Feminist remembering: Productive remembering in changing times

The 21ˢᵗ Century Woman: New Opportunities and New Challenges

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REMEMBERING

It is early December- December 6th to be exact – only I am not talking about December 6, today, 2012, but rather, December 6,1989, 23 years ago – and just a few weeks after the fall of the Berlin wall, a few months before the Gulf war begins, and of course not that long before the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

But it is the late afternoon of December 6, 1989 that I want to talk about today.

I find myself in a very crowded city bus in Montreal – the 80 Bus, and stuck in heavy traffic and very heavy snow. I am heading home from McGill University where I teach; I have just picked up my 4 year old daughter, Dorian, at day care and we are 'hanging on for dear life' to stay upright on the bus. The bus crawls along, up Avenue du Parc towards Mille End. The trip seems to be taking forever. I have never seen traffic quite like it, but there is lot of heavy snow falling, and it the late afternoon rush hour. People are hurrying to get home, to get to night classes, to take up evening activities. I become aware of the sound of police and ambulance sirens, and every once in a while in the middle of the crowded bus I manage to catch a glimpse of flashing lights. A mother's horror. Whenever I see police cars, ambulances and fire engines heading in the direction of my own neighbourhood, I worry. Are they heading to my house? These flashing lights are all heading up Park Avenue but beyond where I live.

In a busy city like Montreal and in a snowstorm and at this time of the day, all of this is perhaps not so unusual. Or is it? By the time I get off the bus and Dorian and I make our way through the snow on foot to our house, and I turn on the radio, I realize that this indeed is not a usual day. As I listen, I start calling out 'key

words', I guess you could call them, to my two teenaged daughters. You know the way one does:: 'Polytechnique? ... Universite du Montreal" 'gunman' ... "gun man" "shootings". "engineering students" "young women shot" As the evening progresses and as we stay glued to the radio, the horror becomes clearer. Yes the Ecole Polytechnique, yes the University de Montreal, yes gunman on the rampage. But then the tally - 14 young women shot and killed (included 13 engineering students and one female staff member) – 'a bunch of feminists' is what the gun man, Marc Lepine calls them.

For days and weeks and months afterward media analysts will argue about whether "the Montreal massacre" as it has come to be called is an isolated incident, or whether there is something more profoundly misogynistic about the event. Marc Lepin's 'bunch of feminists' phrase is conveniently left out of much of the media discussion, but when Andrea Dworkin, the well known feminist activist comes to the University of Montreal to a rally/demonstration a year later, she says it this way – or at least this is how I remember it: 'if you are going to be killed as a feminist, make sure you deserve to die as one'. Years later when I try to find Dworkin's exact words on the internet I find it as " I think that one of the most important commitments that anyone can make to life or to feminism is to make sure that you deserve your death if you die at the hands of a misogynist, that you have done everything that he in his mind accuses you of, that every act of treason he is killing you for is one you have committed". Both versions are chilling, and which ever they were exactly they remain to me haunting and compelling all these years later.

For a few years after 1989 I feel a certain shame about being from Montreal especially when I travel. When I would hear myself saying 'I am from Montreal' I think people will, by association, think 'Montreal massacre'. But people forget, or if they are young enough or too far removed, they never knew – this was, after all,1989 and a time before Twitter, before Facebook and YouTube. But I promise myself that every year on December 6, wherever I am, I will not let the day pass without comment, but I also promise myself that it doesn't only have to be December 6.

COMMEMORATIVE DAYS: THE 16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM

I start this paper with a personal memory piece as a way to think about lessons learned from the 20th century that might inform women and gender studies in the 21st century. What are the unresolved problems and what are the new opportunities for both men and women – and how might we use the idea of feminist remembering as a strategic tool in and of itself? Although there are many areas I could discuss, political leadership, access to maternal health care and so on – and of course if there is one key lesson from the 20th century and women's history is the interrelatedness of issues and the importance of intersectionality -- the area of gender violence seems to me one where there is still much to be done. I wish I was just offering historical commentary today and not contemporary commentary. In taking on such a theme, I am also thinking of the importance of terms such as 'social forgetting', cultural amnesia, cultural nostalgia and the glossing over of the past, and perhaps the most 'active' one, 'political erasure'. We are right now – from November 25th to December 10—in the middle of the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence. The declaration of the '16 days of Activism' dates back back to 1991. 21 years ago. Since 1991, over 4,100 organizations in approximately 172 countries have participated in the 16 Days Campaign since 1991.

