

Ritual, Rhythms, and the Discomforting Endurance of Militarism: Affective Methodologies and Ethico-Political Challenges

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This article explores the rituals and rhythms of military commemoration events and the ways these practices reproduce and legitimize militarism. I assess two Canadian war commemorative rituals—the Highway of Heroes gatherings and the Portraits of Honour tour—as micro-political sites where the affective dimensions of militarism are reproduced. The article theorizes how emotion and affect are entangled in rhythms of commemorative rituals. While scholarship in international relations has largely focused on cognitive approaches to studying militarism, this article envisions militarism from a reflective and relational perspective, building upon a burgeoning, largely feminist-led theorization of militarism as affective. The article considers how resisting militarist discourse and practice is difficult due to ethico-political relations forged in militarist rituals. Yet, as the article argues, a thorough examination of these relations is necessary if we are to properly challenge the “unquestionable” military politics of Western nations.

Este artículo analiza los rituales y los ritmos de los eventos de conmemoración militar y las maneras en que estas prácticas reproducen y legitiman el militarismo. Evaluó dos rituales conmemorativos de guerras canadienses, las reuniones en la Autopista de Héroe (Highway of Heroes) y la gira de Retratos de honor (Portraits of Honour), como sitios micropolíticos donde se reproducen las dimensiones afectivas del militarismo. El artículo teoriza de qué manera la emoción y el afecto se involucran en los ritmos de los rituales conmemorativos. Mientras que los estudios de Relaciones Internacionales se han centrado principalmente en los enfoques cognitivos para estudiar el militarismo, este artículo lo visualiza desde una perspectiva reflexiva y relacional, basándose en una creciente teorización del militarismo como afectivo dirigida en gran parte por el feminismo. El artículo considera la dificultad de resistir el discurso y la práctica militaristas debido a las relaciones ético-políticas forjadas en los rituales militaristas. No obstante, como sostiene el artículo, el análisis exhaustivo de estas relaciones es necesario si cuestionaremos adecuadamente la política militar “incuestionable” de las naciones occidentales.

Cet article explore les rituels et rythmes des événements de commémoration militaire ainsi que les manières dont ces pratiques reproduisent et légitiment le militarisme. J'évalue deux rituels commémoratifs de guerre canadiens—les rassemblements de l'Autopiste des héros et la tournée de la fondation Portraits d'honneur—en tant que sites micropolitiques où les dimensions affectives du militarisme sont reproduites. Cet article théorise la façon dont l'émotion et l'affect s'entremêlent dans les rythmes des rituels commémoratifs. Tandis que les recherches en relations internationales se concentrent en grande partie sur les approches cognitives de l'étude du militarisme, cet article envisage le militarisme d'un point de vue réflexif et relationnel en s'appuyant sur une théorisation naissante majoritairement féministe du militarisme comme étant affectif. Il examine à quel point il est difficile de résister aux discours et pratiques militaristes en raison des relations éthico-politiques forgées dans les rituels militaristes. Pourtant, comme il l'affirme, un examen approfondi de ces relations est nécessaire si nous voulons remettre en question les politiques militaires « incontestables » des nations occidentales.

In the summer of 2011, I was deep into research about the militarization of foreign policy and the use of Support the Troops discourse to legitimize military involvement in the Afghanistan war. I attended a community event hosted by the Kinsmen Club of Canada showcasing a large canvas oil painting to commemorate Canadian Forces members who were killed in Afghanistan. Part research encounter, part personal curiosity, I showed up to the event with a great deal of feminist skepticism and wariness about the types of militarist narratives I might encounter. I was keen to observe how this discourse might support my existing findings from political speeches, media coverage, and House of Commons proceedings about the Afghanistan war that suggested Canadian politicians were actively justifying involvement in the war by shaming anti-war protesters as disrespectful to grieving military families (Wegner 2017).

