. ¹⁰

I believe these changes have been positive, yet I also believe there are dangers in allowing this narrative to explain fully the Montreal Massacre. Making the massacre representative of all violence against women emptied the event of its specificity and flattened the differences among domestic violence, the violence of the massacre, and "the fear with which every woman must live." This narrative, however unintentionally, privileged fear of violence as *the* issue that unites women and defines women as women. Moreover, it focused on Lepine as key to understanding the massacre, as though Lepine's misogyny was not only a necessary, but a sufficient reason for the event. ¹¹ By privileging the perpetrator's testimony in its attempt to understand the event, the feminist interpretation thus unwittingly undercut the significance of the testimonies of Lepine's actual victims. As I discuss later, by conflating all woman-targeted violence, by arguing that every woman had been symbolically put to death, this narrative allowed women to assume this violence as a common experience in order to build communal support, but it also inadvertently preempted an engagement with the actual victims. This narrative thus exposed and widened fault lines between certain older feminists and younger women--usually women in male-dominated fields--who resented the older feminists' commentary and their imposition and usurpation of "victim" status. By insisting on "don't forget" and the need to publicize the event, feminists kept certain unwilling eyewitnesses in the public's eye, calling into question exactly what we were not to forget. Lastly, this interpretation encouraged and was encouraged by paternal men who took the blame for the massacre and for "the fear with which every woman must live." For these men, the massacre pointed to the need to revive chivalry--to teach men not to abuse women and not to leave the classroom when their women were under attack. For these reasons, I believe there are dangers in allowing ourselves to be placated too easily--in allowing the massacre to be boiled down into some pithy "lessons learned." We should not, and cannot, rest in our reading of the Montreal Massacre.

Thus, I will reopen the case of the Montreal Massacre through an analysis of the public dispute between feminists and postfeminists. I do so to turn a dispute framed as an argument between "mothers" and "daughters," "victims" and the "unvictimizable" into a reassessment of the goals and methods of feminism and postfeminism. I want particularly to draw out the full ramifications of the slogan "personal is political," or, more precisely, the implications and limitations of basing the political on personal experience. As the impasse between feminists and postfeminist survivors makes painfully clear, sharing or being called to share a common experience--even one so powerful as suffering abuse from a man--cannot guarantee solidarity. It confirms Judith Butler's point that "an effort to give universal or specific content to the category of women, presuming that that guarantee of solidarity is required in advance, necessarily [produces] factionalization" ("Contingent Foundations" 15). It also makes clear that

testifying and testimony are not simple gestures and that experience cannot be treated as something that a subject undergoes and then possesses. Who, after all, is called to testify and to whose truth do you testify? How does one listen and respond to testimony?

Will the Victim Please Stand Up

Is the witness the one who sees, the one who undergoes, or the one who propagates, the accident to which he bears witness?

(Barbara Johnson qtd. in Felman and Laub 23)

The media, in reporting resistance to feminist testimony, did not focus on angry male responses, but rather the testimony of certain female survivors and female engineering students. ¹² Male complaints about feminist "misuse" of the event did appear, but highlighting the accusations made by women allowed the "respectable" media to publish antifeminist diatribes that, given the events of 6 December 1989, they probably would not have otherwise published. The media found an especially fertile source in Nathalie Provost, the young woman who had tried to reason with Lepine. Provost interpreted Pelletier's publication of the suicide note as a deliberately hostile act. At first, Provost refused to acknowledge that the massacre had affected more people than the actual survivors. She refused to acknowledge that other women needed to talk about the event in the context of their own lives and experiences. In response to the letter's publication, Provost chided feminists for losing sight of the true victims' needs: "Those of us who survived are strong and solid. We grew tremendously. Now, we need our peace. We need serenity" (Peritz A1). She refused to acknowledge that the event she wanted forgotten could help others unite under the mantra "Never Forget."

Provost's plea for peace was not necessarily a rejection of the feminists' interpretation, but rather a rejection of their testimony. According to Provost, feminist testimony needlessly propagated the accident, since those who had survived--those for whom the massacre "really" mattered--had grown strong from their experience, had extracted personal lessons from it. Any further discussion of the event or otherwise "helpful" dialogue was harmful since it recirculated images and narratives in the media that made peace impossible for those who decided to *keep* their peace. ¹³ It disturbed their serenity by forcing the issue of their own testimony--testimony that many felt unable to give.

Provost was, after all, the first female survivor to speak to the press about the massacre, if only to demand the end of public speculation. Speaking to the Canadian press from her hospital bed, Provost defined further public recounting of the massacre as morbid: "You know what has happened. I am not going to dwell on it. It has been a nightmare. I have talked it over with my friends. I don't intend to do it in public. It was horrible; to dwell on the details now would be morbid" (Buchignani A1). Provost, finding it impossible both to speak and not to speak, emphasized the importance of taking leave, of leaving the event. To dwell on the details now was unhealthy or diseased, not only for herself but for everyone else as well. Witnessing for the end of witnessing, Provost insisted no one else could bear witness for the witness. ¹⁴ No one else could bear the responsibility to speak for or to others, even as she, in order to survive, was refusing to be summoned to the media's witness stand as an eyewitness.

Although refusing to re-narrate the events, Provost, the "hero" of the massacre, did have two messages she wanted to disseminate. First, she wanted "to tell [others] . . . that there was nothing that could have saved her friends, to tell others who survived and perhaps herself that there should be no guilt" (Kastor B1). No one could have prevented the massacre:

He had decided to do what he did. When you plan to do a movie, every scene is set down. He knew how it would happen, I think. I tried to talk to him. It didn't change a second. I am sure that if people had tried to get him [i.e., if the men had not left the classroom], it might have been worse. Maybe he would have shot everyone. Maybe he would have gone on shooting. It is terrible now, but I am happy it wasn't worse. (Kastor B1)

Provost's first message attempted to alleviate guilt for possible complicity with Lepine and for surviving. ¹⁵ It also created something to be grateful for--a bright side to the tragedy: it is terrible now, but I am happy it wasn't worse. It cast the events of 6 December 1989 as something that she and others *survived*, rather than as an event that simply killed her peers.

Provost's second message urged reporters to "use the power of information to explain to men that women are equal to them. I am as much a human being as if I were a man; I deserve as much respect, and I have the right to have my life the way I want it" (Buchignani A1). Not willing to interrogate why men are privileged examples of human beings, nor to consider the ways one's "right" to have one's life the way one wants is always compromised, Provost demanded that the media stop their investigation and direct their efforts "to explain *to men* that women are equal to them" (emphasis mine). Her second message, then, directed at men in general, implies that she, like the feminists, linked the massacre to broader societal attitudes.

