

"A Good Start": A Graffiti Interpretation of the Montreal Massacre

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ABSTRACT

On December 6, 1989, fourteen Université de Montréal women, most Engineering students, were killed by Marc Lépine, a young man who subsequently committed suicide. During the "Montreal massacre" and in a letter left behind, Lépine spoke of his rage against women and feminists. I analyze an item of graffiti which appeared at the University of Waterloo, Ontario, shortly afterward: "WHAT DO YOU CALL 14 DEAD FEMINISTS IN MTL? A GOOD START. — the M. LÉPINE FAN CLUB." I argue that this text and its context share an underlying structure with that of the murders in Montreal, and that, while such items of graffiti and jokes appear trivial, they are in fact part of the discourse of misogyny and violence, and thus must be recognized and understood.

RÉSUMÉ

Le 6 décembre 1989, quatorze femmes de l'Université de Montréal, des étudiantes en génie pour la plupart, ont été abattues par Marc Lépine, un jeune homme qui s'est suicidé par après. Pendant cette tuerie ainsi que dans une lettre écrite auparavant, Lépine a parlé de sa rage contre les femmes et les féministes. J'effectue une analyse d'un graffiti fait à l'University of Waterloo en Ontario peu après le massacre: WHAT DO YOU CALL 14 DEAD FEMINISTS IN MTL? A GOOD START. — the M. LÉPINE FAN CLUB." (Comment appelle-t-on 14 féministes mortes à Mtl? Un bon début — Le club d'admirateurs de M. Lépine.) Je soutiens que ce texte et son contenu ont la même structure fondamentale que les meurtres à Montréal et que, malgré l'apparence bénigne de tels graffiti et blagues, ils font partie du discours de la misogynie et de la violence. En conséquence, on doit les reconnaître comme tels et les comprendre.

LEAVING WORK AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WATER-
loo on December 6, 1989, at about 5:45 in the evening, I turned on the car radio which was tuned, as usual, to the Toronto French station, CJBC. While it was immediately clear that something terrible was happening in Montreal, without hearing the beginning, and without an ability in French, I was not able to grasp fully what was taking place except recognizing frightened and excited speech. However, when I got home and tuned in to the news on English language television, I quickly learned that several people, mainly women students, had been killed in the Engineering School at the Université de Montréal by some as then undetermined person or persons.

During the next few days, Canadians and others were shocked to learn that fourteen women,

most Engineering students, had been killed by Marc Lépine, a man in his mid-twenties who subsequently committed suicide. During his rampage, later called the "Montreal massacre," and in a letter left behind, he spoke of his rage against women in general and feminists in particular. Apart from personal reactions of shock, horror, and grief, those who were touched by what happened attempted to reconstruct in a meaningful way the events that occurred.

This writing is part of that reaction and reconstruction, but it departs from many others in at least two areas. First, it focuses on only one response to the event: an item of graffiti which appeared at the University of Waterloo shortly afterward. Second, it is consciously informed by my background as a feminist, folklorist, and anthropologist. I thus stud-

ied the phenomenon as culturally and symbolically motivated, and used a structural analysis of the communicative forms of the graffito and event to construct the argument. Following dialogic, pragmatic, and reflexive anthropology (see Ortner, 1984), my critical response proceeds from a personal reaction to the graffito, an item of traditional culture I find compelling mainly because, unlike most other such items, I find it both disturbing and repellent.¹

This is not an analysis of the Montreal massacre or of the ways in which people reacted to it. While such work is necessary and will certainly continue to be produced for some time,² my ultimate task here relates only indirectly to the massacre and its effects. Instead, this commentary is centred in feminist research which foregrounds both the complexity and the significance of things which are often dismissed as trivial or everyday. Given the enormity of the massacre, a discussion of a single, simple item of graffiti might seem petty, even meaningless. However, linking the structures of the graffito and the massacre suggests the wisdom, even the necessity, of attending to just this kind of mundane, quotidian stuff. The significance of the "insignificant" and the political nature of the personal are essential foundations to the epistemology of much feminist theory.

Beyond theory and into practice, the work of Liz Stanley and Sue Wise exemplifies research into the common and everyday. Their series of analyses of obscene calls they received as telephone contact persons for lesbian and gay groups proceeds from their own experiences, and analyzes their own reactions — and those of others around them — to these "everyday" occurrences. Like mine, their work provides only one example of the barrage of misogyny which, as they discuss, can be dismissed by some as unimportant, despite its devastating effects on those who must endure it (Stanley & Wise, 1991: 275). I focus to a greater extent than they do upon how the medium chosen for such expression affects how the message is interpreted, but we come to similar conclusions about the effect, particularly of the anonymity of the message's author/producer upon those who receive it.