Yet, at the conclusion of the event, I left in tears and feeling confused about the experience. I was captivated by the speeches and felt moved by the community of participants openly expressing their reverence and sorrow for the death of a local, hometown soldier. It was only after significant reflection and engagement with feminist scholarship that this emotionally evocative and intellectually confusing

experience took form as a methodological and ethical tool for my research. My experience, akin to what Clare Hemmings (2012) describes as “affective dissonance,” or Linda Åhäll's (2018) description of events that “really didn't gel” was a turning point for my project, leading to an affective praxis of using the politics of discomfort as an epistemic and interpretive approach for research (Chadwick 2021). My experience at the event resulted in a disjuncture between my “embodied sense of self and the self I felt I was expected to be in social terms” (Hemmings 2012, 149).

The experience provided a guiding research question to which this article will explore: how is it that, even for those consciously aware of the problematic reproduction of militarism in society, this pervasive set of ideas is so very tricky to challenge and dismantle? What is it about certain instances of language and experience that “stick” (Ahmed 2014) with audiences, beyond their simple utterances and particularly when those utterances do not cognitively resonate? I suggest that militarism evokes both emotional and ethical relations that need to be considered if militarism is to be resisted. Using feminist affective methodologies, I consider how militarism is not simply cognitive, it is emotional, and find that it leads to the endurance of militarism in contemporary

political life. This article therefore examines the emotional and ethical dynamics of militarism and suggests a methodological strategy for exploring militarism's affective logics. Militarism, simply put, is the normative valuing of the military as an essential institution in society; an ideology that legitimizes the use of military force for political purpose. I oppose the promotion of the military as an unequivocally beneficial public good and seek to unsettle discourse and practice that endorse this. As I outline below, challenging militarism requires an understanding of the rituals and rhythms of militarism, the ways that "scenes and spaces [of militarism] set the table ... in these domains by rendering large segments of the public receptive or unreceptive to them" (Connolly 2002, cited in Solomon and Steele 2017, 280). Militarism is reproduced through social rituals and affective rhythms that obscure the politics of war and influence how we "make sense of death and injury deliberately produced through war" (MacLeish 2019, 274–75). Judith Butler (2009) noted that who "we" are in times of war involves considering what lives are considered valuable and mourned, and what lives are considered ungrievable. War commemorative rituals involve a hyper focus on mourning "our" dead, grieving and revering those "we" have lost, and in turn, obscuring the political contexts in which these deaths have occurred. Contemporary Western military affairs have been called the "forever wars," long-term military occupations that have been accompanied by cultural attitudes of the "military normal" (Lutz 2009). I argue that sustained attention is needed to consider how rituals and rhythms sustain and legitimize contemporary military violence by considering how militarism's felt logics are reproduced in micro-political encounters (Steele 2019a, 12).

Militarism involves complicated articulations of relational emotions, not least in the practice of commemorating and exalting military personnel who have died in war. While there are long-standing state-led practices of commemorating war in formal ceremony and holiday (such as Remembrance Day in the United Kingdom and Canada, Anzac Day in Australia and New Zealand, Poppy Day in South Africa, and Veterans Day in the United States), militarist logic does not simply flow from the top-down, but rather circulates between macro- and micro-political levels. Militarist articulations, of course, are mobilized in state-led initiatives, but are also generated outside state-led discourse and practice in micro-political spaces with "affective practices [that] coincide with the production of space as socially meaningful" (Solomon and Steele 2017, 269).

The reproduction of militarism involves social practices, such as wearing a red poppy in November (Bashum 2016), donning a yellow ribbon in Support of the Troops (McCready 2013), wearing a red shirt on Fridays as a visual show of support for troops overseas (Wegner 2017), educational community initiatives to teach children about the sacrifices of World War veterans (Pennell 2016), "Honour flights" for World War II veterans (Steele 2019b), and the widespread social media sharing of US military "reunion videos" (Steele 2019a). These social practices reinforce the normative acceptance of military exceptionalism and the desirability of revering military service as the penultimate civic occupation. These social practices not only reinforce romanticized imagery about militaries, but also distract from the types of violence that militaries execute. Importantly, the normalization of militarist values in social and cultural also discursively insulates militarist practices from critique.