Provost did offer a tentative narration and explanation of the event to the American press. In an interview with Elizabeth Kastor of the *Washington Post*, she offered the following account:

There were two crimes. The first one was something like a thief who comes into my house--the first crime was that. Everyone felt that. There's another crime, which was a guy attacking girls. I felt a bit like it was a rape. Maybe it's a strong word, but I feel a bit like that, and I have talked to friends who have had that experience and they felt as I do. (B1)

Provost herself linked the Montreal Massacre with violence against women and identified with rape victims. Moreover, she separated the experience of the Montreal massacre by gender: all present felt the intrusion (burglary), but the women felt the violation (rape). The massacre as analogous to rape also depends on/fosters community: Provost and her friends talked to each other in order to make sense of their experience. She does, however, in this statement and in her message to the press distinguish herself and her own experiences from others ("as if I were a man," "it felt a bit like rape"). She maintains her individuality while still looking for similarities with others, for similarities with other events that can help make sense of her own. However, the details of this interview were not published in any English-language Canadian newspaper and later, Provost resisted feminist interpretations of the event with: "this is our tragedy, our drama, we are the victims, so will you please shut up with all your ideology?" (Provost as paraphrased by Pelletier in Zerbisias A32). In light of her second message to the press and her interview

with the *Washington Post*, it would seem that Provost was upset with the fact of the feminist testimony rather than its content: she was outraged that feminist testimony succeeded even though the "wrong person" performed the testimony. Her adamant claiming of this tragedy would seem a reaction against the loss of control over the event. By demanding silence, Provost was demanding that her views and experiences stand as the lone legitimate source of information or non-information.

Provost was not alone in this call for silence. In response to the public dialogue regarding the Montreal Massacre, the students at the Polytechnique became militantly apolitical. On the second anniversary of the massacre, the Polytechnique was the only major Canadian engineering school not to hold a commemorative service for the fourteen dead women. Defending the Polytechnique's silence, the Student Council president Serge Savard told the press that "we want a serene atmosphere where we can get on with life. . . . We're tired of the leering and the bad publicity" (Picard and York A1). On the first anniversary of the massacre, the school's director, André Bazergui, sent letters to several news outlets asking them to use restraint in their coverage: "Let's forget about this guy. This guy was completely crazy. By talking about him . . . you are just encouraging more crazy people to act like him" (Lalonde "Students' Silence" A5). This "you" is not only aimed at the media, who played an active role in the propagation and resolution of the massacre; it is also aimed at the feminists, who were perceived as needlessly propagating the massacre for their own purposes. Although Bazergui phrases his comment as a call for restraint for their own safety, he positions feminists as aggressors whose talk *encourages* massacres.

Similarly, many students at the Polytechnique focused on the similarities between feminist arguments and Marc Lepine's. According to Bazergui, the students refused to rally publicly behind the feminist cause because they were uncomfortable using the "crazy logic" of Marc Lepine: "The girls and guys don't want to be separated like they were in the class by Lepine. They don't want to get into the crazy logic of Marc Lepine. They are saying, 'This happened to us as a community and we want to stick together'" (Lalonde "Students' Silence" A5). According to this view, the experience of the massacre, rather than creating a community based on "the fear with which every woman must live," created a community based on institutional proximity to the events of 6 December 1989. Since the crime began with the students separating themselves into different corners of the room, any admission of gender difference became inseparable from this "complicitous" action. To the "guys and girls" still suffering from the results of gender separation and not completely placated by Provost's admonishment not to feel any guilt, admission of gender difference became inseparable from the fifteen deaths. The insanity of Lepine's logic, then, did not lie in his desire to kill feminists; the insanity of Lepine's logic lay in his forced separation of women and men.

Some students not only saw the feminists' and Lepine's logics as similar, they also sympathized with Lepine against the feminists by blaming the feminists, rather than him, for the murders. As Heidi Rathjen, a graduate of civil engineering, commented later:

Feminists got a really bad rap out of what happened at the Polytechnique. I mean, people were telling them to shut up before they had even begun to say anything. There was a mass denial of what had happened at the Polytechnique, and *part of that denial was to blame feminists for what had happened.*

You have to understand, though, that immediately following the massacre, the entire Polytechnique was not thinking about male–female issues.

We were in intense mourning. These were our friends and classmates that had died and we just couldn't take on the social implications. It was impossible to see the big picture. Incomprehensible. (emphasis mine, "For Many Women, Mourning Is Not Enough" A1)

Incapable of taking on the social implications of their tragedy, the students construed Lepine and the fourteen dead women as casualties of feminism. The logic ran something like this: if feminists had not talked of gender differences, none of this would have happened--look, even now they can't even shut up, no wonder that Lepine was driven crazy! Thus, if the feminists depended on the motives of Lepine to validate their interpretation of the event and to combat his "crazy logic," the students, still in shock, re-enacted his logic by blaming feminism for causing the massacre.

Provost's rejection of feminist testimony was conceivably a result of a double trauma. Having once lost control of the situation to Lepine, Provost fought against losing control of the script again. As the *Washington Post* article puts it:

That independence, that certainty, has shaped [Provost], she says. "I like to make my own decisions," she says. "I like to rule my life." And so, when Lepine walked into her classroom and began to make all the decisions and rule everyone's life, it stung in a way Provost is still trying to explain. (B1)

For Provost, the feminist "usurpation" of the event could have re-enacted this loss of control, this rewriting of the script in which she, or her representative, was made to perform. Thus the hostility of Provost's response--"this is our tragedy, our drama, we are the victims, so will you please shut up with all your ideology"--could be due in part to a repetition of this loss of control: this time a loss of control over the media spectacle they had become and a loss of control over adjudicating which testimonies would be felicitous or infelicitous. Provost's angry insistence on *her* decision could have been directed against either Lepine or the feminists: against either the man who created this event, or against the women who insisted on "never forgetting," who insisted on commemorating, publicizing, and propagating the event as a *massacre*, and who thus inadvertently elided the experiences of the other women present at the Polytechnique. However, after the feminist testimony had persuaded the general public to read the event as representative of violence against women, Provost and her peers reframed their objections in terms of a generational dispute.

Cutting the Apron Strings

"Yes, yes, in theory, in my head, I am a feminist. But in my guts, basically, no. I don't need--I won't say I don't need it because I did need it, and if I had been born 50 years ago, I would have done the same as my mother. I just don't feel it."

(Nathalie Provost qtd. in Lalonde "I Am Not" B1)

After the conflict over "true" victimhood, a generational conflict ensued over definitions of feminism and agency. Opposing the older feminists' portrayal of universal female victimhood, these younger women refused to accept the role of feminist

heroines/victims. They fought against being represented by white ribbons worn on 6 December: they refused to be mourned over, and they refused to limit 6 December 1989 to the *deaths* of their peers. Taking up the rhetoric about their being "bright and shining daughters," ¹⁶ they established themselves as the legitimate offspring of 60s radical feminism who were "*living* the feminist principle"--and, as a natural evolution--disposing of their "mothers'" adversarial methods (emphasis mine, Rathjen qtd. in "For Many Women, Mourning is Not Enough" A1).

