

Generals, colonels, and captains: Discourses of militarism, education, and learning in the Canadian university context

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Abstract

This article discusses a feminist discourse analysis that explores the ways in which discourses of learning interact with discourses of militarism at four Canadian civilian universities named for military leaders. I discuss how this particular research topic became apparent to me and explore the current national context where it can be argued that Canada is exchanging an identity of a peace-making country for one of war-making. I examine literature that connects education with militarism, taking a feminist anti-militarist approach, and discuss issues relating to academic freedom in critiquing one's own institution. I explain my methodology and detail my findings, concluding that educators should continue to contest gendered militarism in higher education and society.

Résumé

Dans cet article, j'analyse le discours féministe en mettant en parallèle les discours d'apprentissage et les discours militaristes de quatre universités civiles canadiennes portant le nom de chefs militaires. J'explique comment ce sujet de recherche particulier m'est apparu comme une évidence. J'explore également le contexte national actuel et soutiens comment le Canada mue de son identité de pays pacifiste en un pays militariste. J'étudie la documentation qui relie l'éducation au militarisme, adoptant ainsi une approche féministe antimilitariste, puis je discute de questions portant sur la liberté académique en évaluant mon propre établissement universitaire. J'explique ma méthodologie et présente le résultat de mes recherches en concluant que les éducateurs doivent continuer à contester le militarisme sexospécifique dans le domaine de l'éducation supérieure ainsi que dans la société en général.

Introduction

As a faculty member at Brock University, a university named for a military leader, I have been continually confronted with the ways in which the university's connection to its namesake is privileged and integrated into daily life on campus. In August 2011, I happened upon a photograph on the university's home webpage, prominently displaying how orientation week was organized by the Students' Union around an army theme. Students were pictured wearing red t-shirts, with a cartoonish profile of General Brock above the words "Isaac's Army," and wearing felt hats made to look like military helmets (*Brock News*, 2011). This example reflects other military representations at Brock on campus, such as two larger-than-life paintings of General Brock and Chief Tecumseh at the entrance to Market Hall, the campus's largest dining hall. Another wall of this cafeteria is covered by a 60-foot mural depicting the Battle of 1812, titled *Reverberations* (*Brock News*, 2010). The valuing of the university's military connections is problematic even though these portrayals may be understandable, given the university is named after a military leader, is located in St. Catharines, Ontario, a site of major battles in the War of 1812, and is involved in the war's 200th anniversary celebrations.

Brock University's emphasis on the War of 1812 is mirrored at the local, provincial, and federal levels, which include Niagara events planned to commemorate the war and attract tourist dollars (Niagara 1812 Legacy Council, 2006), an Ontario provincial vote to name October 13 as Major-General Sir Isaac Brock Day (Robbins, 2012), and a "rebranding" (Leblanc, 2012, para. 6) of the Canadian Museum of Civilization to "reshape the country's major symbols with a greater emphasis on the monarchy and past military achievements" (para. 3), including the War of 1812. All this despite criticisms that a focus on the War of 1812 is "a multimillion-dollar propaganda push aimed at flogging a cardboard version of history, painting the foolish, inconclusive War of 1812 in patriotic colours" (McKay & Swift, 2012, p. 10).

It is within this context that I began to consider the following question: What are the implications of viewing civilian university students as soldiers in an army, with attendant military representations? This question precipitated my interest in specifically exploring the ways in which militaristic ideas may be promoted in the Canadian postsecondary context. In particular, I wondered if other universities named for military leaders were experiencing similar dynamics, since it can be argued that Canada is currently embracing a "romanti[c]" perspective on war, wherein "every battle ... is bathed in glory" (McKay & Swift, 2012, p. 2) and "militarized neoliberalism" (McCready, 2010, p. 29) is valued. There has been a concerted effort to "highligh[t] events of military glory, heroism" (Fremeth, 2010, p. 53) and make the military "an everyday feature of Canadian culture" (p. 56). Binaries of us versus them are promoted with warrior protectors positioned as responsible for the freedom and safety of the protected (Taber, 2009c, 2011b). I extend my analysis beyond Brock University in order to take into account the broader Canadian context and to avoid singling out my own institution.

