

Yellow Ribbons: The Militarization of National Identity in Canada

By A. L. McCready

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A Book Review by

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The key message delivered by *Yellow Ribbons: The Militarization of National Identity in Canada* (2013) is that Canada's national identity has been dramatically changed along with the country's deepening involvement in the "War on Terror". Canada, once celebrated for its (somewhat mythicized) peacekeeping and multiculturalism, is moving toward a self-righteous nationalism with increasing militaristic cultural representations. Although the thesis of Canada moving toward a "Military-Industrial-Communications" complex remains relatively unattended and thus invites further academic inquires, there is no doubt that Canada's political economy and military interests have undergone fundamental changes over the past decade. As shown in the recent public debates on Bill C-51 and Canada's participation in anti-ISIS missions, communication has played a crucial factor for legitimizing or contesting the country's increasingly proactive role in the "War on Terror". As such, this concise book presents a timely and welcome intellectual contribution that would appeal to both academic and general readers interested in recent development of Canadian international affairs.

Written by A. L. McCready, this book primarily focuses on the militarization of Canadian culture along with the country's involvement in the "War on Terror". McCready argues that Canada has stepped into an era of "the new Canadian exceptionalism": "an emerging cultural and political idiom that defines and represents Canada (to itself and to the world) as unique and particularly well-suited to find its way in the 'post 9/11' global landscape by drawing on a perceived history of peacekeeping and multiculturalism to justify and legitimize neo-imperialism and racialized policing at home and abroad" (2013: 111). In other words, militarization, in McCready's opinion, presents Canada's response to the neoliberal global order and the rise of a transnational capitalist "empire" (Hardt & Negri, 2000). This thesis is developed throughout the book's four chapters.

Chapter One of the book introduces its theoretical framework and posits Canada's rising nationalist expressions in the radically changed global environment after 9/11. Specially, the chapter makes connections between peacekeeping and multiculturalism as well as between militarization and neoliberalization. Drawing upon critical writings such as Giroux (2010), Hardt and Negri (2004), and McQuaig (2007), McCready proposes radical re-conceptualizations of the concepts of "peacekeeping" and "multiculturalism" since both have been contradicted by

Canada's imperialist and racialized military interventions overseas. Another valuable discussion in this chapter is the distinction between "militarism" and "militarization". While the former concept refers to government resource allocations and policy preferences toward military ends, the latter refers to the deeper cultural process along with a society's deepening militarism.

In Chapter Two, McCready moves into how militarization can be experienced through the everyday cultural practices in Canada. The chapter begins with a brief review of Canada's expanding military spending and its associated political economy. Then, it discusses how the abstract militarization process is articulated through government-led public campaigns such as "Yellow Ribbons", "Red Fridays", and "Highway of Heroes". The chapter ends with the conclusion that militarization in Canada presents a crucial change of the country's public discourses beyond the political realm: voices "supporting our troops" have effectively directed the public attention toward patriotic expressions and heroic individuals, thereby appropriating Canadian traits and values with a decidedly conservative tenor and silencing dissident voices.

Chapter Three explores the elaborations and circulations of militarization expressions within various modes of cultural production. Based on critical analyses of important militarizing cultural "texts", the chapter presents the subtlety of cultural representations of militarism by illustrating how media products of different genres can contribute to a shared propaganda project. To be specific, the chapter's analyses deal with three representative media texts on militarism: the recruitment ads of Canadian forces during the country's military involvement in Afghanistan, the very successful radio drama *Afghanistan* by CBC, and *Passchendaele*, the most expensive Canadian film to date that re-narrates Canada's involvement in WWI. In comparison to the previous chapter's political economy oriented interpretations, Chapter Three's analyses are mainly based on critical semiotic analysis. The main commonality across the analyzed media products is that they have blurred the boundary between cultural independence and government oversight. In this regard, militarization is more than a particular set of glorification of militarism; rather, it should be primarily understood as a "dense cultural fog" that seeps into cultural production via the capture of national imagination.

Last but not least, Chapter Four revisits the key arguments presented in previous chapters and discusses the potential negative impacts of "the new Canadian exceptionalism". For McCready, the rise of Canadian exceptionalism is closely connected with the country's abiding narrative of national self based on peacekeeping, multiculturalism, and civility. This desire of going beyond the country's dark colonial past, unfortunately, is appropriated by the global neoliberal transformation in the Post 9/11 era and as a result, we have witnessed how expressions of Canadian nationalism are increasingly Americanized, with more self-celebration and less self-reflection.

With only 136 pages, *Yellow Ribbons* delivers a concise yet powerful critique on the militarization of Canadian national identity and it provides some very interesting observations on why new patriotic and militaristic expressions are so alluring to many Canadians. The book's accessible writing style and short length makes it more accessible to general readership. Meanwhile, there are two points that are not fully elaborated in the book, which require interested readers' own efforts for finding additional references. First, the exclusive focus on cultural representations or the "encoding" aspect within the communication process makes the discussion on national identity shift somewhat incomplete. To what extent the messages in public campaigns such as "Yellow Ribbons" and cultural productions such as *Passchendaele* have been accepted, debated, or resisted by ordinary Canadians? Despite some anecdotal descriptions, this question remains largely unattended. Second, it becomes clear throughout the book that Canada's

militarized patriotism is pernicious and thus requires further critiques. Yet, what kind of national imagination shall Canada seek and is it possible for employing ordinary Canadians' appeals to peace and multiculturalism against Capitalism's new imperialist global expansion? The book, unfortunately, falls somewhat short of offering persuasive alternative directions regarding the future of Canadian nationalism. With all being said, this book's overall purpose is still well achieved and it deserves communication scholars' attention since Canada's militarization process, as McCready illustrates throughout the book, is deeply embedded in various forms of cultural production and public campaigns.

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About the Reviewer

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