What are we remembering in the commemoration of each of the 16 days?

November 25: International Day Against Violence Against Women

Garcia-Moreno et al. (2005) offer a comprehensive overview of key aspects of the ways in which violence against girls and women, is a critical public health problem. In their work they highlight the following points:
- Physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner was reported by at least 40% of women in 10 sites participating in the WHO multi-country study on women's health and violence;
- Rape and other forms of sexual violence, including forced or coerced first sex, are common for many women.
- In conflict and other humanitarian settings, we know that the risks are increased, particularly for sexual violence.
- The health consequences of sexual violence are numerous, affecting *women's' sexual and reproductive hea*lth (e.g. unintended pregnancy, unsafe abortion, gynecological problems, sexually transmitted infections, including HIV), *physical health* (e.g. chronic pain syndromes, gastro-intestinal

problems, hypertension), and *mental health* (anxiety disorders, depression, suicide, post traumatic stress).

- Violence during pregnancy is linked to low birth weight of babies, miscarriages, and premature birth and infant mortality.
- Violence against women interacts with HIV &AIDS in complex ways. Rape by an infected person can lead directly to HIV transmission. Women often lack the ability to negotiate condom use and safe sex in the context of a violent relationship.
- Partner violence or fear of it can also be a barrier to HIV testing and to access to prevention, treatment and care.
- Sexual abuse during childhood has been associated with high-risk behaviours such as alcohol and substance misuse, early and unprotected sex and multiple partners, thus increasing the risk for other health problems.

<u>December : World AIDS Day</u>

In the last decade, women have become the face of HIV&AIDS particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, as 61 percent of people living with the virus in the region are female. The highest rates of HIV & AIDS infections among 15-to-49-year-old women occur in southern Africa, particularly in Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, and South Africa. The gender gap is even more substantial among the younger age groups: In South Africa, the prevalence of HIV among young women ages 20 to 24 is approximately three times higher—21 percent compared with 7 percent—than among men of the same age. In Lesotho, around 8 percent of young women ages 15 to 19 are infected with HIV, while the prevalence rate is 3 percent among men in the same age group. These numbers indicate certain factors that increase women's exposure to the virus. As noted above in relation to the significance of the International Day Against Violence Against Women, sexual violence is a key driver of HIV. According to UNAIDS, women who have experienced violence are up to three times more likely to be infected with HIV than those who have not. Country statistics compiled by the United Nations show that younger women in Africa are more likely to experience physical or sexual violence than older women, generally from an intimate partner. But while the numbers are more dramatic in Southern Africa, we have ample evidence of a gendered face of HIV amongst female populations in other parts of the world, as can be seen in the risk of infection amongst aboriginal girls and women in Canada.

December 3: International Day of persons living with disabilities

Internationally, the prevalence and consequences of violence against women and girls with disabilities have played out in both education and domestic contexts (Naidu, Haffejee, Vetten, & Hargreaves, 2005). A UNESCO study on the intersection between disability and gender in the context of Education for All found that women and girls are more likely to experience violence, which in and of itself can result in disability (Rousso, 2003; see also Rousso, n.d). In a public service announcement from the East Asia Pacific Region issued on December 3, 2012, the particular vulnerability of girls with disabilities is highlighted. Girls with disability are at a greater risk of violence and sexual assault, and indeed are 1.7 times more likely to experience violence than their non disabled peers.