This article uses a feminist discourse analysis (Lazar, 2005) that explores the complex ways in which discourses of learning interact with discourses of militarism at four Canadian civilian universities named for military leaders. I discuss how this particular research topic became apparent to me and explore the current national context, arguing that

Canada is exchanging an identity of a peace-making country for one of war-making. Then, I examine literature that connects education with militarism, taking a feminist antimilitarist (Enloe, 2000, 2007; Feinman, 2000) adult education approach (Taber, 2009a). I also discuss issues relating to academic freedom in critiquing one's own institution. Next, I explain my use of the methodology of feminist discourse analysis. I then detail my findings that demonstrate the varying ways in which each of the universities' representations interact with masculinist discourses of militarism. Finally, I discuss the implications of my findings and conclude that educators should continue to contest gendered militarism in the context of higher education and society.

Feminist Antimilitarism, Education, and Academic Freedom

In addressing this research, my feminist antimilitarist approach explores the ways in which the connected processes of militarization, masculinization, feminization, and globalization work together to privilege hegemonically masculine capitalist violence in ways that marginalize those deemed in need of protection and assistance (Enloe, 2007). I argue for a need to “critiqu[e] militarism and war from a learning lens” (Taber, 2009a, p. 192) in order to explore not only how gendered militarism pervades daily life but also how it interacts with education systems.

There is a “merging phenomena of militarization and corporatization ... [that] are shaping not only the terrain of school but the broader society” (Saltman, 2011, p. 2) and extends to higher education (Giroux, 2011). Unfortunately, “the goals of universal public provision of schooling... [are] replaced with the metaphors of ‘competition’ and ‘choice’” (Saltman & Gabbard, 2011, p. 21), wherein those who succeed are considered as more deserving than those who do not, with little or no attention paid to the ways in which society and education work to marginalize specific groups of people (Guo & Jamal, 2007). It can be difficult to critique issues of militarism (Apple, 2002, 2006) and gender (Webber, 2005, 2008) in masculine educational institutions that are becoming increasingly corporatized and conservative (Hyslop-Margison & Leonard, 2012). Combining the two into a critique of gendered militarism can be particularly challenging (Taber, 2011a). In universities that promote their military heritage, a feminist antimilitarist critique may conceivably question certain aspects of its very foundations.

In fact, the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada's (AUCC) new “Statement on Academic Freedom” (AUCC, 2011) is considered by the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) to “reverse 100 years of advancement in the understanding of academic freedom” (Peters & Turk, 2011, p. 4). Of particular relevance to my argument is Peters and Turk's observation of the lack of “mention of academic freedom including the right to criticize the institution where one works — perhaps not a surprising omission from the organization representing the executive heads of Canada's universities — but a troubling omission nonetheless” (p. 2). This is not to say that I necessarily expect any negative impact from including my own university in my data set, but that there is no explicit protection for me to do so in the AUCC statement. This aligns with militaristic ideals where dissent is discouraged and repudiated. As Butler (2003) argues, “The public sphere [which includes postsecondary institutions] is constituted in part by what cannot be said and what cannot be shown. The limits of the sayable ... circumscribe the domain in which political speech operates and certain kinds of subjects appear as viable actors”

(p. xvii). The retraction of protection for critiquing one's workplace works to further restrict what is "sayable" and acceptable. If "the academic mission ... has to be organized to institutional needs" (AUCC, 2011, para. 11) and "the university must also defend academic freedom against interpretations that are excessive or too loose" (AUCC, 2011, para. 12), then "whose definition of 'excessive' or 'too loose'" will be used? (Peters & Turk, 2011, p. 3).

Due to the nature of my analysis, it is impossible to make the data anonymous, so it is necessary to name the universities I am discussing. I find myself once again critiquing an organization for which I work or have worked, as I also did with my analysis of gendered representations and expectations in the Canadian military (Taber, 2005, 2009b, 2009c, 2011b; see Taber, 2010 for an in-depth exploration of methodological implications). Although doing so can bring forward feelings of disloyalty (Taber, 2010), it is crucially important to avoid any sort of silencing (whether self-, institution-, or state-disciplined; see Foucault, 1995) that works against a societal critique. While my position as a tenured professor in academia affords me relative privilege to conduct research as I see fit, it also generates some measure of vulnerability. However, not to engage in this critique would be to succumb to the stifling of academic freedom. As Hyslop-Margison and Leonard (2012) state in relation to their critique of their own university:

There are obvious personal and professional political risks in challenging the post neo-liberal attack on public discursive spaces inside and outside the university. Yet, our social responsibility as academics must move us beyond narrow career considerations and promote a long-term vision on the interaction between academic work and the collective welfare of society. (p. 11)

Feinman (2000) draws on Enloe's work in arguing that "the military is too important" (p. 40) a social institution not to critique. I argue that similarly the academy is too important, particularly as relates to what Giroux (2011) would call the "military-industrial-academic complex," not to critique.