This article considers how militarist articulations have been mobilized in micro-political spaces, indicative of militarism's broader "feltness" (Welland 2021) or "attachments"

(Chisholm and Ketola 2020). This affective dimension of militarism can be influential, even to those who recognize the politicized nature of supporting the military. I build upon the work of Maria Rashid (2020) by considering how affective relationships are crafted within militarism and the im/possibilities that exist for challenging it in particular spaces. Collusion with militarism "works in subtle, layered ways and is not a result of appropriations and manipulations summoned by the language and text of the nation alone" (Rashid 2020, 48). Citizens are not a distinct population that experience an entrenchment of military values (Howell 2018; Millar 2019), but are participants—sometimes eager, sometimes ambivalent, sometimes wary, sometimes conflicted, and sometimes unaware—in the reproduction of militarism. Drawing on work that recognizes the role of civilians as "fungible elements 'always already involved' in war's becomings" (MacLeish 2020, 201; see also Kinsella 2011), I argue that rituals attendant to the "Support the Troops" discourse in North America, such as repatriation and commemorative events, are illustrative of how citizens play a key role in reproducing militarism, replete with contradictions and complexity.

This article contributes to broader literatures on militarism, and the ways and places it is reproduced. While militarism has been studied by feminist IR scholars (see, e.g., Cohn 1987; Enloe 1990; Enloe 2000; Lutz 2002; Sjöberg and Via 2010; Åhäll 2016; Bashum 2016; Dyvik and Greenwood 2016) and by military and historical sociologists (see Stavrianakis and Selby 2012 for comprehensive overview), there is a burgeoning literature that sees militarism outside strictly institutional, material, or economic effects, and which bridges existing work on the significance of emotions and affect in global politics (Crawford 2000; Edkins 2003; Åhäll and Gregory 2015; Hutchinson 2016) to the study of *militarism as affect* (Burrige and McSorley 2013; McSorley 2016; Chisholm and Ketola 2020; Rashid 2020; Welland 2021). This article contributes to this growing body of work and advances current debates by exploring how militarism is reproduced affectively, why it endures, and why we need different methodologies to understand the constitutive affective/relational practices that sustain it.

A political consequence of militarism as affect, fostered through community-led commemorative events, is the social reproduction of the "moral economy of war violence" (MacLeish 2018, 130). Discursive and affectual rituals of these events cast military deaths as honorable and, in turn, legitimize the contexts in which these individuals died. War, therefore, is bizarrely justified through discourse that positions its logical outcomes (the lethal destruction of human life) as worthy of reverence. Lutz and Millar (2012, 482) note that war as a social institution "makes value and values out of the obliteration of human lives" and it is through rituals that emphasize war's value as a means to justify the loss of human life that militarism as an ideology is reified. As Mary Dudziak (2018, 8) explains, "Dead bodies and the stories told about them matter to war politics. War, at the moment of impact, includes the production of dead human bodies ... Death does not make war 'wrong', but war's worth is often measured against its 'cost' in human lives." Militarism structures the discourse and praxis of war commemoration and therefore determines the limits of what can be thought and spoken in a socially acceptable way (Foucault 1991, 59–60). To explore the challenge of thinking and speaking against socially acceptable norms that bolster militarism, I rely upon feminist affective methodology—*discomfort*—to "think/theorize with bodily

and visceral residues as openings which move us towards different kinds of knowing” (Chadwick 2021, 6).

Ultimately, what is at stake here is not only the particularity of affective militarism in the specificities of the Canadian examples to follow, but more broadly the ways that militarism’s “feltness” (Welland 2021) can render contemporary military activities as “unquestionable,” even to those who may wish to question them. Civilians are not uniformly apathetic, uninformed, or whole-heartedly supportive of the use of military violence by their governments. Yet, they are bound by what is deemed acceptable discourse and behavior related to critique of military activities. The legitimation of military violence is not simply cognitively directed; it is also emotionally governed. To understand and to challenge militarism, then, requires methodological approaches that can account for this complexity.

The contribution this article makes to the broader study of Global Politics is threefold. First, it builds upon existing scholarship on militarism and contributes to critical scholarship seeking to challenge the pervasive legitimization of military violence in global politics (Eastwood 2018, 48). I seek to broaden current analytical approaches to studying militarism through a reflective and relational approach to demonstrate how militarism is not simply cognitive; it is affective too. Second, I offer a novel framing of war commemorative rituals as involving rhythmic activities in distinct micro-political spaces in which emotions and affect can both reproduce and unsettle militarist subjectivities, identities, and ideologies. Finally, this article explores the intersections of emotions and ethics in affective militarism as a means to explain why it endures as an “unquestionable” ideological force in contemporary politics.