This graffito is part of the discourse of misogyny. It is also part of the structure of physical and mental violence against women. The literature on these subjects is extensive, ranging from such works as Morgan (1989), which links global violence with patriarchy, to Cameron and Fraser (1987), which investigates one extreme manifestation. Discussions of the treatment of violence in literary or other cultural forms are not uncommon, such as Bloch and Ferguson (1989), and the more rare works on mediated/implied violence, like that of Stanley and Wise. Drawing insight from mainstream anthropological thought as well as from feminist research, I address the issue of how and why such ostensibly socially unacceptable statements — particularly jokes and graffiti — come to be formulated, circulated and interpreted in public, and the effects such statements have.

The graffito appeared in early January 1990 at the University of Waterloo. A notice about the location of a graduate course in Women's Studies included the addition in small printed letters of the following comment: "WHAT DO YOU CALL 14 DEAD FEMINISTS IN MTL? A GOOD START. — the M. LÉPINE FAN CLUB." I have tried to determine whether this text had any currency as a joke in Waterloo or elsewhere, and to discover similar examples — without much success.

This item is as much a part of the popular³ response to the massacre as were the newspaper articles and editorials, the mourning pages in publications, and the numerous vigils and memorial services held on university campuses and elsewhere in the country. It is vastly different in tone and intended message from most of the reactions I witnessed or saw reported in the news media; however, there were similar responses. Others in graffiti form at the University of Waterloo included an announcement of a memorial service "mourning the deaths of 14 women," on which someone wrote "and one innocent man died too" — presumably referring to Lépine. On another banner in the Campus Centre, which said "violence against women must stop now," someone wrote "slut" and "bitch."

The graffito as a cultural text is also telling in

that it shares an underlying structure with the murders in Montreal, themselves seen as a cultural text. My interpretation polemically foregrounds the murders, and the graffiti at the University of Waterloo as themselves polemics against women, feminists, and feminism; the text and context of the Waterloo graffiti structurally mirrors the massacre itself. Similarly, the arguments of such writers as Susan Brownmiller (1975) and Andrea Dworkin (1981) locate systemic structural relationships between superficially different phenomena vis-à-vis expressions and actions of misogyny and violence.

What makes the Montreal massacre itself a cultural text? Most of what took place the afternoon and evening of the event can never be known or understood. Contrary to the belief of those who feel that the search for facts and the truth need be in vain, any account of something that happened, whether written, told, photographed or videotaped, cannot avoid being interpretive. It is affected, even while data on it is being collected, by the limitations of the medium chosen — what it can and cannot frame. Action in time and space is thus translated into some kind of visual and/or auditory semiotic system.

The production of any account is also influenced by the perceptions and individual personalities of its creators, by the passage of time and by perspective. Knowledge and understanding change from the time an event happens until it is reported, interpreted and texted in whatever form; the resulting variations in the story may be great or slight. Ultimately, in the most everyday sense as well as academically, we select the significant from the insignificant according to subjective principles which include theories and methods. Equally, we are made aware of certain aspects of an event — and left unaware of others — through the intervention of chance, over which we have minimal control. We cannot, even if we wanted to, reproduce an event.

An understanding of these processes is commonplace in the study of traditional and popular culture. Even relatively conventional analyses of folklore show how the use of a particular genre to convey certain ideas or stories affects their narrative content.⁴ However, in folk, popular, mass, and

academic culture alike, reality cannot be recovered. There are only the interpretations — our attempts to give events meaning and make them, at the very least, comprehensible. They are our cultural texts.

Though possible interpretations of the Montreal massacre are legion, they tended initially to cluster around a limited series of scenarios with different outcomes for the stories or morals for the fables they told; varying interpretations were created for the event. Most, unlike the graffiti, saw the massacre in tragic rather than laudatory terms.

For some, the story was about the women who were killed; this was a crime against women, against feminists, and/or against humanity. For others, it was about the murderer,⁵ an indication of the seriousness and ultimate effects of child abuse. Advocates of the perspective that Lépine was psychotic or a mass murderer drew parallels between his actions and those of others so described — his interest in guns, his final letter's focus on hatred of feminists and, specifically, upon a group of well-known Quebec women, and so on. Adherents of the child abuse story pointed out Lépine's troubled youth, his relationship with his parents, and so on. Others looked at the massacre in ethnic and/or linguistic terms: it was an indication of the violence of French-Canadian — as opposed to English-Canadian — society. Those who saw it as a reflection of a deeply rooted sociocultural misogyny pointed out, for example, the similarities between the experiences of the students at the Université de Montréal and those at other universities in the fall of 1989. In retroactively (re)constructing the events so as to give different explanations of what happened, in drawing upon different "experts" to pronounce upon the events, and in telling different stories with different endings, varying aspects of the massacre were foregrounded.