In a study from Hawaii (Yoshihaman & Dabby, 2009), a number of key features of violence in relation to women and disability are highlighted:
- At least one in ten women with disabilities report having experience abuse.
- Women with disabilities report more intense abuse, a larger number of abusers, more incidents of abuse, and abuse that lasts longer than women without disabilities.
- Women with disabilities can be subject to unique types of abuse. Caretakers can withhold medicine and assistive devices such as wheelchairs or braces. They can also refuse to help with daily needs like bathing, dressing, or eating.
- The national statistics in the US on violence against girls and women with disabilities is alarming; it is higher for girls and women with disabilities as compared to women and girls without disabilities.

December 6: the Montreal massacre

As noted in my personal remembrance of December 6, 1989, the targeting killing of 14 young women, "a bunch of feminists" by a single gunman draws attention to the ways in which feminism itself is a 'target' of violence. And while since that time, especially in the Canadian context, there has been attention to gun laws and gun registry, what is most critical on the day of remembering is the continued ongoing grief related to the fact that it was possible for something like this to happen in the first place.

December 10: International Human Right's Day

The 16 Days of Activism end with December 10. Human rights is an issue that cuts across all sectors but we are seeing in the Canadian context a renewed interest in the significance of this work in relation to schools.

WHAT PROGRESS HAS BEEN MADE?

It would be misleading to think that the declaration of these various commemorative days is all in vain and that nothing has happened to try to change the situation of violence against women. And indeed, there has been progress. Various countries for example attempted to improve the public representation of on violence against women. Training for journalists is often seen as a critical entry point for public awareness and public debate. Similarly, there have been improvements on the actual reporting of gender based violence, and especially the sensitive handling of cases by the police. Increasingly there is special training for the police and various countries have set up a 'gender desk' with the police force. And of course police itself is a key area with the development of global and national policy frameworks.

Perhaps one of the greatest gains of the late 21st century has been in relation to the development of theory which might help to take account of and address gender violence, and I make mention of two here, intersectionality theory and the notion of decolonizing knowledge.

Intersectionality as espoused by the work of Crenshaw and others (1995) has been key in providing a context for seeing violence in all its complexity and hence for envisioning solutions in complex ways. Some critical aspects of intersectionality include the following:

- Different dimensions of social life cannot be easily separated into discrete strand.
- No one category of social identity is necessarily more important than any other (there is not a predetermined or pre-hierarchical pattern – gender first, then race …
- Intersectionality analysis resists essentializing any categories.
- Intersectionality analysis does not seek to simply add categories (gender, race, class, sexuality), but instead strives to understand what is created or experienced at the intersection of two of more axes (captures several levels of difference and oppression).

- Those engaging in intersectionality research are committed to social justice, and seek shifts in power.
- Intersectionality recognizes connections between oppression and resistance.
- Intersectionality recognizes the need to work with a variety of stakeholders (policy makers, grassroots organizations and community groups) to undertake research and policy and to make social change.

Theories of decolonizing knowledge come out of the work of a number of researchers, including the work of Linda Tuhwai Smith (1999). What is central to this work is the idea that too often the knowledge that is being used to inform policy in the area of gender violence is coming from 'on high': male patriarchal structures (as opposed to from women and women-centered structures), from the North (and not the South), from adults (as opposed to youth knowledge), from urban centres where policy is formed (and not rural areas), from those who are abled (deciding for those who are disabled), and overall, from outsiders and not from insider (and often indigenous) contexts. What theories of decolonizing help to frame are new approaches and new methods (especially participatory methods) for envisioning change?

WHERE COULD WE GO? PRODUCTIVE RMEMEMBERING IN CHANGING TIMES:

In this paper, I do not want to dismiss the value of commemorative days and the actions that have resulted from the formal declaration of days such as the 16 Days of Activism or the new International Day of the Girl (October 11). . They are what we fight for. When a journalist or moderator on a panel asks me what I think would help to change I find myself constantly highlighting these areas (working with journalists, police, policy makers) and engaging in development tools that help us to theorize and strategize. But what if remembering -- productive remembering – became a tool in and of itself to addressing gender violence? In my own work I think there is a need for greater recognition of tools of remembrance if we are to go forward. As my colleagues and I put forward at an international conference on girlhood several years ago:

"To date there are almost no references in studies to past (and present) intergenerational experiences and discourses of gender based violence. We think that this is a critical point in order to fully appreciate the impact of gender based violence in schools on learners. We might hearken back to the Truth and

Reconciliation Commission hearings that served as an entry point for the ordinary citizen and government to simultaneously come to a recognition of the long term impact of apartheid on the country. We needed to look back in order to go forward. We are not necessarily here suggesting a Truth and Reconciliation on gender based violence, so much as calling for studies of some breadth and depth that take into consideration the need to recognize the long term impact on former learners who have been victims of teachers' misconduct, victims or survivors of gang violence, witnesses of violence, or even experiences of having to leave school as a result of pregnancy and hence abandoning hopes and dreams for a career -- to name only some of the violations " (Moletsane, Mitchell & Lewin, 2010, np).

Gilmore (2001) ties rising interest in memory and in the memoir to a Western interest in "self-production" which has been very much a part of two movements: (1) the 'digital revolution' of blogs and social messaging, and (2) a "culture of testimony" providing witness to social injustice (p. 2). We saw this in the Truth and Reconciliation hearings in post apartheid South Africa, and currently in the Truth and Reconciliation Hearings in Canada in relation to the atrocities committed against First Nations children in what were then called the Indian residential schools. The growing field of memory studies has been motivated in large part by remembering the past to change the future (Crownshaw, et al., 2010; Gutman et al., 2011; Mitchell, Strong-Wilson, Pithouse, & Allnutt, 2011; Radstone, 2010). Frigga Haug and her colleagues in Germany are credited with coining the term memory-work in the 1980s, and developing a set of tools for working with memory. It is their work which has also inspired other memory collectives in Australia (e.g., Crawford et al., 1992). Some key principles include the focus on a collective topic, documenting memories, writing in the third person, sharing and analyzing memories collaboratively. This approach has been applied to a number of different social issues, ranging from the female body and sexualisation (Haug et al., 1987), through to gender and emotion in relation to childhood holidays (Crawford et al.), to memories of socialization through, for example, playing school (Mitchell, Weber& O'Reilly-Scanlon, 2005). Third person memory writing has also been applied to individual memories, as Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2012) explored in their work with women and mail-order catalogue memories. While participants' experiences of memory-work processes might be therapeutic, this is not its primary purpose. As Haug (2008) explains: "Memory-work is not intended to provide therapy for suffering persons … If increases in self-recognition, knowledge about socialization processes, competence about language and meaning, and critique of theory are fundamental and prerequisites for the growing ability to act, memory-work aims at such an outcome" (p. 38). The goal of productive remembering methods is remembering for the future.

What would a productive remembering agenda look like, especially one that looks at violence? My colleagues at McGill University in Canada and at the University of KwaZulu Natal in South Africa have begun to look at something called digital memory work as a strategy in productive remembering, drawing on the work of Gilmore (2001) and others related to self-production and collective remembering through individual and group approaches to visual cultural production. From a social action perspective, memory-work resonates with a generative research process which aims at cultivating a self-reflexive capacity for making a difference" to present and the future by changing teacher perceptions and practices. This process may begin with the self but goes beyond it by "[pointing] outwards and towards the political and social" (Mitchell & Weber, 1999, p. 4). Thus, socially-directed action is generated through collective memory-work that starts with the self.

CONCLUSION

The digital memory projects noted above are not meant to be 'quick fixes' but it has been our finding so far that a very effective way to get people engaged is through history and memory, and that the strategies from there should not be about 'truth value' so much as opening up spaces for examining the past and the future. And that is the difference. We sometimes encounter comments like 'what is the point of dredging up the past' or 'isn't this dangerous?' and what we have tried to do is develop tools for collective and individual remembering and 'future oriented work that are not confining. Much of this has been about working with the visual, working with arts-based methods, participatory video, digital storytelling, and photography. More than anything these productive remembering activities taken us back to Andrea Dworkin and her remarks on the Montreal Massacre:

 "We need to endure. We need to create. We need to resist, and we need to stop dedicating the other 364 days of the year to forgetting everything we know. We need to remember every day, not only on December 6".

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