The article explores the social rituals and affectual relations that are peripheral to formal, state-initiated institutional processes of honoring the war dead. Specifically, I consider examples from grassroots gatherings of people along Highway 401 in Ontario, Canada during the transport of caskets following repatriation of Canada’s war dead between 2002 and 2020 and from the Portraits of Honour tour of 2011. Both series of events were intended to commemorate Canadian military personnel killed in Afghanistan. These “unofficial” commemorative events illustrate the ways that rhythms of these rituals infuse militarist ideology with emotional resonance.

The article proceeds as follows: I begin with an overview of militarism and how my work builds upon existing theories. I outline my methodological approaches and explain how discomfort as methodology can be used to explore affective relations that characterize militarism. I proceed to highlight the rituals and rhythms of war commemorations to show the ways that these events recreate ethico-political relationships and subjectivities among participants. I conclude with a discussion of how the emotional and ethical entanglements of affective militarism function to insulate military practices and processes from targeted critique.

Militarism and Affect

The commemoration of war deaths is an inherently political activity. It is also a distinctly emotional enterprise. Public displays of mourning for soldiers reproduce militarism, an ideology linked with the “glorification of war” (Higate and Henry 2009, 134). In international relations, there has been ambiguity and disagreement on what militarism is. Stavrianakis and Selby (2012) offer five possible models of militarism—ideological, behavioral, institutional,

sociological, and the propagation of military personnel and equipment. Sociological perspectives, including Shaw (1991) seek to study how military values influence social structures, often drawing from Mann’s (1987) definition as “a set of attitudes and social practices which regards war and the preparation for war as a normal and desirable social activity” (35, cited in Eastwood 2018). Enloe (2007, 11) defines militarism as “a complex package of ideas that, together, foster military values in both military and civilian affairs [which] justifies military priorities and military influences in cultural, economic, and political affairs.” Militarism circulates through all levels of society, including the everyday (see in particular, Enloe 2000; Bernazzoli and Flint 2010; Khalid 2015; Åhäll 2016; Bashum 2016).

Like Eastwood (2018), I reject the notion that conceptualizing militarism as ideology somehow ignores the social relations upon which these ideas are fostered and reproduced. This is because ideas are not unconnected from our bodily experiences with them. Militarism, as Chisholm and Ketola (2020) offer, is an affectively felt logic. Focusing on militarism requires us not only to examine the sites where militarist logics are reproduced, but also to challenge the ways that these logics are felt as “good” or proper.

Militarism is not simply about glorifying war. Militarism involves (1) *justifying* military action through narratives that legitimize the deployment of the military and (2) *reproducing* discursive environments whereby criticizing military activities is rendered taboo. It can be an “ambivalent, involuntary or unconscious phenomenon that manifests itself in a variety of ways” (Eastwood 2018, 48). This is particularly evidenced in the Canadian context, where militarism thrives upon citizen ambivalence in learning about, knowing about, or caring about what the military does overseas. Militarism is not perpetuated by a series of rational thoughts, rather it is “unreflexively assumed, embodied, and summoned through ... intracorporeal interactions, structures of feeling and sensory practices” (McSorley 2016, 105). Because of this complexity, resisting militarism is no easy task.

Scholarship has considered the ways that militarism can manifest as a conscious or unconscious identity anchor: in military training (Barkawi 2017), in unstable occupational identities (Duncanson 2013; Greenwood 2016), in incompatible gendered and vocational identities (Welland 2021), and in celebrated notions of idealized citizenship (Cowen 2008; Bernazzoli and Flint 2010; Millar 2019). Scholarship has also examined practices where banal militarism (Thomas and Virchow 2006) is experienced and embodied, including fitness (McSorley 2016), diet (Burrige and McSorley 2013), fashion (Tynan 2013; Shepherd 2018) bodily aesthetics (Dyvik and Welland 2018), and popular culture (Dyvik 2016), observing “place-specific processes that may embed militarism in particular communities” (McSorley 2016, 106).