Of course, "simple" reportage was not the only reaction; the massacre and its repercussions also stimulated polemical reactions. Aided and encouraged by the news media, people debated privately the appropriateness and truth value of each response. I will not enter the debate here, nor do I intend to detail and deconstruct it with any pretence to totality. I also do not wish to assert the relative

truth values of the alternatives presented; however, finding that the Montreal massacre was a crime against humanity, a crime against women, and an indication of the horror of child abuse is not mutually contradictory.⁶

This focus on storying and cultural texts is not intended to denigrate the seriousness of the enterprise involved. As indicated by deconstructions of culture, from Akira Kurosawa's film *Roshomon* to the works of anthropologist Marshall Sahlins (e.g., 1981), creating a story to explain events — structuring, sequencing, and ritualizing a series of actions — helps to render them meaningful, and the search for meaning becomes all important where meaning cannot be easily assigned.⁷ No storying, including my own, is more rational or more truthful than any other. However, following the principles of dialogic anthropological inquiry, I must point out that the story constructed here is that of a crime against women, directed particularly toward feminist academics — part of a society which structures such responses. Accordingly, I choose to foreground examples and materials which support my contention that the event's unfolding follows a social structure which affects in particular ways the cultural construction of male and female genders, and that the item of graffiti is an example of how such a social structure is created, recreated and maintained.

Significant to my interpretation is the fact that the shock, horror and rejection of Lépine's actions, which dominated both the media and the responses I observed, were not the only alternatives. Unfortunately, we cannot dismiss the Waterloo graffitist as an individual crackpot — as some dismissed Marc Lépine — whose interpretation of the event is unique. Others created "joking" responses to the massacre shortly after it took place. Firecrackers were set off outside a women's dormitory at the University of Toronto. A man in a law class pointed his finger at a student and yelled "Bang!" She fainted. And so on.⁸

The argument that Lépine participated in a patriarchal structure of "everyday" misogyny and violence against women is compelling. However, his perpetration of the massacre may be an unusually

— perhaps even, we fervently hope, uniquely — violent and undoubtedly deviant example. In contrast, it is not at all unusual in modern society to see such events as the Montreal massacre interpreted and re-presented in a joking tone. No one who studies humour should be terribly surprised that even these murders have apparently been interpreted as funny. Gershon Legman's analysis of sexual humour, *Rationale of the Dirty Joke*, was reissued under the title *No Laughing Matter* (1968; 1975), and from ethnic jokes⁹ to those about the Challenger explosion that resulted in the deaths of NASA astronauts (see Oring, 1987; Simons, 1986; Smyth, 1986), it appears that much North American humour is based on what might otherwise seem anything but amusing. A necessary prelude to my analysis, then, is to look briefly at work on humour, jokes and graffiti as a source of illumination for this particular item, not only in terms of its content, but also of the context in which it was communicated.

There has been some attention in feminist literature to the subject of humour; for example, an issue of *Women's Studies* (1988) was devoted to the topic. However, most of the latter's content refers to (pro-)feminist humour, or to the humour of women as expressed mainly in literature. Only Fay Welton's (1988) final word addresses a joke text and even it is homophobic rather than misogynist. Elsewhere, in contrast, Marlene Mackie considers both misogynist and feminist humour, and very reasonably concludes that:

humour performs a dual role in the social construction of gender. On the one hand, it functions as an ideological buttress of the patriarchal status quo. On the other, humour plays a subversive part in undermining ideology. (Mackie, 1990:23)

My identification of the Waterloo graffito text as a joking commentary is based upon two features: its similarity in substance and structure to traditional jokes which have a question-and-answer format, and the fact that, like jokes, it addresses a serious issue in a manner which suggests inversion and reversal pertaining to the personality of its communicator and to his or her society. However, as I will suggest, its status as a joke is problematic.

Nationally and internationally recognized events frequently occasion joking responses (see Greenhill, in press). Such disasters as the gas leak from the Union Carbide plant in Bhopal, India, and the massacre at Jonestown were promptly commemorated — and travestied — in joking form. No more than twelve hours after the Jonestown massacre, I first learned, from a fellow folklore student in St. John's, Newfoundland: "Did you hear that ten thousand Billy Graham supporters have just committed suicide? They're keeping up with the Joneses." I heard the same joke again only a couple of hours later on the telephone with my sister in Toronto. The transmission of particular joke texts happen with great rapidity and crosses a multitude of social barriers. A student who worked at the time in a brokerage firm heard, on the day the Bhopal disaster was reported, "Who killed more Indians than John Wayne? Union Carbide." Such texts flame into popularity rapidly and die out as soon as the event to which they refer is no longer topical.

Recently, American folklorists have turned their attention to the joke cycles pertaining to the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger and the deaths of the seven astronauts, including civilian teacher Christa McAuliffe.¹⁰ Apart from their topical interest, these jokes and others like them indicate the extent to which such texts are modelled upon pre-existing ones. For example, the joke "What was the last thing that went through Christa McAuliffe's mind? Her ass" is clearly a cognate of the pre-existing "What is the last thing that goes through a bug's mind when it hits the windshield? Its ass."¹¹

It is by no means a coincidence that many jokes about McAuliffe focus on her place as a woman inappropriately outside her traditional role, using markers such as domestic routines, cosmetics, physical attributes, and lack of intelligence. In several cases, the texts represent McAuliffe herself as responsible by her action, inaction, and/or incompetence for the Challenger explosion itself, as in "What were Christa McAuliffe's last words? 'What's this red button for?'" Similarly, jokes about Helen Keller associate her with such female domain issues as home and family — "How did Helen

Keller's parents punish her? They moved the furniture around" (Barrick, 1980: 447) — and the multiple victimization of women — "Why did they cut off Helen Keller's fingers while raping her? So she couldn't scream for help" (Barrick: 448).

