

Remarks at McMaster University's National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women

On the National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women, we often come together to remember women who have died violently – women murdered by men. But it is also a day to commit to taking *action* to end this violence, and several local and global events of the past several months remind us that the call to action is an urgent one. Today I want to highlight just a few of those events, with awareness that the struggle to end violence against women continues in more ways than I can hope to convey here.

The women killed in the event that has become known as the “Montreal Massacre” on December 6, 1989, are too seldom remembered as women who were murdered because their killer believed them to be feminists. “You’re all a bunch of feminists, I hate feminists,” he shouted, as he systematically separated young women from men at the Faculty of Engineering, École Polytechnique, and began shooting women. This September, we heard echoes of his words in the online threats made against feminist faculty and students at the University of Toronto, threats that urged men to walk into feminist classrooms and events at the university and start shooting. These threats had an impact on feminist faculty, staff and students here at McMaster as well, and, I’m willing to bet, at campuses across the country. The University of Toronto administration’s vague and dissatisfying response to these threats, and the deafening silence from other university administrative bodies, left CUPE, the union representing the most precarious academic workers at the university, to lead the demonstrations and expressions of solidarity with feminists that followed. These events remind us that much action is still needed to make university campuses welcoming and safer places to explore a plethora of ideas, worldviews and histories, including those of feminism.

The last several months have also brought much needed, wider attention to realities that racially marginalized communities have always known: namely, that racist and misogynist policing practices leave these communities vulnerable to much higher rates of police violence and brutality. The murders of black and brown men by police, south *and north* of the border, have made it necessary to insist, again and again, that yes, black lives matter – or, as Hamilton activists have put it, that black, brown, and red lives matter. But time and again, our police services let these communities down. There is the – now well documented – slow, inadequate, or downright dismissive responses from police when Indigenous women are reported missing, described by the head of the B.C. Missing Women’s Inquiry as a “colossal failure” in policing resulting from “systemic bias.” This fall, we learned of the numerous reports from Val D’Or in Quebec of the sexual assaults, physical violence, and “starlight tours” inflicted on numerous Indigenous women by the Sûreté du Québec, the provincial police force. And our own Hamilton Police Service continues to endorse and deploy “carding” practices in a way that the head of the Ontario Human Rights Commission criticized as reflecting “a textbook description of racial profiling.” Indeed, Hamilton Police Service’s own statistics reveal that members of racially minoritized communities are disproportionately targeted by this practice, which has led many members of these communities to articulate the negative impacts of such targeting on their everyday lives, their feelings of safety, belonging, and citizenship, and their freedom of movement in our city. I am aware that there are often members of Hamilton Police Services (including the Chief) at this event, and I hope you’ll join me in calling on them to put an end to racially-biased police practices, for while these may create a *perception* of safety for more privileged Hamiltonians, they clearly do so, as Kojo Damptey said in his article for the CBC last weekend, “at the expense of marginalized communities.”

Finally, before I turn things over to our panelists, I also want to mention how in the last few weeks we've seen stunning reminders of the action needed to change how some lives and violent deaths get represented as widely grievable to Canadians while others do not. While our world leaders and mainstream media invited us to witness the recent murders of Parisians as a loss of "family," too many of us only belatedly learned of the murders committed by the same extremist group in Beirut the day before, and certainly we were seldom invited to grieve those dead in the same very public ways. Even less frequently are we invited to widely and publicly grieve the violent deaths of more than 200,000 Syrians so far during the civil war there. Instead, anger about this violence committed by extremists is still far too often misdirected against Muslims in general, and visibly-Muslim women wearing hijabs in particular. The escalation of this form of racialized, gender-based violence in the wake of the attacks in Paris and Beirut reminds us that action to challenge Islamophobia is also action to challenge violence against women.

With these calls to action in mind, I now turn things over to Dr. Rick Monture, Director of the Indigenous Studies Program, to introduce our panelists. Thank you.

Amber Dean Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
English & Cultural Studies
Co-Convener: Violence Against Women/Gender Based Violence Working Group
President's Advisory Committee on Building an Inclusive Community
McMaster University