Building upon feminist scholarship that calls for the need to study war and its attendant violence in the ways that “people themselves experience war” (Sylvester 2011; Parashar 2014; Dyvik and Welland 2018, 348), there is newfound attention to *militarism as affect*, and in particular the ways that militarism is not simply ideas and values, but something that is experienced as a dominant structuring social force with material, ideological, and embodied affects. Burgeoning scholarship utilizing the notion of militarism as affect has utilized qualitative methods to explore how individuals feel about militarist identities, attachments, and responsibilities (McSorley 2016; Chisholm and Ketola 2020; Rashid 2020; Welland 2021). It is to this growing body of literature that I contribute.

What is absent from current theorization is how militarism *becomes* felt—how the affective dynamics of militarism are sensed. I suggest that it is through the rhythms of commemorative gatherings—and the “power of iterative action in collective contexts” (Solomon 2019, 1001)—that the links between rituals and militarism’s “feltness” are made. Akin to the social power of crowds (Aradau 2015), rhythms in physical spaces can grow to influence perceptions and reinforce or expand the power of relationships, identities, and ideas. In other words, the power of rituals is not simply the discursive scripts recited or enacted in these spaces, but the affective investments (Solomon 2014) that bind subjects to particular identities and narratives and disables alternatives. While distinctions between form and force of discourse have been articulated (Laclau 2005; Solomon 2019), militarism in commemorative events is illustrative of how the *force of affect* infuses particular militarist ideas and identities with power and legitimacy.

I see the rhythmic activities of war commemorations as “serving certain political interests while undermining others” (Kertzer 1988, 87). In short, while not all participants may holistically Support the Troops, revere the war dead, or believe that military activities and purposes are or should be without critique, the “collective effervescence” (Durkheim 1995) of the commemorative rituals makes challenging militarist ideas and identities difficult. Within these micro-political spaces, social norms buttress militarist logics from critique. I therefore suggest that bridging current scholarship on rituals and rhythms to emerging scholarship on affective militarism is a means to theorize how rituals, affect, and ideology become entangled.

Affective methodology: Discomfort and Emotion Discourse Analysis

While my intention was to examine militarism and the ways it discursively circulated, it was my unplanned participant observation at the Portraits of Honour community event and the discomfort I experienced during this event that redirected my methodological priorities. I did encounter militarism’s discursive circulation, but was surprised by its affective influence—the seductive *rhythms* of militarism—and my newfound sympathies for militarist scripts I previously had criticized. My experience resulted in some messy, scribbled field notes and great discomfort about my two states of mind. The discomfort I felt stemmed from awareness of the politics of war commemorative discourse (my academic self) while simultaneously feeling seduced and moved by the emotions of the crowd (my community self). My dilemma was an estrangement with my researcher self (Higate 2015): what was I supposed to “do” with these emotions?¹

¹In IR, there has been increasing attention to the role of emotions and affect in politics and of the link between emotion and discourse (Crawford 2000; Edkins 2003; Wilcox 2009; Sylvester 2013; Ross 2014; Solomon 2014; Åhäll and Gregory 2015; Koschut 2017). While there is not a consensus, some scholarship sees a distinction between emotions and affect (Gregg and Seigworth 2010; Hall and Ross 2015) whereby emotions are “the conscious manifestations of bodily feelings” (Hutchinson 2016, 16) that are always-already intertwined with pre-existing cultural and socio-political contexts (Crawford 2014, 535–37) and affect is considered to be more than feelings, it is “a more complete range of nonconscious, noncognitive ‘inner states’ and sensory experiences” (Hutchinson 2016, 16). Affect is understood to “unleash emotion from cognition” (Koschut et al. 2017, 503). Yet feminist scholarship has refused such clean divisions, recognizing that emotions “involve bodily processes of affecting and being affected” (Ahmed 2014, 208, cited in Welland 2021, 61; see also Hemmings 2005) and thereby sees these concepts as linked. Emotions and affect are “not attributes of individual selves, but products of swirling, moving sets of relations between persons, bodies, material spaces,

Discomfort is a form of “affective methodology” (Knudsen and Stage 2015) in which affects become tools researchers can use to consider research problems in new ways, rather than obstacles to overcome, work through, or stuff aside. Our feelings as researchers can “dis/orient [us] in particular (and sometimes productive) ways, opening up and/or closing down questions and lines of inquiry” (Chadwick 2021, 2). Discomfort is both a “visceral and relational intensity, feeling or sensation” (Chadwick 2021, 2). Sarah Ahmed describes it as a type of gut feeling, a “sense something is amiss” (Ahmed 2014, 27). Discomfort is an affect that alerts us to relations; it draws attention to how we perceive we fit or do not fit within normative expectations of groups and communities.