In the French-only film *Au-delà du 6 décembre*, Nathalie Provost and Catherine Fol (another Polytechnique graduate) responded to the feminists by discrediting not the validity but the relevance of their victimhood. According to Fol, the feminists are like Moses, unable to cross over to the promised land because of their violent past:

The debate articulates itself differently now than it did 30 years ago. Because we are different, a new generation. Feminists cleared the road for us and we say thank you. But we are on that road right now. We grew up on it. We have a different way of looking at it, a different way of working for feminism. (Lalonde "I Am Not" B1)

Since "the debate articulates itself differently now," the older feminists are caught in a time warp, mistakenly applying old methods to a new situation they have "cleared the road" for but cannot understand. Provost and Fol insist that the Montreal Massacre was an accident on the new road of feminism and, as such, could not be rendered comprehensible as a normal occurrence. Thus, even surviving the massacre did not involve them in "women's struggles":

When feminists talk about women's struggles, I don't find myself in that. I don't want women's struggles--not in my personal life, not in my professional life, not with my boyfriend. Women's struggles have nothing to do with me. . . . The massacre opened a lot of wounds for many women. We, in our 20s, we don't have those wounds. (Fol qtd. in Zerbisias A1)

In Fol's world, desire and reality coincide: she finds what she wants. And, not only can Fol choose not to involve herself in women's struggles, she emerge as a completely unscathed "survivor" of the Montreal Massacre. From this position, Fol can allow that the massacre may have been traumatic to others, but not to us, "in our 20s," because the massacre merely reopened old wounds. ¹⁷ The "we, in our 20s" construction allows Fol to conflate her own experiences with Provost's, though one could indeed argue that she was unwounded, since she had graduated from the Polytechnique eighteen months prior to the shootings. By concentrating on the "reopened wounds" of the older feminists, she renders the pain these women feel as strangely incongruous with the actual event, and turns a blind eye to the ways in which other bodies--including Provost's--were wounded. Such a construction dismisses testimony by Sylvie Gagnon who was wounded in the shooting. In the English film *After the Montreal Massacre*, Gagnon states that she is "emotionally frozen . . . living in horror. I have lost the capacity to interpret what happened. It was too huge, too unfair, too sick" (Quill F3). Such a construction of the survivor as unwounded also denies the pain that other men and women associated with the Polytechnique claim "will always be there" ("Pain of Lepine's 14 Killings Lives On" A2). Lastly, such a construction unfairly blames the victim. As Fol so succinctly puts it: "In my life, I don't have these problems because of my comportment, as an individual. Men who are sexist are not sexist with me" (Conlogue, "Different Views" C2). Fol, then,

can choose not to be involved in women's struggles because *men heed her*.

Through this gesture to disidentify as victims of the shootings, Fol and Provost now become outsiders to the Montreal Massacre. They become spectators to an unusual traumatic event and reassure themselves that this wounding, which actually happened to at least one of them, could not happen to them. This is a rather bizarre reversal of the "safety" that "unusual" traumatic events provoke:

When trauma is unusual, we can pretend safety, engage in the daily self-deceptions that allow us to believe ourselves beyond the reach of the unusual. We can be spectators, titillated by the thrill of risk, safe behind our imaginary psychic barriers; or we can watch in horror as trauma happens to others but reassure ourselves that we are not next because we are safe so long as we do not protest, do not stick out our necks and "make" ourselves into the target. We can ignore the institutions of the society that appear to privilege us as long as we pretend that we will not be next. (Suzanne Pharr qtd. in Laura S. Brown 100-12)

Pharr and Brown, challenging the psychiatric definition of trauma as "outside the range" of normal human experience, controversially argue that traumatic stressors are found in everyday life, that trauma can work like repetitive stress syndrome. They argue that the classification of trauma as unusual not only denies the experiences of women who suffer from daily traumatic stressors, it also gives other women a sense of false safety. Provost's, like Fol's, reactions complicate Brown's and Pharr's analysis since it is the victim, rather than the outside witnesses or passersby, who insists on the unusualness of the event, on the event's inability to touch her. Thus, the actual victim becomes the spectator of someone else's trauma, admitting finally that she does not own the event, but *also denying that the event owns her*.

In opposition to (and emerging from the loins of) the older, battle-scarred feminists, the new woman arises, whole and impenetrable. She is the victim who cannot be victimized, the woman who cannot be wounded. To Fol, Provost exemplifies this new (non)victim: "Of course, Nathalie Provost is a victim of violence. What people didn't seem to like about her was that her reaction to it was one of strength. She would not play a role of weakness. She would not define her life in terms of what this madman had done" (Conlogue C2). Arguably, Provost's response was one of strength. ¹⁸ She refused to go along with the script; she argued the terms; she refused to be Marc Lepine's feminist; and later, she refused to be the innocent victim whom others could commemorate with a white ribbon. Despite this, she did not resist his categorizations. Although she called his logic crazy, she did not question his formula that "feminists equal women who hate men." She preserved Lepine in his self-appointed role of judge/vigilante and accepted her role as the woman on trial, trying to explain away the presence of women in the classroom to a man with the adjudicative power of a gun. ¹⁹ Before the barrel of the semiautomatic, she tried to explain to Marc Lepine that it was a case of mistaken identity. And she would do it again:

If Marc Lepine were in front of me tomorrow morning I would say the same damn thing. It's true that I don't *feel* like a feminist. I *feel* like any guy does in his life. I feel that way, period, with all the doors open in front of me. And if someone who is sick tries to close it, well I'll open it, damn it. (emphasis mine, "I Am Not a Feminist" B1)

Here is the key to the (non)victim: *feeling* like a guy, with the complete confidence of having assumed the male subject position. Tellingly, there are only two positions in this world: feeling like a guy or feeling like a feminist. Feeling like a woman is not even an option or possibility, or, to put it differently, being a woman is limited to either feeling like a guy or a feminist. Moreover, for Provost, Marc Lepine is someone sick who *tries* to close doors (by killing women) and she *opens* doors (by surviving). In this "just like a guy" world, agency and control are highlighted to such a degree that vulnerability cannot even be narrated; thus, survival is narrated as winning, and winning is crucial. [20](#)

Provost's willingness to repeat the event may be linked to her desire to relive her survival, but, by desiring to repeat the event as it happened, Provost must continue to explain that she is no different from a man, that she is no feminist and that Lepine should not shoot her. This repetition and escape of the event is evident in the very name of the film *Au-del du six décembre*. It is "beyond" the sixth of December, and thus the leaving and surviving of the event, but it is also beyond every sixth of December, rather than 6 December 1989. It is a beyond that repeats itself every year. As an annual event, this film resonates with feminist attempts to commemorate 6 December, but re-inscribes December 6 as a day of surviving, rather than mourning. As Cathy Caruth argues, "repetition . . . is not simply the attempt to grasp that one has almost died but, more fundamentally and enigmatically, the very attempt *to claim one's own survival*. If history is to be understood as the history of trauma, it is a history that is experienced as the endless attempt to assume one's survival as one's own" (Caruth *Unclaimed* 64). Given the emphasis that Provost puts on surviving, on agency and on feeling, it should be no surprise that Provost repeatedly insists that her survival is her way of "winning" over Lepine. Upon receiving an award for female engineering students (set up by the funeral home that handled the funerals of Lepine's victims) Provost repeats, "for me, it [the award] is a way of saying to Marc Lépine that women will continue to be present and active in the fields of science and engineering . . . because I lived through the shooting, it is important to me that he doesn't win" (Moore A1).