The Montreal massacre graffito, like many other topical jokes, is based upon a traditional *blason populaire* which could be used against just about any out-group. A colleague reported that he had heard it as a Pakistani joke — "What do you call a busload of Pakis going off a bridge? A good start" — and I have since heard it as "What do you call one hundred lawyers at the bottom of the sea?" with the same punch line.¹² There are, of course, differences between the hypothetical nature of the model joke and the terrible actuality represented in the graffito.

Much work on sexist, misogynist, and cruel topical humour is not particularly enlightening. For example, one statistical analysis comes to the conclusion that "both gender and feminist sympathy influence reactions to feminist humour" (Stillon & White, 1987: 219), and another discovers that, "Although sexist jokes were, in general, rated funnier than non-sexist jokes, joke type interacted with attitudinal disposition such that males and females with less traditional views of women's roles showed reduced preference for sexist humour, compared to their more traditional counterparts" (Moore, Griffiths & Payne, 1987: 521). Similarly, I find those studies which assert that joking assists people in dealing with traumatic issues fundamentally unconvincing. For example, Alan Dundes and Thomas Hauschild (1983) conclude with respect to Auschwitz jokes that:

As long as such jokes are told, the evil of Auschwitz will remain in the consciousness of Germans. They may seem a sorry and inadequate memorial for all the poor, wretched souls who perished at Auschwitz, but when one realizes that comedy and tragedy are two sides of the same coin, we can perhaps understand why some contemporary Germans might need to resort to the mechanism of humor, albeit sick humor, to try to come to terms with the unimaginable and unthinkable horrors that did occur at Auschwitz. (259-60)

Sometimes such conclusions extend beyond the problematic into the offensive:

The Helen Keller joke has fulfilled an important social function.... It has the cathartic effect of erasing the pity normally felt toward the disabled, so that the joke-teller and his listener now accept these people on equal terms. They may resent what some consider to be pushiness on the part of the handicapped or regret the amount of money spent to accommodate them, but as long as physical disability remains a joking matter, the success of the Handicapped Children Act seems certain. How can you hate someone who makes you laugh? (Barrick, 1980: 449)

Apart from any concerns which might be raised about how these studies were performed, I disagree with their (usually inchoate) assumptions: that there is a simple, literal interpretation of jokes, and that agreement with the point of view expressed in that interpretation in all contexts is the basis of finding something funny. Because the communicative context of joke telling is essential to its interpretation, one cannot necessarily assume from a text alone the source of the teller's motivation, the meaning intended, or the meaning taken. If the presentation of a joke assumes invariably the teller's agreement with its content, my own motivation for writing this paper would be particularly suspect. Perhaps some strict Freudian psychoanalyst would suggest that I have an underlying hatred for women that I share with the graffitist.

In contrast, one folklorist who studied psychological aspects of different tellers' relationships to one joke concluded only that "the key to the joke adoption and transmission phenomena is whether the individual finds the content of the joke that he encounters personally attractive" (Burns, 1975: 325-6), without specifying what sort of attraction that might be. Another folklorist, comparing women's and men's joking, examined not only the kinds of jokes they told, but also the audiences and situations they chose, how they learned to become tellers, how they told jokes, and how they interpreted and appreciated them. She concluded that the content of women's jokes and the ways in which they were told "was less openly hostile and aggressive" than those of men; that women preferred all-female

audiences while men were comfortable with opposite-sex or mixed audiences; and that "both sexes are influenced in their choice of jokes by the sex makeup of the audience for whom they are performing" (Mitchell, 1985: 185).

Similarly, though Freud in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) presents joking as ultimately aggressive, and suggests that the joker "finds criticism or aggressiveness difficult so long as they are direct, and possible only along circuitous paths" (142), he goes on to suggest the ultimately interactive nature of joking in that:

No one can be content with having made a joke for himself alone. An urge to tell the joke to someone is inextricably bound up with the joke-work; indeed this urge is so strong that often enough it is carried through in disregard or serious misgivings. (143)

This theory, then, depends on the presence of auditors to whom the joke is directed and whose reactions the teller may observe: "when I make another person laugh by telling him my joke, I am actually making use of him to arouse my own laughter" (Freud, 156). This aspect of joking begins to indicate the problem with looking at the graffiti text as a joke; the maker of the graffiti cannot always be there to observe the reactions of his¹³ interlocutors.

Unlike those who consider jokes an indication of the teller's personality, anthropologists have related joking to social structure. A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (1952) discusses joking relationships as symbolic expressions of contradiction; individuals in relationships which lack congruence and must remain separate yet also retain some kind of alliance accomplish this through joking and teasing.¹⁴ Utterances of problems in hierarchical relationships, jokes are used in situations of social avoidance.