My research and theoretical conclusions that follow emerged as a result of my discomfort I experienced when confronted with my experience *feeling* militarism in a particular space. Maria Erikson Baaz and Maria Stern (2016, 118) describe a similar methodological approach, the “methodology of unease,” which involves a research process that is “inevitably messy; involve [ing] loops, spirals, even cul-de-sacs.” My attendance at the Portraits of Honour tour was meant to supplement my pre-existing ideas, not subvert them. Discomfort as a method led me to ask new questions: what about this particular space and time makes militarism’s affects so “sticky” (Ahmed 2014)? And are other spaces—micro-political sites where similar war commemorative rituals are enacted—subject to the same sorts of emotional stickiness?

I turned my attention to another popular war commemorative practice. Since 2002, citizens had been gathering along Highway 401 east of Toronto, Ontario, to witness the hearse procession of repatriated soldiers. Unable to attend these community gatherings myself, I relied upon popular narrations of these events documented through media sources. I drew upon select texts to examine the narratives of participants and observers at the Highway of Heroes events. My sample included a photojournalist commemorative book and media articles published in four Canadian news outlets between 2006 and 2020 (*CBC News*, *The Toronto Star*, *Durham Region News*, *The Globe and Mail*). Using Koschut’s (2017) method of emotion discourse analysis, I assessed narratives of participants documented in media sources to consider how attendees of these commemorative events experienced the ritual emotionally.² I consider the types of emotion discourse articulated about these gatherings to consider the “affective products of socio-material relations, physical spaces and locations, body-to-body exchanges and power relations” (Chadwick 2021, 4). In addition, I reflect upon the ways particular normative truths and identities were reproduced or prioritized in these narratives.

It was not my goal to prove that I accurately captured the “correct” emotions in this discourse, or to suggest that discourse at commemorative events prompts universalized emotions. Instead, I consider “how affect, emotion and discourse are composed together in ever-shifting ways in

objects, discourses, conceptual histories, locations and geopolitics” (Chadwick 2021, 2; see also Ahmed 2014)

²I cannot assume ways that these events evoke universal feelings in all participants or observers. As Simon Koschut (2018, 279) notes, “emotions underpin the meanings within and effects of discourse,” therefore, my analysis seeks to explore emotional language as expressed in narratives of participants and observers at the Highway of Heroes, defined as “emotion discourse” (Koschut 2018, 277). It is a means to consider how participants may have felt and how these expressions align with militarist logics. As with all discourse analysis, my study can only capture partial representations and therefore this methodology has similar limits to other qualitative methods in which the researcher may only have access to limited or partial expressions and narratives.

actual practices” (Anderson 2014, 60). Individual and collective emotions shape and are shaped by participation within war commemoration rituals. These emotions can support or lend to particular politics. Militarism becomes felt or affectively “sticky” in these micro-political sites, adhering to individuals who may not have conclusively supported militarist ideas prior to their participation.

The significance of these rituals and their influential rhythms is that they can become spatial and temporal sites that close off opportunity to critique militarist ideas and practices; sites whereby militarist logics become felt as *true*. Militarism’s uncritical acceptance in contemporary political life (Lutz 2009) stems from ways that militarist feelings are summoned and reproduced in particular places and times, and the lingering influences of these sites long after individuals have left them. These micro-political spaces and practices may not cause individuals to explicitly embrace the legitimacy, deployment of, or acquisition of lethal military force. Yet the social norms and identities reproduced in these spaces can become inherent “within the deepest fibres of our bodily being” (McSorley 2016, 105), insulating militarist norms from sustained critique because they are embedded in social relations. It is to these rituals and rhythms that I now turn to explore how militarism becomes affective in these spaces.