Hyslop-Margison and Leonard (2012) focus on the humanities in their discussion of the ways in which, drawing on Althusser, ideological state apparatus (ISA) such as the educational and political systems interact with repressive state apparatus (RSA) such as the police and military. They discuss how "the present militarization of the capitalist state within Canada ... reflects a shift from the ISA to the RSA with potentially profound consequences for post-secondary education" (p. 6). These "neoliberal underpinnings come to shape the educational experiences of instructors and students" (Servage, 2009, p. 27), associating education with consumerism (Servage, 2009; Webber, 2008) and support of the status quo. Furthermore, these underpinnings work against the interests of marginalized groups (Guo & Jamal, 2007), privileging those who conform to mainstream educational and societal norms.

The research discussed in this section demonstrates how discourses of militarism and neoliberalism interact with critical inquiry in postsecondary teaching, research, and administration. My research further focuses this lens to explore the ways in which masculinized militarism circulates in four specific Canadian universities, with implications for the Canadian societal context.

Feminist Discourse Analysis

This research centres on Canadian civilian universities named after military leaders, as an entry point into an exploration of educational and societal discourses of militarism, of which I found four: Brock University, named after Major-General Sir Isaac Brock; Dalhousie University, named after General George Ramsay, 9th Earl of Dalhousie; McGill University, named after Colonel James McGill; and, Simon Fraser University, named after Captain Simon Fraser. The research addresses the following questions: To what extent is the military background of the namesake emphasized by university stakeholders? Are discourses of militarism present? How might these discourses interact with the oft-stated higher education ideal of critical inquiry? In what complex ways might discourses of learning interact with discourses of militarism in the Canadian postsecondary and societal contexts?

As Lazar (2005) explains, “For feminist CDA [critical discourse analysis], the focus is on how gender ideology and gendered representations of power are (re)produced, negotiated and contested in representations of social practices ... [and] in text and talk” (p. 11). For the purposes of this research, I focus on the representations on the university websites as they relate to discourses of militarism and learning. In particular, I explore how each namesake is represented, how *his* history is told, and how or if these aspects are integrated into other aspects of university life. I examine how these discourses interact with each university’s most recent reports. With the exception of Brock University, my focus is solely on the discourses and representations found on the universities’ websites. This very specific data set was a starting point from which to explore how militaristic discourses may circulate in the postsecondary environment, allowing me to make connections to similar discourses in the Canadian context.

Masculinist Militaristic Educational Discourses

Findings as relate directly to the four postsecondary institutions indicate that each university website differentially draws on and represents its military connections. For instance, Dalhousie references war on its “History & Tradition” page (Dalhousie University, n.d. para. 3) but does not mention Lord Dalhousie’s personal military history. On the Brock website, it is noted that Sir Isaac Brock “died defending Niagara” (Brock University, 2010, para. 1) “while leading his soldiers in a charge” (para. 7) with his believed last words, “Surgite! Push on” (para. 3), which became the university’s motto. McGill’s website briefly mentions its founder’s military history in the description of his life. Simon Fraser University is the only university website where I could not find any mention of its namesake, Captain Fraser, let alone any discussion of his military past. Each of these men, with the exception of General Brock, were arguably known more for other accomplishments in the areas of trading, exploring, and politics than for their military ones. Nonetheless, each university, other than Simon Fraser, does promote masculinist militarism in various ways, interconnecting with its namesake’s history and the university’s current textual representations and context.