Like Freud's, Radcliffe-Brown's analysis depends upon face-to-face interaction between jokers and interlocutors. However, not all anthropological interpretations of joking do. For example, Mary Douglas (1975) suggests that humour is located at points where social structure is contradictory, incongruous, or oppositional; that jokes confront the dominant social pattern and its irrationalities. This

does not assume a teller's agreement or disagreement with the literal content of a joke; only that the content is socioculturally problematic, as are the contradictions in women's and men's roles and expectations in modern Canadian society.

I suggest that jokes, by the way in which they are communicated, are highly interpretable. That is, though there may be a primary meaning to any joke, each situation in which it is used affects how it is intended to be understood by those to whom it is communicated.¹⁵ Texts, performers, audiences, performance occasions, and sociocultural contexts are all relevant to any text's production and use. All are mutually influential. In an oral performance, for instance, both the performer's intentions and the audience's reactions (as he or she interprets them) affect the text. For example, a singer may choose to shorten a song if the audience seems restless or uninterested in it, or he or she may attempt to vary the style of presentation. Similarly, the performer's choice of a specific text is constrained by the nature of the performance occasion. For example, only in extremely exceptional circumstances would anyone tell an explicitly obscene joke at a Women's Institute meeting.

The kinds of occasions which call for performance, and who is expected to perform, are strongly influenced by cultural notions of appropriateness, which will in turn influence the genre selected. A business office is not usually seen to give employees much opportunity for personal expression, but the same people at an office party might tell jokes or personal experience narratives — but not usually telling long traditional folktales or singing songs. Performer, audience, text, and performance situations are affected by more generally understood cultural meanings and uses for a particular genre, by norms for interaction between different groups of people, and so on. For example, it might be socially benign for a politician to tell an ethnic joke to his family; it is not so if the same politician tells the same joke to the press. Meaning is problematic; it cannot readily be assigned to a text. The same is undoubtedly true of graffiti, though its communicative system, which reduces or prevents direct contact between graffitiists and their audience, makes interpretation more difficult than in the case of oral

texts. However, as the literature on graffiti indicates, there are other differences as well.

Much of the literature on graffiti suggests how it differs, textually and otherwise, from jokes. For example, the full text of the Waterloo graffiti is marked as a non-joke by its anomalous signature: "the M. LÉPINE FAN CLUB." A joker has no such opportunity to indicate his or her specific communicative identity. The activity often names its creator.¹⁶ The artist/writer can sign his/her work (as in this case) with a chosen name reflecting some selected attribute or characteristic.¹⁷ Wall writing is often employed in this way by disenfranchised groups to express their presence.

Not only does graffiti differ from joking in that it can involve a chosen name and identity, but the two also vary in their communicative permanence. Commentary in this form is much less ephemeral than any which might be communicated verbally. An oral text, once heard — or misheard — cannot be pronounced identically again, but the item of graffiti remains until it is worn away, covered up, or otherwise removed. Because of its written form, graffiti is also invasive; it successfully enforces the attention of its audience. One cannot decide not to read an item of graffiti having noted objectionable content; once that decision is made, it is already too late and the message has registered.

Yet, because the message does not specify the statement's maker, no response is possible beyond the creation of another item of graffiti, to which one has no assurance that the original graffitiist will attend. Thus, graffiti varies interactionally from joking. Essential to this communicative act is the fact that the writer and receiver do not meet face to face. The writer's comment becomes the final word. His/her interlocutor's response is limited in ways not seen in a face-to-face communicative event. Even the particular identities of the communicator of the text and the audience are unknown to one another.

The literature on graffiti differs from that on joking, both in its relative paucity and in its greater concern with the psychological state of the text's creator/communicator. Much of the literature pre-

sents graffiti in extremely negative terms. While joking is often seen both culturally and psychologically as a creative expressive form, graffiti is described with reference to the ignorance, prejudice, and aggression of its form and its creators. Some writers even go as far as to suggest a psychoanalytical profile of the graffitist. For example, "the anonymous writers of graffiti are ... generally repressed people; their inscriptions are, *ipso facto*, wish fulfilment and fantasy" (Reisner, 1971: 18). Most often, these conclusions are reached in a total absence of any interviews or field research with actual graffitists. My personal experience of the Waterloo graffiti suggests to me that the threatening nature of such anonymous messages strongly influences most writers' reactions to them.