Rituals, Rhythms, and Affective Militarism

Scholarship on rituals has been well developed in sociology and anthropology, following from Emile Durkheim’s (1995) framing of rituals as means to reinforce group norms and provide social cohesion. Steven Lukes (1975, 301) notes that rituals “serve to specify what in society is of special significance ... [to] draw people’s attention to certain forms of relationships and activity ... [and to] deflect their attention from other forms.” The function of rituals has been to “organise and load the world symbolically, creating affective entanglements which shape the emergence and reproduction of power, authority and subjectivities” (Aalberts et al. 2020, 242). Rituals “bring discourses and audiences together, framing situations and enacting scripts in an aesthetically compelling theatrical form” (Ringmar 2012, 7–8, cited in Malksoo 2020).

Rituals to commemorate war socially reinscribe military death(s) as valorous. In these spaces, family members of deceased soldiers express and are represented as expressing particular emotions—grief and mourning—while not other private, potentially contradictory expressions such as anger or indignation (at the military for failing to preserve the soldier’s life). Commemorative rituals shift emotional attention away from the cause of death—the destruction of life in war—and divert attention to honoring deceased soldiers and their families. The lives of soldiers honored in war commemorative events position “our” soldiers as grievable (Butler 2009) and, in turn, obscure the political context of these deaths. In war commemoration events, “attention is focused on the obligation of mourning, rather than the specifics of war in which the soldier died” (Zehfuss 2009). While private and potentially conflicting emotions are held by friends and family members of dead soldiers, in public rituals, military families are denoted as part of the broader military institution, bestowed with subjectivities as distinct from civilians, and casting their publicly expressed emotional scripts with authority. Discourse about the sacrifices made by these families and their deceased loved ones dominates war commemorative rituals, centering the emotional

focus of the rituals on their loss and our reverence for their role in war.

The rituals I consider here—Highway of Heroes gatherings and the Portrait of Honours tour—are not formalized, state-led initiatives, but were rather enacted in micro-political sites. Drawing on Solomon and Steele’s (2017, 269) conception of micro-politics, these sites are not macro-level state directed structures, and are instead sites of particular affects, space, and time that become socially meaningful and politically generative. These unofficial, local sites are “not mere epiphenomenon of deeper structural forces [they are] also a generative force in and of itself” (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014, 3). In this vein, examining the ritual and rhythms of war commemoration illustrates that the power of militarism is not simply a top-down process, but rather a deeply embedded logic that permeates all levels of society. These micro-political sites are where state-initiated militarist logics play out, yet they are also generative of power and relations on their own. Feminists have long stressed how the personal is political, how the personal is international (Enloe 1990, 196) and emphasized the need to look at “unofficial” spheres to examine the multiplicity of ways that power, security, and legitimacy operate. Therefore, while the unofficial rituals examined in this article are indeed connected to and serve the interests of state-directed militarist ideology, the affective relationships created and affirmed in these spaces contribute to the nebulous and inter-personal effects of militarism in social and political life.

Ritual 1: Gatherings along the Highway of Heroes

The Highway of Heroes is a stretch of highway between the Canadian Forces Base (CFB) Trenton and the coroner’s office in downtown Toronto, where bodies of deceased Canadian soldiers are repatriated upon their return from overseas. Since 2002, citizens have gathered along highway overpasses to observe the procession as a means to “pay their respects” to military families who travel along the highway as part of the official repatriation proceedings.³ The official repatriation ceremonies at CFB Trenton are an example of rituals in which particular norms and ideas (such as the legitimacy of military violence as a force for good in the world, the need to honor and revere military deaths) are promoted and where particular relationships (the idea of the military family, the divisions between “civilian” citizens and “military-adjacent” citizens) are emphasized with special significance. It is unsurprisingly that states would invest in repatriation rituals that honor the