Taken alone, the content mentioned above may be viewed as benign; however, when analyzed for militaristic discourses that reach beyond the webpages, particularly relating to official annual reports, it becomes clear it has further implications. As an example, on

the Dalhousie webpage, one paragraph celebrates how “The spoils of war helped fulfill his [the Earl of Dalhousie’s] dream” (Dalhousie University, n.d., para. 3) to found the university. Yet, another paragraph describes how he “wanted to establish a Halifax college open to all, regardless of class or creed” (para. 2). As war works to dehumanize the enemy (Butler, 2003; Enloe, 2007), it raises the question of who the student population was intended to be, particularly when the wording of “spoils of war” glorifies violence and othering. The discourse of militarism is at odds with the discourse of acceptance. This does not mean that those in the university do not necessarily engage in positive practices of acceptance, but that competing discourses are present in its public communications.

In another example, Brock University has been increasing its focus on the military history of its namesake, similar to the ways in which the Canadian government has been highlighting the country’s military history (Fremeth, 2010; Leblanc, 2012; McKay & Swift, 2012). Although the official image in the university logo has recently been changed from a profile of General Brock to a fingerprint, the profile reappeared on the front cover of the Fall 2011 Convocation program, and Brock’s last words are mentioned inside (Brock University, 2011, p. 6). Additionally, his image is now on student (and faculty) identity cards, creating a juxtaposition of students’ own images with that of a white, military man. Those who do not reflect this image may view themselves as othered and further marginalized due to their cultural diversity (Guo & Jamal, 2007). Concurrently, the 2010–2011 Annual Report asserts that Canadians live “in a relentlessly competitive world” (Brock University, 2011/2012, p. 2) where only some will “prevail” (p. 2). The focus on competition, much like McGill’s “world-beating” alumni (McGill University, 2011a), highlights a fight (or war) for scarce resources where only the best rise to the top; how then, is it possible that “everyone wins” (Brock University, 2011/2012, p. 2), as the report claims? The question arises, who is “everyone”? From the accompanying photo (p. 3), it appears that “everyone” is young white men and women graduates, perhaps those who best emulate the qualities of General Brock (white, male, and masculine, or its equivalent, female and feminine; “heroic;” and of British heritage), as pictured on their identity cards. These discourses of competition and militarism highlight a tension between the aim of “help[ing] students become better thinkers, better citizens” (p. 4) and the aim of competing in a zero-sum game where some must prevail over others. As such, capitalism, competition, and the market are given precedence over critical thought (*Hyslop-Margison & Leonard, 2012; Saltman & Gabbard, 2011*).

Colonel McGill is presented in ways similar to General Ramsay (Lord Dalhousie) and General Brock, as a caring yet masculine man whose aim was to better society. McGill was involved in “the rough-and-tumble world of the fur trade” (McGill University, 2011b, para. 3), keeping him “in almost constant danger” (para. 3). He was involved in the War of 1812, as he “led the defence of Montreal” (para. 5). In the Principal’s Report, McGill is credited with bringing “together two worlds that, on first blush, seem unlikely bedfellows: the intellectual milieu of the Scottish Enlightenment and the rough Canadian frontier” (McGill University, 2010/2011, p. 1). The report continues with a discourse of winners and losers, us and them, where winners (us) are deserving and losers (them) did not try hard enough. For instance, James McGill “flourished where others floundered” (p. 3), growing “his fortune by hard work” (p. 4). McGill University “appl[ies] today the same gutsy ingenuity that James McGill possessed in order to achieve our goals and compete with the best”

(p. 4). McGill people “are cut from a special cloth” (p. 5); “where others see obstacles and stumble, we create opportunity and seize it” (p. 5). How does this fit into the “betterment of the world” (p. 1) where it seems that only the deserving survive? While Colonel McGill’s military history seems to be less prominent than General Brock’s, there is certainly a comparable discourse of militaristic competition and victory in the websites and reports.

The Dalhousie University Annual Report discusses funding, research grants, and student recruitment (Dalhousie University, 2009/2010). Approximately half of the three-page “Message from the President and Vice-Chancellor” focuses on “pension problems” and “labour contract negotiations” (p. 3) as “challenges” (p. 4), setting an anti-union tone by the university administration in the first pages of the report. Additionally, it highlights “an increasingly competitive environment for students and research funding” with a need for “aggressive strategies” (p. 4) in order to succeed as a university. Again, a fight for scarce resources (funding and students) is emphasized. Furthermore, a gendered classed perspective is taken in the use of such words as “mankind” (p. 26), eclipsing the lives of women, and references to “needy and deserving students” (p. 31) raise the question of whether some students are perceived as perhaps needy but undeserving. These are just a few examples in a report that also discusses such positives as student support, community connections, and efforts to decrease harassment and increase inclusion. Yet, the use of certain words and phrases throughout point to very specific discourses that operate as a hidden curriculum in the document itself and perhaps in the university as well.