Repeating the events of 6 December 1989, however, is not the most efficacious way to fight violence. Telling Lepine that they were "just women in engineering," "just students intent on leading a normal life," did not stop him from pulling the trigger, nor did it stop pro-Lepine graffiti in other engineering schools. [21](#) Refusing to be hailed as a feminist did not stop the hail of the bullets. As Provost herself remarked after the massacre, her challenge "didn't change a second." Unfortunately, deciding that one is not going to be a victim does not prevent violence. Even women who believe fully in male-defined "merit" and who add their voices to the lobby against affirmative action and special scholarships for women are still threatening to some, are still, according to those who sympathized with Lepine, "instigating" violence. Lepine felt threatened by their very "I feel just like a guy" position. He wrote down the names of famous, vocal feminists to whom he had no access, but he hunted down the women who were personally threatening to him--women who were succeeding in a profession at which he had failed to even enter. Lepine saw them as subjects, hailed them as feminists, in order to blame them as the "cause" of his misery. Lepine did not see these women as victims, nor as battle-scarred. He agreed with their view that they have agency and that they hold responsibility for their own actions: Lepine claimed to be appointed by the Grim Reaper to punish these women and to make them take responsibility for their disruptive activity. Nathalie Provost's position does not oppose Marc Lepine's. It in fact eerily repeats his view. [22](#)

Thus, feminism can produce a postfeminism virtually indistinguishable from antifeminism if it ends at claiming the rights of man, whatever those rights may be. Postfeminism's denial of systemic violence and the female body as always at risk is not simply a repudiation of ideology and sentimentality, but also a survival strategy: a survival strategy that conflates "feeling empowered" and "being empowered." By claiming to be equal at all costs, these women attempt to level the playing field, or, at the very least, synchronize themselves with the emphasis on "meritocracy" within these male-dominated fields. What was devastating about the massacre, then, was that the postfeminism failed. Lepine should have put down his gun after Provost denied being a feminist, denied being different from a male engineer. And so, in response to this contradiction between "feeling like a guy" and being a woman, these women insist on a fantasy body--the victim that cannot be victimized. And this body continues to be beaten over and over again, as it covers over its wounds unable to heal.

[23](#)

The impossibility of control that trauma exemplifies is traumatic to postfeminists. According to Caruth, traumatic experience cannot be treated as one's possession since it tends to possess the one who has survived it (*Trauma* 4-5). Because of this, trauma moves the subject position from that of screenwriter to that of a screen. Postfeminism as an ideology, however, makes seeing oneself as screen inadmissible and impossible. It renders "out of control" events beyond the experienceable. Provost and other immediate survivors of the massacre seemed caught in a trap, unable to acknowledge their wounds not only because of the belatedness of traumatic experience, but also because of their hypostatization of choice. Because the crime of Lepine was interpreted as the denial of their right to have their life the way they want it, the only way to fight back was by reclaiming this right while at the same time conceding the larger argument. Because of the need to construct an autonomous ever-present subject, postfeminists construed feminists as the cause of their distress, just as Lepine constructed feminists as the cause of his life's sufferings. In this world of freely acting subjects, responsibility had to be attributed to someone for the postfeminists' media (mis)representation, for the untethering of event and context. The question we must ask is: how has this been construed by young women such as Heidi Rathjen as "living the feminist principle," and by older feminists such as Stevie Cameron as fulfilling their mothers' dreams?

Judith Butler's warning to those who desire the wholeness of old-guard feminism gains new power when seen through the lens of the Montreal massacre:

If there is a fear that, by no longer being able to take for granted the subject, its gender, its sex, or its materiality, feminism will founder, it might be wise to consider the political consequences of keeping in their place the very premises that have tried to secure our subordination from the start.
("Contingent Foundations" 19)

By taking for granted the sex, materiality, and gender of "women," by taking for granted the impact of violence on all women and "women's experience," feminism stumbled in the aftermath of the Montreal Massacre. This is not to say that feminism sunk irretrievably, for many women in engineering devastated by the failure of the postfeminist defense, such as myself, turned to feminism--especially to strands of feminism that called into question the freely choosing subject--for strategies to cope with and analyze our precarious position. This is to say that if feminism sentimentalizes victims while at the same time reifying the putative normal

male subject, it risks producing a postfeminism that is almost indistinguishable from antifeminism. It has, and will, produce a situation where women who have "made it" must deny the discrimination they see in order to keep their precarious hold on the male subject position. It has, and will, lead to "an incite to *ressentiment*" in which "failure [turns] to recrimination by the subordinated, and guilt [turns] to resentment by the 'successful'" (Brown 67). This *ressentiment* threatens to sink feminism.

As Butler and others argue, the subject must instead be opened up, or deconstructed:

To take the construction of the subject as a political problematic is not the same as doing away with the subject; to deconstruct the subject is not to negate or throw away the concept; on the contrary, deconstruction implies only that we suspend all commitments to that to which the term, "the subject," refers, and that we consider the linguistic functions it serves in the consolidation and concealment of authority. To deconstruct is not to negate or to dismiss, but to call into question and, perhaps most importantly, to open up a term, like the subject, to a reusage or redeployment that previously has not been authorized. ("Contingent Foundations" 15)

This deconstruction of the subject position is imperative if women in male-dominated fields are to begin to experience and react against--rather than simply deny--discrimination. This deconstruction of the subject offers a way to engage the problem of violence and violability that does not reduce to "victim" versus "nonvictim," "wounded" versus "unwoundable." In other words, in order to move "living the feminist principle" away from postfeminism, we must keep insisting that subjectivity is always compromised, that a fantasmatic identification with a wholly impenetrable and fully "in control" subject is not possible. This means that feminism--that we--must produce strategies for dealing with violence that do not allow for blindness or appropriation, for supermen or infants, so that we may deal with experiences outside our control rather than simply re-narrating them in the first person over and over again.

Toward a Politics of Listening

Now, ten years after the massacre, the question I am still asking is: how could a difficult yet nonhostile encounter between feminists and postfeminist survivors have taken place? How will such an engagement take place? I do believe that such an encounter is still necessary, especially since the impact of the murders has not yet been dispelled; the murders return every year. Indeed, Provost's accusations against feminists can be understood as a cry for an such an ethical engagement. Her words resonate with Clorinda's cry--"why have you wounded me once more?"--in Tasso's story of Tancred's twice killing his beloved Clorinda (Caruth *Unclaimed* 2). As Caruth notes, we can read "the address of the voice here . . . as the story of the way in which one's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another's wound" (*Unclaimed* 8). Provost's complaint--that she has been once more wounded--and the fact that the person who inadvertently wounded her is herself traumatized by the wounding points to the intimate knot of traumatic experiences.

But before such an encounter can take place, we need to ask: how is an ethical engagement in the context of a traumatic event possible, given that so many women identified as victims of Lepine? How can an ethical encounter take place given that the

events in Montreal became construed as a 'national trauma'? The murders in Montreal defied comprehension and shocked a substantial percentage of the Canadian population. One year after the murders, headlines proclaimed: "Canadians haunted by Montreal's Ghosts," "A Year After the Trauma, the Answers and Insights Still Go Begging," "Scars, Fear, the Legacy of Montreal Massacre." Commentators such as Judy Rebrick, president of the nac, proclaimed that "in some way, all of us have been touched by it [the Montreal Massacre]" (Rebrick qtd. in Peritz A16). Although these statements are both extreme and banal, the murders did affect far more people than those present at the Polytechnique on 6 December 1989. To call it a national trauma, however, erases the differences between the woman in the classroom and the man watching the events unfold on the television.