Socioculturally informed work on graffiti will differ depending on whether the writer feels that graffiti reflects social attitudes (Stocker et al., 1972) or if it counters them (Gonos et al., 1976). A rare feminist analysis of graffiti concludes: "We do not feel ... that our data disprove either of these hypotheses; rather we believe that female washroom graffiti cannot be analyzed in the same way as male graffiti" (Reich et al., 1977: 190). In the second case, however, "we would expect graffiti to occur about particularly pressing topics in settings where there is an incongruence between some individual view and a well-defined, 'appropriate' public position on the matter" (Gonos et al., 1976: 43). The social interactional context of graffiti — that it is a statement for which the graffitist will not have to take personal accountability (Bauman, 1977) — makes this analytical perspective reasonable. Thus, there is a:

primary sociological characteristic of the graffitists' medium, namely the *anonymity* its setting affords its user.... The anonymity afforded the graffitist allows the opportunity to use language, and present beliefs and sentiments, which are not acceptable in ordinary social life. (Gonos et al., 1976: 42)

Thus, the graffitist's attitude to his/her material takes into consideration others' sensibilities. In fact, the nature of the message as a social interactional event may be central to the decision to make it in graffiti form. The graffitist would risk much in

making such a statement in face-to-face interaction.

The Waterloo graffitist's intent is strongly suggested by the context he chose — that is, because the message was located near the Women's Studies office, in a university with a large Engineering program, on a sign advertising a Women's Studies course, the intended interlocutors were specified. The creator's intention, thus expressed, clearly begs a serious interpretation, links it to action, and thus makes it a reflectively confrontational statement. Contrast the effect of an identical item in a men's washroom in a bar in Toronto — that is, implicitly, the Waterloo graffiti is an aggressive and negative statement directed at a particular group of people: feminist academics and students. It is intended to be seen and interpreted as a threat.

To understand the graffiti, then, we must identify the communicative system in which it is created. As a genre, graffiti focuses clearly upon text, performer and context; its audience has little opportunity to influence directly this genre. In the case of the Waterloo graffiti, the intended audience is clear. By placing it on a sign which would be closely approached and examined by students interested in a Women's Studies graduate course, and making the size of the writing sufficiently small that it could not be read by a casual passerby, the graffitist ensured that his audience would be selected. Lindsay Dorney, then Director of Women's Studies at the University of Waterloo, described the location:

It was an announcement of where the class was going to meet — just "WS 601" and where it was going to meet — and time and place. And it was on the Women's Studies bulletin board which is right next to the Psychology lounge, where people stream in and out all day long, getting coffee, muffins, etc. So it was in a very prominent place.... It was right there where everybody could see it.¹⁸

Certainly, everybody could see the class announcement sign, but not all would examine it closely enough to see the item of graffiti:

The printing was small and so I don't think, unless you kind of stood there and contemplated the board — and the poster had large letters done in a heavy felt, black felt pen type — and this was done in small print with a ball point pen. So I think you really, in a sense, had to focus on it as well.

Thus, the vast majority of its audience would be female graduate students interested in the course — people who would fit most definitions of *feminist*. Ironically, the first person to notice the comment was a male Sociology professor, whose reaction showed, as Dorney described, the extent to which he disagreed with the sentiment expressed:

It was actually picked up not by myself or by the secretary in Women's Studies, but by [...] the sociologist, who was going to get a cup of coffee. And he was quite shocked when he saw it. He asked permission to copy it, and took the Xerox copy then down to, over to [the Arts Dean]'s office, and left it with him. And [...] then later told me that he had done this, was it all right, but [...] said he was so upset about it he thought something should be done and that the Dean should know that this kind of obscenity, which is the word that [...] also used, should be brought to the Dean's notice.

As suggested above, this specification of audience through performance context affects the interpretation of the text. It was taken as a serious statement about the writer's attitude toward the massacre as having partly positive implications, rather than the negative ones characterized by most other considerations of the event. However, since the performer remains removed, alienated and dissociated from the text, its meaning is implicitly threatening for its chosen audience. The "good start" is especially problematic; as Dorney says, it is "supposed to be something we congratulate ourselves for, then it's turned around." The implication exists that there will be a continuation of the killing Lépine started.

In addition, the message indicated that "someone else identifies with [Lépine] and felt very free to use the name and that they were an association, meaning, hence, 'we are a legion.'" The notion of a legion of Marc Lépinés cannot be anything but terrifying for women. Dorney commented:

I don't think it's got very far in the administration [but] the Dean was quite upset about it. I had a very kind note from him, expressing his concern and his, I guess, former disbelief that this kind of activity, these kinds of attitudes, existed on this university campus. I think it almost was like the bolt of light on the road to Damascus in that sense.... I've had advice today from [...], who's the admin assistant to the Dean, that I should take copies over and talk to [...], who's head of Security here on campus, that if there's some kind of nut running around, they'd better be at least forewarned that this type of nut is running around on campus, in a sense alerting Security that there are people who could possibly be dangerous.

Finally, it is significant that dialogue between the graffitist and his audience is limited by the chosen medium; it cannot have any immediacy. First, the communication of the text by the message's sender and its reception by the specified audience — both those who might agree with its message and those who would disagree — are temporarily removed from one another. Likewise, any response which might be made to the graffitist — and Dorney and I spent some time discussing possible iconic equivalents to Lépine who instead threatened men and could be used in an item of counter-graffiti — could not absolutely guarantee that it would reach the graffitist, although it would reach his audience.