Unlike the other universities, Simon Fraser does not appear to use the same discourses of aggressive competition. While still acknowledging the need for funding and student recruitment in a “challenging time” (Report to Donors section, para. 1), the Simon Fraser University 2010/11 Report to the Community uses phrases such as “attract the best students, teachers and researchers” (Simon Fraser University, 2010/2011, Student-centred section, para. 2) as opposed to words such as “compete.” Each section of the report discusses community connections and the importance of making a societal difference; they are not isolated in one place. In short, the document reads differently from those of the other universities discussed here. Although the report’s focus differs (it is not an annual report but a community one), the discourses it draws on are quite different from the other universities named for military leaders, leading to the supposition that perhaps universities that do highlight their military heritage are indeed more militaristic than those that do not. The research undertaken here is not a comparative analysis of all universities with military heritages in comparison to all those without so I am not arguing for a definitive conclusion, but the results are thought provoking. In these cases, overt military connections do permeate certain aspects of the university websites and reports.

At Brock University, it also appears to permeate university life. A newspaper article about a donor’s \$1,000,000 donation for a campus monument to General Brock reported that “[President] Lightstone said in recent years the university community has developed a deepening sense ‘there is a legacy that comes to us as a result of being named for Sir Isaac Brock’” (Herod, 2011, p. A4). But Brock University, like the other universities discussed here, is a civilian university, not a military one. Legacy or not, the aim of universities is not to support or valorize the military. As in Ben-Porath’s (2006) discussion of public education systems, schooling “should never be made responsible for creating soldiers. Creating citizens is the first and foremost responsibility of a public education

system in a democratic country” (p. 55). However, if masculinist militaristic discourses are privileged, militarism gains stronger traction. “Spoils of war” (Dalhousie University, n.d. para. 3) and an atmosphere of “almost constant danger” (McGill University, 2011b, para. 3) “reverberat[e]” (*Brock News*, 2010) throughout education and society, focusing not on critical inquiry but “military achievements” (*Leblanc*, 2012, para. 3).

Implications

This research focused on a discourse analysis of a very select group of documents and website representations as an entry point into a discussion of Canadian postsecondary and societal discourses. It is not intended to extend to all university documents nor to extend findings to the actual beliefs and actions of university members, which are, themselves, extremely diverse. Furthermore, the analysis of Brock University was more extensive due to my physical presence on campus and ability to view artifacts such as paintings, identification cards, convocation programs, and local news articles. It is conceivable I may have found similar representations at the other universities explored here. However, it does appear that, although the reports and websites of Dalhousie and McGill University do emphasize certain military connections and militaristic discourses, Major-General Sir Isaac Brock, as a university namesake, is promoted in much more ubiquitous ways than the military namesakes at the other universities.

I began this research as a way to broaden my focus, but have found it returned to Brock University. The increased embeddedness of its masculine militaristic discourses is disconcerting. As evidenced by Simon Fraser University, a military namesake does not demand a militaristic stance. Higher education should “oppose the death-dealing ideology of militarization and its effects on the world” (Giroux, 2011, para. 22), not embrace it. When militaristic neoliberal ideals are promoted, critical inquiry and democratic citizenship suffers. Saltman (2011) argues “Citizenship becomes defined by an anti-critical following of authority; knowledge becomes mistakenly presented as value-free units to be mechanically deposited; schooling models the new social logic that emphasizes economic social mobility rather than social transformation” (p. 5). For instance, CAUT is investigating academic freedom concerns at Brock University, “regarding their [several academics’] right to criticize a [university] program” (CAUT, 2013b, para. 1), an apt illustration of how Saltman’s “anti-critical following of authority” was expected to support university decisions. Brock is not alone in being investigated; CAUT is also investigating issues of academic freedom at Dalhousie University, the University of Ottawa, King’s University College, and the University of Manitoba (CAUT, n.d). Academics in the United States (represented by the American Association of University Professors, AAUP) are also troubled by restrictive definitions of academic freedom, particularly in reference to David Horowitz’s Academic Bill of Rights, which limits critique by “push[ing] an agenda that is antithetical to the best traditions of American higher education” (AAUP, 2006, para. 2).