Many women who were not present at the Polytechnique identified themselves as victims ("each woman cried over having been symbolically put to death"). Moreover, in their mourning, many conflated the identities of Lépine's victims with other women. As Paula Sypnowich put it:

I do not wish to understate the tragedy of the deaths of those fourteen women. But I mourn their deaths as I do the deaths of relatively anonymous women who are raped and murdered, or as I would if Lépine had gunned down fourteen strippers, bag ladies, or secretaries instead of fourteen aspiring engineers. And I'll end up heartsick again when misogyny is no longer 'topical,' and the media once again address women's issues only through articles on daycare subsidies and debate over who does the dishes.
(130)

This move to mourn the murders in Montreal in the context of other violent acts, this move to make the act of mourning the link between disparate violent events, enabled many women to respond to the Montreal massacre. However, such a linkage can also deny the singularity of the event. According to Dori Laub, "trauma is . . . an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after. This absence of categories that define it lends it a quality of "otherness," a salience, a timelessness and a ubiquity that puts it outside the range of associatively linked experiences, outside the range of comprehension, of recounting and of mastery" (Felman and Laub 69). To those, such as Provost, who saw the event unfold and yet could still not view it as "other," this mourning did violence to the event and to themselves. How then can we negotiate multiple and possibly conflicting testimonies between witnesses, with the ever-present possibility that the witness who propagates the accident can inadvertently re-traumatize the eyewitness? How, then, can we listen and respond to testimony so that one testimony does not substitute for another, but rather resonates with it?

We first need to acknowledge the limitations of agency and the involuntary nature of identification, without allowing the involuntary to stand as an excuse or justification for substituting one testimony for another. ²⁴ In the aftermath of the Montreal Massacre, the line between identifying with and identifying as was breached, partly due to the belatedness of traumatic experience, partly due to Lépine's separation between intended and actual victims, partly due to the fact that one does not need to be present in order to feel threatened by an event. Women who mourned for themselves as they mourned these murders, who testified to these murders as representative of their own experiences, may have been belatedly testifying to and experiencing an earlier traumatic event. Women, such as Francine Pelletier who were Lépine's intended

victims--if we take Lepine's words at face value--inadvertently made peace impossible for other victims who were actually in the line of fire. Women who spoke about the massacre as reawakening their sense of vulnerability, who identified as *potential* victims, denied the difference between feeling threatened and being threatened. Even if one is working through another event, identifying as the victim rather than with her poses the possibility of violating the eyewitness. "Outsider" testimony can easily substitute for eyewitness testimony.

The conflict between responding to and identifying with eyewitness experiences is one of the most important challenges to theories of trauma. Since traumatic events are experienced only in conjunction with another event, traumatic events will necessarily produce conflicting testimonies. Testimony is both an enabling and disabling violence. The intertwining of experience that trauma demands means that testifying is not enough: we must also respond and listen to others' testimony so that the self does not take the place of the other. The need to maintain the separation between events, while at the same time respecting the need to testify, is key to any engagement among witnesses. Even if, as Laura Brown controversially argues, trauma is not unusual and we need to include "as traumatic stressors all of those everyday, repetitive, interpersonal events that are so often the sources of psychic pain for women" (108), there are still unusual traumatic events such as the Montreal Massacre. Although I agree with Brown that admitting the immanence of trauma will help dispel the illusion that we are invulnerable, I question the assumption that "acknowledging we might be next" is the best way to link together gender-based trauma. ²⁵ For, by acknowledging we might be next, we not only identify with the victims, we risk identifying as them. If we "acknowledge we might be next," we are forced to assume that our experiences can or will be the same. We avoid confronting experiences and selves as other and risk looking only at ourselves and our own possibilities. As the aftermath of the Montreal Massacre makes clear, arguing via experiential analogy--making certain experiences representative of others--can and will lead to conflict.

A better way to relate traumatic events is via citation, by arguing that the force of the traumatic event comes partly from its citation of other such events. By doing so, we can link events together, yet insist on the singularity of each one. Iteration alters, yet a citation gains force only because it "repeats" or refers to other events. If we view such events as citations, we can discuss larger social implications in ways that shift the focus away from the perpetrator's inner psychology or intentions. Rather, we can discuss the community that the perpetrator joins with his/her actions. Butler, commenting on the force of the racial slur argues:

The racial slur is always cited from elsewhere, and in the speaking of it, one chimes in with a chorus of racists, producing at that moment the linguistic occasion for an imagined relation to an historically transmitted community of racists. In this sense, racist speech does not originate with the subject, even if it requires the subject for its efficacy, as it surely does. Indeed, racist speech could not act as racist speech if it were not a *citation of itself*; only because we already know its force from prior instances do we know it to be so offensive now, and we brace ourselves against its future invocations. The iterability of hate speech is effectively dissimulated by the "subject" who speaks the speech of hate. (*Excitable* 80)

In terms of the Montreal Massacre, Lepine's actions reached beyond his immediate

victims because, in his address and actions, he cited other events and called others to respond to them as such. Lepine's actions also linked him with an historically transmitted community of misogynists and this link to a larger community made his actions to some degree comprehensible. Again, this link does not make his actions completely understandable. It does, however, offer us a larger political goal: to destroy the community made possible by such citations (in terms of Butler's example "an historically transmitted community of racists"). Citation also offers us a way to think about the community established by the act of testifying. Through this speech act, one links oneself with others who have also testified and thus testimony cannot be construed as an individual act that does not involve others. Lastly, since every citation is also an appropriation, it foregrounds the possible violence of citation.

Sylvie Gagnon's moving testimony in *After the Montreal Massacre* attests to the traumatic experience as citation. Filmed one year after the massacre, Gagnon speaks of her experiences in the cafeteria of the Polytechnique on 6 December 1989--the day she completed all the requirements for her engineering degree. Lepine entered the cafeteria and began shooting the women. After a bullet grazed her head, she lay on the floor playing dead, but refused to faint in order to see what was happening. As Lepine walked between herself and another woman who lay beside her, he shot the other woman point blank. After he passed by, she ran from the Polytechnique to a friend's home in order to transmit her story. To help both herself and her friend believe that the events she "witnessed" were real, they watched the news coverage on television.

