

Book Review

Yellow Ribbons: The Militarization of National Identity in Canada

by A.L. McCready. Winnipeg, Manitoba and Black Point, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing, 2013. \$18.95 CAN, paper. ISBN: 978-1-55266-580-0. Pages: 1-128.

Reviewed by Shannon T. Speed¹

Post-9/11 there have been many changes to Canadian military practices both domestically and internationally. In *Yellow Ribbons: The Militarization of National Identity in Canada*, McCready sets out to contextualize the cultural “shift” of an increasingly militarized Canada as reflected in Canadian national identity. An overarching theoretical framework for this book is not specifically laid out, but the idea of national identity ties each chapter together. Through consideration of both military support campaigns and radio/television productions, McCready argues that Canada’s peacekeeping history is used to justify current imperialist military practices.

A motivation for this project stems from a concern that campaigns and cultural productions have shifted in focus from supporting soldiers to validating military spending. Contextualizing military practices within an environment of Canadian multiculturalism, McCready distinguishes between 1) state ‘militarism,’ the belief in the funding, maintenance, and support of militaries and armaments, and 2) ‘militarization,’ a deep and cultural process through which society adheres to the significance of militarism. The author analyses both ideologies in connection with neoliberalism, race, and gender.

McCready acknowledges that this book may be received as unsupportive of the troops, and is upfront regarding its controversial content. The topic of war and military service can be polarizing, but McCready successfully addresses a wide-range of stances on military support and spending and explains there, at times flawed, logic. McCready ends the introductory chapter with a brief reference to the notion of “make live or let die” and “protofacism,” neither of which are carefully defined, explained, or contextualized. Key ideas such as

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'culture' and 'national identity' are left for the reader to interpret, which is problematic as they are crucial to the author's argument.

In the second chapter, McCready provides a discussion of how the myth of Canada being a "nation of peacekeepers" allows for the advancement of a "new" militarism (31). Referencing Canadian literature on race and multiculturalism, McCready notes how Canada's domestic history of colonialism is erased by a global peacekeeping image. A thorough history of yellow ribbons as an image of war is presented from its origins in America to its Canadian use. The author argues that the many uses of the commodified yellow ribbon have resulted in it no longer having a single message. It "binds together the often contradictory narratives and affective impulses of militarism and national idealism" (41).

McCready connects the semi-privatized organization of the yellow ribbon "Support our Troops" campaign to neoliberalism and privatized defense, arguing that militarization is a contested notion. This is illustrated by poll results cited by McCready, indicating that Canadians differentiate between their support for the war in Afghanistan and those fighting in it, although political decision makers conflate this. The author argues that the yellow ribbon is a performative and declarative act that presents a sense of collective identity. McCready goes on to argue that the yellow ribbon is also linked to white privilege through its use in 1992 to show support for those defending the beating of Rodney King, and again in 1993 to show support for prison guards held hostage in a racially motivated prison uprising.

Another public display of supporting the troops presented by McCready is the Highway of Heroes phenomenon. Despite quoting the reason for the initial gathering on an overpass in Port Hope being to show "support and condolences for the families" (54), McCready contextualizes this phenomenon within patriarchy and the "crisis of masculinity" through an examination of the campaign's key supporters and its emphasis on the masculine figure of the soldier. Although relevant to the book, the Highway of Heroes phenomenon is not clearly connected to the literature nor is it located within the "cultural shift" referred to by the author.

The third chapter is an analysis of cultural productions that provide a link between militarization, entertainment, and industry. McCready looks at Canadian Forces recruiting ads, the CBC Radio show *Afghanada*, and the Canadian film production *Passchendaele*. The politics, funding, and support of each of these productions are examined, providing insight into the power of each as contributing to Canadian military culture, and

consequently Canadian national identity. Furthermore, the author identifies particular themes for Canadian Forces recruitment ads released in 2006 – the ‘adventure’ ad and the ‘helping’ ad – both of which, McCready concludes, deviate from war-like imagery in favour of showing instances of altruism. McCready suggests that this is a rather alarming reflection of the Canadian military as it reinforces a misleading image of Canada’s role as ‘peacekeeper’ having created “a military role for itself as moral authority and enforcer and arbiter of democracy” (78). McCready’s subsequent analysis of CBC Radio’s *Afghanada* and the film *Passchendaele* provides a detailed description of each production in addition to their financial and political patronage. According to McCready, these productions indicate that militarization has seeped into what is referred to as the ‘national imagination’ through cultural production. Here, further consideration of audience demographics and opinion may be useful in order to prevent overplaying what McCready admits are formulaic productions that are not new in their premise or representations.

McCready’s conclusion of having located “the new Canadian exceptionalism” as “an emerging cultural and political idiom” is unconvincing as it is the first mention of this idea (111). A summary of literature is used to explain exceptionalism as change, newness, the circumvention of laws, exclusion, colonialism, and ‘Canadian nationalism becoming American.’ Though exceptionalism is applicable to some Canadian practices, this idea is not traced throughout the book, nor does the author’s general analysis amount to one of exceptionalism.

This book has many important ideas and is an admittedly ambitious project, but would have added impact with a better-organized and more in-depth discussion of the case studies and their main significance. It is difficult to situate *Yellow Ribbons* within the literature because the fundamental concepts are not carefully defined and aligned with those of other authors. The concluding chapter begins by characterizing *Yellow Ribbons* as having focused on the “transformation” of Canadian culture, whereas introductory discussions indicate a “cultural shift.” This book’s contribution would benefit from an explicit conceptual outline, a consistent trajectory, and clearer connections to the literature. Overall, McCready offers a descriptive and unapologetically critical look at the militarization of Canadian national identity.