It is important to note that there are really two forms of naming in this graffito: not only the naming of "the M. LÉPINE FAN CLUB," but also the naming of the massacre victims as "feminists." The forms and definitions of feminism are many; some are even mutually contradictory.¹⁹ "Feminist" was also Lépine's word for the women he killed. It is highly doubtful that every one of his victims would have so described herself. As Dorney suggests:

In Lépine's mind, he just completely confused women and feminists. I think most women picked that up. We don't even know what the women were at Montreal. I mean, they could have been members, card-carrying members of R.E.A.L. Women, and it wouldn't mean anything [to Lépine]. In his mind, anything which is identified as female and femininity is fair game, and he was on a hunting spree.

It may be an exaggeration to suggest that Lépine's Engineering student victims were "card-carrying members of R.E.A.L. Women," though it is possible some of his other targets might be. Generally, women who have expressly traditionalist notions of their place in society are unlikely to become Engineering students, just as they are unlikely to be interested in taking graduate Women's Studies courses. The name "feminist" evidently meant something quite specific to Lépine; they were the people he wanted to kill. His notion of feminism, however, and the notions of people who so describe themselves, are based on fundamentally different premises.

At the same time as he defined and described these women — and apparently influenced how the graffitist saw them as well — Lépine denied them their own voice, their own opportunity and actual ability to counter his argument, in the strongest and most final way possible: by killing them. Correspondingly, he took upon himself the right to voice them, calling them once and finally by his own terms. Similarly, the graffitist names his audience rather than letting them name themselves.²⁰

Ultimately, Lépine also turned his victims into cultural property as signs and symbols for a multitude of approaches. He made it possible for the graffitist, who probably never knew any of Lépine's victims, to take the same power upon himself, and to follow the killer in naming these women Engineering students "feminists." As the graffitist names Lépine's victims, he labels his own audience "feminists," probably without much understanding of the range of ideologies covered by that term. Effectively, Lépine has also named himself, by making his own (apparently chosen) name one of notorious public recognition. His name, like the "feminist" one he imposed on his victims, becomes cultural property which is appropriated by representatives of a variety of perspectives, including the Waterloo graffitist. Someone, who like Lépine hates "feminists," is his fan, idolizing him in word and potentially in action as well.

Finally, Lépine effectively silenced his interlocutors, denying them any opportunity to affect his communicative actions, by killing himself. Nothing

anyone can say will ever affect him, cause him to regret his actions, to re-think what he has done, or even give him an opportunity to affirm in some other medium that his complex statement was understood as he originally meant it. The graffitist, by choosing the genre of expression he did, has symbolically done the same thing. Those who might want to respond to his commentary are limited to the same alienated form he chose. Should they answer, they can never know if their remarks have been understood, or even if they have been noted at all.

Thus, it is clear that parallel structures are evident in the Waterloo graffito and the Montreal massacre. The writer, like Lépine, specifies his audience by locating his comment in the university's Women's Studies area. Similarly, he voices the murdered women — and his audience — himself as "feminists." By making the statement anonymously, he avoids personal accountability for his statement, as Lépine did by killing himself. At the same time, he compounds the threat of his action by suggesting that just as we did not know Lépine before he acted, we do not know the identity of the graffitist. As Dorney suggested:

The writer on the sign ... was giving a message — not only marking that "I'm here and you don't know me," but also that I can intimidate you by fear, which is power, right? ... I think that's what the language is saying: that I can hurt you unto death.... It's just "I'm going to get you," that kind of intimidation. And "you don't know where I am, so I'm coming out, sometime, from the dark to get you, and we are legion as well. We're all around you, you know, watching these things.... What's our jokester? Just being cute? Is there a lot of hostility there? Probably he won't do anything, like the flasher, but there's certainly a lot of hostility there.

The reaction of the public and the media during the weeks following the Montreal massacre indicated nothing more strongly that the fact that these statements — both Lépine's written and oral comments and the murders he committed — were taken very personally by just about everyone who heard about them. My reaction to the event was and is as personal as any other. That evening and the day

after I was numb. It was difficult to conceive of something like this happening in a context which seemed so familiar, even mundane. I also work at a university; I am also a woman; I am also a feminist. This happened in my own country. Later, I wept for the women killed and for my disillusionment with the results of apparent progress in the attitudes about and opportunities for women. Finally, as I appropriate this event into my culture as an academic, a folklorist and anthropologist, I respond by writing an analysis of the popular response — how others have appropriated it.

Using performance-based theories allows me to deconstruct the event and the graffitist's response in terms of what I feel are their salient qualities: the denial of women's communication, both by silencing their responses to a message and denying them an interlocutor. However, it also provides me with an opportunity to attempt to speak back, on behalf of Lépine's interlocutors and the graffitist's interlocutors, and to deny both the finality of their statements. I am trying here to give voice to women who will never again be heard by implicitly addressing both the graffitist and Lépine, who may never hear nor listen.