Like Provost, Gagnon was soon angry at the interpretations propagated through the media. However, rather than railing against feminists for having usurped her tragedy, she argued that media analysts had tried to turn her tragedy into an "isolated event," and had sought to explain her tragedy in the terms of Lepine's life-story. For her, this event was linked to "all the little sadnesses" and abuse that she, and other women, had suffered through their entire lives, to all those daily episodes "too small" to be registered. According to Gagnon, women's testimonies exploded after the Montreal massacre because the murders "recalled" all these other little sadnesses. Importantly, Gagnon did not seek to understand Lepine in any way. Gagnon states that she does not know Lepine and she does not want to know Lepine--to her Lepine is death. She did not view his suicide letter or his intentions as necessary to understanding the massacre, but rather as a way to *avoid* doing so. Unlike other feminists, she refused to link her interpretation to his intentions. Rather, the event's significance stemmed from its ability to *re-call* other women's sadnesses. Gagnon was also able to testify because she was not a postfeminist. As she put it, the murders did not teach her anything, but rather made her feel with her nerves and her body what she had always known in her head. For this reason, she was able to "already know its force from prior instances." Arguably, she was able to speak because of her "other" little sadnesses, and her "other" little sadnesses opened her to the pain of other women.

If Gagnon's feminism and history prepared her for the murders, the feminists' emphasis on fact-finding and on disseminating their testimony foreclosed the possibility of listening to the survivors' testimonies. It reduced the massacre to a question of knowledge about Lepine. As Laub argues, refusing to listen can take place through "a foreclosure through facts . . . an obsession with fact-finding; an absorbing interest in the factual details of the account which serve to circumvent the human experience. Another version of this foreclosure, of this obsession with fact-finding is a listener who already 'knows it all,' ahead of time, leaving little space for the survivor's story" (Felman

and Laub 73). Those who pinned their interpretations of the Montreal Massacre on knowledge of Lepine left little space for survivors' stories as anything other than corroborating testimony. Because of this, there was little opportunity for witnesses to testify *together* to a truth inaccessible to anyone alone. By this, I do not mean to imply that simple cooperation between witnesses is sufficient, nor that consensus should be the goal, nor that we must simply respect the survivor's desire for silence and stop testifying. Instead, I am suggesting a politics and practice of listening as a necessary complement to a politics of testifying. I am suggesting a politics that does not valorize the act of speaking in and of itself: a politics that listens to a person's speech or silence and then grapples with the question of how to respond to it. In other words, I am suggesting a politics that begins, rather than ends with, the speaking subject, that begins with the other who addresses us with her speech or silence.

Gagnon was able to testify because she externalized the event through a sympathetic interview with Gerry Rogers, a former nun and advocate against violence. Through this interview, Gagnon turns to television--the same medium that initially corroborated her testimony--to externalize and validate it. According to Laub, "re-externalization of the event can occur and take effect only when one can articulate and *transmit* the story, literally transfer it to another outside oneself and then take it back again, inside. Telling thus entails a reassertion of the hegemony of reality and a re-externalization of the evil that affected and contaminated the trauma victim" (Felman and Laub 69). Through this interview, Gagnon speaks, validates, and transmits the story, from a position of enabling vulnerability. She presents a narrative that refuses the position of either superman or child. Although she talks about her childhood dreams and her belief, prior to Lepine's actions, that the world was hers, she does not insist on returning to these dreams and beliefs. Rather, she says that she is a different person now, that such an event changes a person, and that slowly she is dealing with the pain and the trauma, that it gets better every day.

Through a politics of listening, both testimony and an historical understanding of 6 December 1989 emerges. A politics of listening, as Laub describes it, is a contract that emphasizes recognizing and meeting "'the gaping, vertiginous black hole' of the experience of the trauma" (64). Such a contract acknowledges that, by listening, we become implicated in the traumatic event, but that we are still separate human beings:

the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself. The relation of the victim to the event of the trauma, therefore, impacts on the relation of the listener to it, and the latter comes to feel the bewilderment, injury, confusion, dread and conflicts that the trauma victim feels. He has to address all these, if he is to carry out his function as a listener, and if trauma is to emerge, so that its henceforth impossible witnessing can indeed take place. . . . The listener has to feel the victim's victories, defeats and silences, know them from within, so that they can assume the form of testimony.

The listener, however, is also a separate human being and will experience hazards and struggles of his own, while carrying out his function of a witness to the trauma witness. While overlapping, to a degree, with the experience of the victim, he nonetheless does not become the victim--he preserves his own separate place, position and perspective; a battleground for forces raging in

himself, to which he has to pay attention and respect if he is to properly carry out his task. (Felman and Laub 58)

The important task in listening, then, is to feel the victim's victories, defeats and silences, know them from within, while at the same time acknowledging that one is not the victim, so that the victim can testify, so that the truth can be reached together. In this model, distance must be maintained between listener and speaker. The listener must remember that as s/he feels the victim's victories, defeats, and silences, s/he is also re-experiencing her own and involuntarily relating them to her own life. She must constantly ask, "what is being elided in my identifications with the speaker?" As well, the goal is not to cure either the listener or the speaker, but rather to respond and listen so that survival is possible. ⁴⁴

Such a contract is based on *lack* of comprehension. As Caruth, in her reading of the dialogue between the French women and Japanese man in *Hiroshima mon amour*, argues, "[t]heir ability to speak and to listen in their passionate encounter does not rely . . . on what they simply know of one another, but on what they do not fully know in their traumatic pasts." That is, "[w]hat we see and hear, in *Hiroshima mon amour*, resonates beyond what we can know and understand; but it is in the event of this incomprehension and in our departure from sense and understanding that our own witnessing may indeed begin to take place" (56). By emphasizing gaps in understanding, in refusing interpretations that reduce traumatic events to factors we can know, we may begin the encounter that may help us finally to say together, *au-del du six décembre dix-neuf quatre-vingt neuf*. This contract of listening must be accompanied by a relentless critique of the ways in which the belief in and desire for a sovereign subject undermines systemic changes to society and undermines feminism. This contract of listening must be accompanied by a politics that understands acts of violence not as "representative of" or "substitutable for" each other, but by a politics that sees these acts as forceful because they recall other events, because they open the self to others. Such a contract of listening would allow for history. Perhaps with these strategies in hand we may finally encounter each other without recriminations and hostility, but also without sentimentality and identity as appropriation of the same.

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Notes

[1.](#) See Ginette Bastien's and Renée Ouiment's "A little story of censorship" and Mary Lamey's "Lepine rampage was a 'cold, rational act,' Pelletier says."

[2.](#) Sylvie Gagnon, a survivor of the massacre, describes other women's reactions to the massacre as "an explosion" in *After the Montreal Massacre*. In this documentary, various women discuss the impact of violence on their daily existence and the impact of the Montreal Massacre on their lives. For more on the flood of testimony by women who

identified with or as victims of Lepine, or who sought to make connections between Lepine's victims and the "ordinary" victims of male violence, see *The Montreal Massacre*; see also Sue Montgomery's "Slayings, Attacks on Women Continue as Nation Remembers 14 Dead Students." For more on the impact of the Montreal Massacre on the feminist movement, and the importance of commemorating, contextualizing and responding to this event, see Lynda Hurst's "Legacy of the Montreal Massacre"; Jim Coyle's "Women Appeal for the End of Violence"; Ingrid Peritz's "Scars, Fear, the Legacy of the Montreal Massacre"; André Picard's and Geoffrey York's "Women Vow 'Never Again'"; Jason Robert's "A Personal Response to the Lepine Massacre"; Patrick Quinn's "Society Slowly Learning it Need Not Accept Violence"; Lindsay Kines's "Soaring Violence Figures Have Groups Calling for Grassroots Action"; Alanna Mitchell's "Montreal Massacre a Catalyst for Action"; and Michael Kaufman's "A Letter to Marc Lepine." Now, ten years after the murders, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation is planning a two-hour documentary on it.