Ironically, “while the United States [and Canada] offers no public universal higher education program in civil society, it does so through the military” (Saltman, 2011, p. 8), leading to the competition for funding that each of the universities discussed here face. Furthermore, as the government and private donations largely provide funding for Canadian universities, it is perhaps unsurprising that university decision makers would tap into prevailing national militaristic discourses. The Higher Education Quality Council of

Ontario (HEQCO), a provincial government agency, has called for all Ontario universities to submit strategic mandates that are directly linked to which institutions will be “the first to receive funding” (HEQCO, 2012, para. 4). In order to be successful, universities must “provide ... plans that advance government policies, objectives, and goals” (para. 4). As provincial and national government policies, objectives, and goals become more militarized, so too do universities.

Canadian organizations such as Science for Peace are working with scholars from various disciplines in order to “seek to understand and act against the forces that make for militarism, environmental destruction, and social injustice here and abroad” (Science for Peace, n.d., para. 1). As “the military policy of a nation continues to influence scientific research in industry, and more significantly, at the universities” (Science for Peace, 2002, para. 1), it is important to investigate the ways in which the Canadian military is involved with university funding, research, and teaching. For instance, in a recent Defence Research and Development Canada (DRDC) press release (DRDC, 2013), the Canadian Minister of National Defence, Peter MacKay, announced that \$20 million would be invested into research that will “enhance Canadian public safety and security” (para. 1). DRDC’s goal is to support and engage in research that is “needed to defend and protect Canada’s interests at home and abroad” (para. 5). This funding, based on military priorities and managed by a military agency, comes at a time when funding for basic research in the social sciences and humanities, in the natural sciences and engineering, and in health research has been cut (CAUT, 2013a).

Additionally, the Canadian military recruits on many university campuses (Patterson, 2007; see Turse, 2008, for a discussion of extremely aggressive recruiting at American colleges), which raises the question, might any explicit military connections make students more amenable to recruitment? Might they be viewing the military with an uncritical eye where “war becomes a source of pride rather than alarm, while organized violence is elevated to a place of national honor” (Giroux, 2011, para. 15)?

Universities contribute to society in many positive ways, but the militaristic trends discussed here are cause for concern. Many educators are speaking out about these dynamics, critiquing Canadian universities’ “masculine marketplace framework” (Gouthro, 2002, p. 8) and the “repression” of critical thought (Hyslop-Margison & Leonard, 2012). They also critique American and Israeli education’s increasing focus on a belligerent citizenship that requires “an overpowering form of patriotic unity” (Ben-Porath, 2006, p. 13) where “deliberation and disagreement are widely regarded as threats to the security effort” (p. 15) and the increased militarism in American education (Apple, 2002, 2006; Giroux, 2011; Saltman, 2011). This research adds to this literature by exploring how discourses of neoliberal masculine militarism are *invading* Canadian higher education.

Militarism interacts with Canadian higher education through discourses present in university websites and annual reports, pointing to the importance of continuing to explore and challenge how war, capitalism, and masculinity are intermeshed with formal education and learning in everyday life. The recent changes to the understanding of academic freedom in the Ontario and Canadian contexts, as well as competitions for funding, combined with a glorification of military events and ideals, demonstrate the pervasiveness of neoliberal militaristic thinking that works to limit critical thought and dissent. Therefore, “the movement against militarism in education must go beyond challenging

militarized schooling so as to challenge the many ways that militarism as a cultural logic enforces the expansion of corporate power and decimates public democratic power” (Saltman, 2011, p. 16). To do so “requires a conscious effort to oppose the emergence of a culture of war, which is inimical both to democracy and to maintaining a vision of peace” (Ben-Porath, 2006, p. 119). Educators, therefore, should engage in this “conscious effort” with respect to higher education in particular and society in general. This engagement is not without its challenges and risks, but in doing so, educators can work to contest masculinist militaristic educational discourses in its many forms and locations.🍁

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