On an everyday basis, women encounter many such small violences as the item of graffiti discussed here. The attitudes about women that it expresses are recreated on a daily basis in similar misogynist humour, jokes and graffiti which threaten and attempt to silence their targets. Unsurprisingly, when my research in this area was reported in the University of Waterloo weekly *Gazette*, I received an item of anonymous hate mail which — among many other things — repeatedly directed me to "shut up." As we attempt to analyze how misogyny continues to flourish, we have to pay close attention to such apparently trivial acts as well as to those that are more overtly violent.

The breakthrough in a common analysis of the Montreal massacre was the realization that Lépine was not simply an insane person; that he was a man whose actions echoed rape, wife assault, and other everyday violence. If we similarly dismiss the Waterloo graffiti as a trivial, everyday, non-powerful act, devoid of significance and without interest for serious feminist analysis, we risk reproducing the arguments of those who similarly dismiss the link between other catastrophic and everyday expressions of misogyny.

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NOTES

1. Analyses of the Montreal massacre are appearing in a variety of different forms and media, including video/film, such as "After the Montreal Massacre," co-produced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and Studio D of the Canadian National Film Board, and the recent book, *The Montreal Massacre* (Malette and Chalouh, 1991), translated from the French.
2. As a folklorist, it is helpful that I have a thick skin with respect to racist, sexist, and other unsavoury material. The fact that this particular item got through to me — my reaction ranged from disgust to fear — intrigued me.
3. I use "popular" to refer to beliefs and ideas that are direct, personal, and non-academic, without reference to the extent to which they are or are not held by a mass of people.
4. For example, Anne B. Cohen's *Poor Pearl, Poor Girl! The Murdered-Girl Stereotype in Ballad and Newspaper* (1973) shows how the murder of a young woman by two dental students in Kentucky in 1896 was reinterpreted in balladry to fit its conventional form. Thus, certain occurrences and events were ignored — such as the presence of a second murderer — and others were highlighted — such as the relationship between one murderer and his victim.
5. Similarly, many folkloric texts foreground male characters, even when they are not especially active or significant, particularly in their titles. For example, in the traditional ballad "Young Beichan," number 53 in the collection by Francis James Child (1882 [1965]: 454-483), the heroic female character who follows her lover over the sea, who is

- the subject of most of the narrative action, is not the title character. Anita Best called this fact to my attention.
6. The foregoing was not intended to be an exhaustive account of the different interpretations, but is based upon my informal observations of reactions to the Montreal massacre.
 7. See also work on the storying of Terry Fox (Greenhill, 1989: 159-210). Various Ontario folk poets, at different times, interpreted the meaning of cancer victim and marathon runner Terry Fox as both hero and victim, and the significance of his actions and ultimate death from cancer, in various patterned forms.
 8. As discussed by Professor Lindsay Dorney and others in *Women's Studies 600, Advanced Feminist Theory*, University of Waterloo, Winter 1990.
 9. Many works on ethnic jokes (e.g., Klymasz, 1985; Oring, 1983) are surprisingly positive about them.
 10. Oring interprets these jokes as an assault on the press and its structuring of "the discourse about death and disaster" (1987: 284). Further, he cogently discusses the psychological interpretations of disaster jokes as problematic; given that people are laughing at disaster, it is difficult to determine whether their motive is "cruel and depraved or therapeutic and liberating" (p. 281). His alternative connects to the nature of the humour in jokes as "forms par excellence that deal with situations of unspeakability, because they may conjoin an unspeakable, and hence incongruous, universe of discourse to a speakable one" (p. 282). Simons (1986) relates similar texts to critiques and explorations of NASA and teaching as institutions, and Smyth (1986) sees them as a psychological response to the media.
 11. This text was found in a photocopied collection of ethnic, sexist, and racist jokes copied for me by a colleague at the Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, Ottawa.
 12. Other examples of similar texts are found in Barrick (1980).
 13. I recognize the leap I have taken in assuming the male gender of the graffitist. It is difficult for me to imagine the graffitist as a woman.
 14. Richard W. Howell comments that "the very fact that such behavior is made public seems to emphasize its nonserious nature. And as the relationships grow actually more serious the public aspect also seems to diminish" (1973: 18). These insights pertain specifically to face-to-face communication — clearly absent in graffiti. Following this, I surmise that the seriousness of the Montreal massacre is marked by the fact that this is the only instance of any joking item about it that I was able to discover, despite specific requests for similar examples in my daily interactions with students, colleagues and friends.
 15. See also Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1975) for a discussion of a similar effect in storytelling.
 16. For example, naming can be a significant part of rites of passage. Similarly, recent attention to the issue of women keeping their "maiden" name after marriage draws attention to the link between name and identity.
 17. As discussed, for example, in Grider (1975) and Kohl (1972).
 18. I am grateful to Lindsay Dorney for permission to quote this and all subsequent excerpts from our interview of January 26, 1990.
 19. Just a few of the examples of discussion in this area include de Lauretis (1989), Heilbrun and Stimpson (1975) and Offen (1988).
 20. Feminist discussion alerts us to the fact that naming is traditionally associated with men. In Christian mythology, for example, Adam names the nature elements.

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