3. To be clear, I am not arguing that feminism has never taken on the issue of silence or listening. *Listening to Silences* (Hedges and Fishkin) is one example of this engagement. However, feminists usually listen to silence in order to break it, or attribute silence to institutional, economic or cultural hardships or differences. Rarely has the question of how to listen, or listening as a political act, been addressed.

4. Shoshana Felman, in *Testimony*, argues:

What testimony does not offer is, however, a completed statement, a totalizable account of those events. In the testimony, language is in process and in trial, it does not possess itself as a conclusion, as the constation of a verdict or the self-transparency of knowledge. Testimony is, in other words, a discursive practice, as opposed to a pure theory. To testify--to vow to tell, to promise and produce one's own speech as material evidence for truth--is to accomplish a speech act, rather than to simply formulate a statement. As a performative speech act, testimony in effect addresses what in history is action that exceeds any substantialized significance, and what in happenings is impact that dynamically explodes any conceptual reifications and any constative delimitations. (5)

5. As I argue later in this paper, this constant publicity forced eyewitnesses to constantly relive the episode. This is not to say that a juridical inquiry guarantees protection from publicity. It is to say that without a juridical inquiry, the witnesses have no control over the interpretation and propagation of the event. Without someone sanctioning and privileging their testimony, they seemed condemned forever to read about themselves with no other outlet for their own stories than the media itself.

6. For instance, Armande Saint-John argues, "All evidence shows that this man committed an insane act. But he did it in a lucid, conscious manner. He suffered a sort of madness, certainly, but not the kind of insanity that severs all contact with reality and plunges one's conscious mind into total unconsciousness. His gesture was completely thought out, consciously chosen, premeditated: he even took the trouble to explain it in a letter he wrote. The murderer himself furnished all the evidence necessary to understand what he'd done" (62).

7. The slippage between Lepine's suicide and murderous actions is odd. According to his letter, his suicide, rather than these murders, is political. Interestingly, as Lepine

condemns these women for taking responsibility for their actions, he himself denies his agency. He is "forced" by the Grim Reaper to take extreme action.

8. One strain of feminist thought seemed completely to ignore Lepine's insanity. For instance, Erin Graham, a counsellor at Vancouver Rape Relief argued that Lepine's actions were "not an individual act. It is not just one man hating women. It is the social and political reality we live in" (Graham qtd. in Bergman, et al. 18). Diana Bronson writes:

It does not matter that the man who decided to kill 14 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, of all the unspoken hatred, the pent-up anger that he expressed. Hatred and anger that is shared by every husband who beats his wife, every man who abuses his child, and by many more who would not dare. It happened at the École Polytechnique in Montreal but it could have been anywhere. (A7)

Nicole Brossard argues that "the events at the *polytechnique* are there to remind us that from *male politics* (misogyny, phallocentrism and ordinary sexism) to *men's political response* (antifeminism), what is obvious is self-evident; men are just as hostile to women when they make no demands (women) as when they claim their rights (feminists), whether women pay attention to them (heterosexuals), or ignore them (lesbians)" ("One Year After" 18). Suzanne Sprott argues, "This was not an isolated case of anger. Lepine's act epitomized the anger that is directed to women on a daily basis. The anger Lepine manifested in the shootings is anger that resides in many men. We as a society excuse that behavior and perpetrate it in the media, advertising, and the socialization of our little girls and little boys. The oppression he speaks about in his suicide letter is an oppression that most women carry and live with every day of their lives. Until every person takes responsibility in the Montreal Massacre, violence toward women, and people in general, will continue to exist" (A20). In his letter to Marc Lepine, Michael Kaufman writes, "I agreed with you when you said you were rational. In a world where women, since the story of Eve, have been blamed for the ills of humankind, there was something rational about your response" (A23). Another strain noted his insanity, but argued his insanity did not belie his act as a premeditated political attack. In addition to Armande Saint-John's and Francine Pelletier's arguments, Patrick Quinn argued that "These murders will perhaps be accepted as random and irrational, but they will also be seen as an act against all women, the ultimate in sexist violence . . . all women felt fear" (B3). MP Barbara Green called Lepine's act the "manic edge of hatred by men against women" (Green qtd. in Peter O'Neill A15).

9. For instance, Lynda Hurst, in "Legacy of the Montreal Massacre," begins her account with Lepine's suicide note, rather than the shootings (A1). Hurst writes, "in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy, feminists clung to each other at vigils and rallies, physically aching with grief, anger and a reawakened awareness of their own vulnerability." (A1). Catherine Ford argued that "every woman can feel the hatred" ("Every Woman A4).

10. For more on the changes to, effects on, and recriminations against engineering, see Michelle Lalonde's "Women's Enrolment up at site of Montreal Massacre"; Catherine Dunphy's "École Polytechnique Slayings Spark Engineer's War on Sexism"; Alanna Mitchell's "Sexism in Engineering Decried" and "Women Say Engineering Hostile Field"; Frances Bula's "UBC Adds Sexism Course for Engineering Students"; John Davidson's

"Schools Tone Down Engineering Week"; Mary Lamey's "'Engineer as lout' a Canadian Image"; George Oake's "Metro Engineer Urges Colleagues to Fight Against Sexism at Alberta School"; Gord Cope's "Designing a New Image." Female enrollment in engineering programs at the Polytechnique in September 1989 reached a new record: 25 percent of the first-year class were female. At the University of New Brunswick, female enrollment increased to 18% from 11.9%. At Guelph, 38% of first-year students in engineering were women. At Queen's University, more than 20% of the first-year class were female, a jump of more than 5% from the previous year (Statistics Taken from Cornacchia's "The New Engineers"). For more on women in engineering in Canada, see *More Than Just Numbers: Report of the Canadian Committee on Women in Engineering*.

[11.](#) Claude Lanzmann, in "The Obscenity of Understanding," argues that attempts to answer the question, "Why were Jews killed in the holocaust?" are obscene. By this, he means that there is an abyss between various psychological and economic reasons behind the Holocaust and these actual deaths:

All these fields of explanation (referring to unemployment in Germany, and so on) are all true and all false. They're all true together and all false in the same way. And it is a very flat truth, because you cannot proceed in that way--you cannot precisely engender the Holocaust. It is impossible. Between all these conditions--which were necessary conditions maybe, but they were not sufficient--between all these conditions and the gassing of three thousand persons, men, women, children, in a gas chamber, all together, there is an unbreachable discrepancy. It is simply not possible to engender one out of the other. There is no solution of continuity between the two; there is rather a gap, an abyss, and this abyss will never be bridged. (206)

Although the Montreal Massacre and the Holocaust are not analogous, they both point to a gap in understanding. Although I do not believe that understanding the massacre as the result of misogyny is obscene, I do not believe that Lepine's misogyny, or his living in a patriarchal society, can adequately explain the deaths of these fourteen women.

[12.](#) For instance, Anthony Johnson, writing on the second anniversary of the murders, reports both on a female engineering student who lost a friend in the massacre and will thus attend memorial services, and on female engineering students who are too busy preparing for their examinations to attend. He states that all the women he interviewed "stressed they've been treated well in the male-dominated faculty." He also singles out Betty Yee's opinions, without separating his words from hers: "The 20-year-old believes that the murders were more an act of a sick lunatic than symbols of misogyny, expressing some concern about the politicization of the tragedy by hard-core feminists. If women's groups across Canada continue to use the event for 'men-bashing,' she suggests, it might be better for all of us to let it fade into history" (C12). By concentrating on female engineering students, Johnson also ignores complaints leveled against the profession by female engineers (see Alanna Mitchell's "Sexism in Engineering Decried").

[13.](#) Shoshana Felman, interpreting Barbara Johnson's question, writes:

If it is the accident that pursues the witness, it is the compulsive character of the testimony which is brought into relief: the witness is "pursued," that is, at once compelled and bound by what, in the unexpected impact of the accident, is both incomprehensible and unforgettable. The accident does not let go: it is

an accident from which the witness can no longer free himself.

But if, in a still less expected manner, it is the witness who pursues the accident, it is perhaps because the witness, on the contrary, has understood that from the accident a liberation can proceed and that the accidenting, unexpectedly, is also in some ways a freeing. (Felman and Laub 23)

In terms of the aftermath of the Montreal Massacre, the feminists pursued the accident so that "a freeing" could take place (i.e. the massacre could bring attention to and legislation against violence against women). However, their freeing also augmented the ways in which the accident was pursuing women such as Nathalie Provost. In reaction to this pursuit, Provost would conflate feminist testimony with the actual event.

14. On the appointment to bear witness, Shoshana Felman writes:

Since testimony cannot be simply relayed, repeated or reported by another without thereby losing its function as a testimony, the burden of the witness--in spite of his or her alignment with other witnesses--is a radically unique, noninterchangeable and solitary burden. "No one bears witness for the witness," writes the poet Paul Celan. To bear witness is to bear the solitude of a responsibility, and to bear the responsibility, precisely, of that solitude.

And yet, the *appointment* to bear witness is, paradoxically enough, an appointment to transgress the confines of that isolated stance, to speak for the other and to *others*. (Felman and Laub 3)

15. Provost's message, however, is ambiguous. She states, "I am sure that if people had tried to get him, it might have been worse," rather than "it would have been worse." Thus, she is sure that there is a possibility that it could have been worse, which leaves open the possibility that it could have been better as well.

16. One of the most cited and powerful articles is Stevie Cameron's "Our Daughters, Ourselves." Radical feminists, such as Nicole Lacelle, construed these women as their "daughters" whom they sought to mold as empowered offspring:

Why take it out on young women who would never have imagined there could be negative implications to what they were doing? They innocently inherited the career openings we feminists, fully aware of what we were doing, created for women. Why take it out on them, on those "civilians," and not us militants? Simply because they followed in our footsteps? They were so far behind that they'd lost sight of us. For them, it was all very simple--they wanted to become engineers, that's all. It was there for them, available, as long as they came up with the academic and personal effort normally expected to accomplish such a goal. For us it was different, we were on enemy territory, shells exploding around us from all directions; it didn't take much to figure out there was a war going on. These young women ended up standing in No Man's Land; it was too easy to ignore that the peace treaty had never been signed. (28).

17. Reaction to these arguments by the older feminists was understandably hostile. To many older feminists, these younger women became lumped in with "the enemy." In such articles as Catherine Ford's "Truths about Sexism Bear Repeating," older feminists

lashed out at these young women: "I'm tired of yelling at men for their gender's mistreatment of women. So I'll yell at young women instead. We have failed to teach you history" (A4). Ford combats the younger women's notion that "we are living in an equal and fair world" and takes on the duty of preventing the younger generation from repeating the past by informing them that they haven't come a long way, baby. But the article ends on a frustrated note. Emphasizing her sense of estrangement, Ford asks "But are young women listening anymore?" (A4).

[18](#). See Sharon Marcus, "Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words."

[19](#). This resonates with the classic woman-on-trial image that Jennifer Wicke discusses in "Postmodern Identities and the Politics of the (Legal) Subject."

[20](#). As the *Washington Post* article argues:

[Provost] also wants to tell her fellow students not to be defeated. One friend, she says, is "very shaken" by the attack, and Provost is worried that she may abandon her plans to be an engineer. "I will speak to her because I want her to continue. It's my feeling if some girls don't go through Polytechnique, don't finish their course, we let the guy win. He will win." Her voice quivering, she says, "We can't let that happen." (B1)

[21](#). See Pauline Greenhill's "A Good Start." The repetition of Lepine's words in graffiti would seem to confirm the authorities' fears that analyzing the massacre would produce antifeminist sentiments. However, this violence was restrained to graffiti: there were no copycat massacres.

[22](#). According to Antonia Zerbisias, the massacre haunts Provost, not "because of the way the light go[es] out in her friend's eyes as they died, a sight that makes her shudder still. Nor because she survived and others didn't. Not even because she spent months trying to walk again. No, it's the f-word that bothers her still. Feminism" (A1). If this analysis is correct, Provost would seem to have identified with Lepine to the extent that feminism is at the "heart" of her discomfort. It would seem that Provost has collapsed Lepine's taking over her classroom and feminist's taking over her testimony.

[23](#). This fantasy of the body as sublime object is itself testimony to the event of trauma. For a rereading of Lacan's notion of the sublime object, see Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (18, 71). For Žižek, the sublime object is related both to the symbolic and to the real--and hence to trauma, since for Žižek any encounter with the real is traumatic. Also, according to Felman, it is only by exploring one's injury that liberation is possible:

To seek reality is both to set out to explore the injury inflicted by it--to turn back on, and try to penetrate, the state of being stricken, wounded by reality . . . --and to attempt, at the same time, to reemerge from the paralysis of this state, to engage reality . . . as an advent, a movement, and as a vital critical necessity of moving on. It is beyond the shock of being stricken, but nonetheless within the wound and from within the woundedness that the event, incomprehensible though it may be, becomes accessible. (Felman and Laub 28)

On the desire to repeat the departure from the event of trauma, see Cathy Caruth's

introduction to and first chapter in *Unclaimed Experience*.

[24](#). For more on the involuntary nature of identification, on "the formative role [that the unconscious plays] in the production of identifications" (9), see Diana Fuss's *Identification Papers*.

[25](#). Laura S. Brown argues:

But when we admit to the immanence of trauma in our lives, when we see it as something more likely to happen than not, we lose our cloak of invulnerability. A feminist analysis, illuminating the realities of women's lives, turns a spotlight on the subtle manifestations of trauma, allows us to see the hidden sharp edges and secret leghold traps, whose scars we have borne or might find ourselves bearing. We are forced to acknowledge that we might be next. We cannot disidentify with those who have already been the victims of a traumatic stressor when we hold in consciousness our knowledge that only an accident may have spared us thus far. (108)

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