³Canadian repatriation ceremonies have a protocol. When aircraft carrying the remains of Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) personnel lands at CFB Trenton, a private ceremony of family and members of the deceased’s unit occurs on the aircraft ramp led by a CAF Chaplain. The Chaplain silently prays while an honor guard removes the coffin from the aircraft. Following the rituals, the hearse and associated vehicles travel down the highway from Trenton to Toronto (approximately 175 km) where the body undergoes an autopsy at the Ontario Coroner’s Office before the remains are released to families. The first highway gathering was in 2002 as a response to the repatriation of four Canadian soldiers killed by US “friendly fire” in Afghanistan. Attendance at this gathering was quite small. However, the popularity of the events grew as did numbers of people standing on highway overpasses. The first demonstration—a small gathering of local citizens waving and emergency services members standing at attention—was on April 20, 2002. However, the sentiment continued and the movement spread as citizens from all over the extended Toronto area would line up to show support in the proceeding repatriation processions. Political scientists Joseph Fletcher and Jennifer Hove estimated that by 2011, the number of participants was approximately 3,000 per repatriation (Raney 2013, 24), spread along numerous locations of the fifty-nine highway overpasses on the route. The practice continues at present, including gatherings in 2020 despite the COVID-19-related social distancing requirements issued by the Ontario government.

deaths of military personnel: “emotions have a logic of their own and can lead to what are uncontrolled and in extreme cases uncontrollable, behaviours” from family and friends of the deceased (Ben Ari 2005, 654).⁴

The “unofficial” gatherings meant that Highway overpasses, which previously were not sites of habitual civilian gathering, became both a balcony viewing for the hearse procession and a stage in which citizens could exhibit reverence and sympathy. The Highway gathering spaces became emotionally evocative sites where subjectivities of grateful and patriotic civilian-hood could be enacted. The spaces, at the margins of official state practices, themselves become micro-political locations where similar militarist logics and subjectivities are enacted, reinforced, and felt.

Ritual 2: Gatherings at the Portraits of Honour Tour

In 2011, KinCanada (a community service NGO) sponsored a cross-country showcase of a 10-foot by 40-foot mural titled the “Portraits of Honour.” Cambridge, Ontario artist Dave Sopha hand-painted the mural depicting the 158 Canadian military personnel who died in the Afghanistan war. The mural is made up of 158 floating heads surrounded by 10,000 painted poppies and a white dove, meant to symbolize “peace, love and serenity” (Portraits of Honour website, 2021). The painted heads are flanked by two granite-looking monuments with the names of each fallen soldier. The mural was encased in a specialized mobile display trailer which was displayed at a series of community events across the country. The locations of the tour were hometowns of (some of) the fallen soldiers and of communities adjacent to military bases. In the case of the event I attended, the family of the deceased was in attendance and a personal acquaintance addressed the crowd. The Portraits of Honour tour events were held in various public locations, usually parks or green spaces. In my case, a quick trip to the bank one afternoon led me to a downtown green space with a crowd of people gathered around the Portrait mural trailer.

Like the Highway of Heroes gatherings, the Portraits of Honour events were community gatherings—unofficial events that became ritualized by the people and communities that practiced and promoted them. These events involve rituals where particular *rhythms* intensify collective emotions, generate subjectivities, and (re)construct social meanings associated with public spaces (Solomon 2019).

Rhythms of Militarism

Rhythms, broadly understood as a distinct category of iterative and repetitive action, “offers an account of qualitative shifts observed in the power of repetitive action” (Solomon 2019, 1003). Akin to theorizations on crowd theory (Canetti 1984; Borch 2012; Aradau 2015), scholarship has investigated how the physicality of bodies in common spaces amplifies the affective power of these spaces and intensifies collective emotions (Solomon 2019, 1004). Rhythms therefore can “enhance group solidarity and emotional energy, produce affective investment in the foci of attention and can

inflate feelings of morality” (Solomon 2019, 1004; see also Collins 2004, 49).

It is through this lens that I consider how affect and emotions were generated, sometimes in surprising ways, among participants attending war commemorative rituals. Mediated stories of Highway of Heroes participants indicated the experience was highly emotional. Narratives, especially those promoted in media promotion of the events are about not only what citizens thought, but also what they felt. Wayne McVein, Highway gathering participant, spoke to the affect stimulated while at an event:

It’s something you can’t easily put into words. Once you see the long line of black vehicles with the emergency lights and flashing headlights you know what is approaching. When we can see them approach ... off come the hats and the flags go up, and people ... put their hands over their chests. (Fisher 2011, 120)

His story describes how that the experience at these events were emotionally driven, yet the behaviors that individuals undertook were informed by a type of subconscious, affectual knowledge. People *feel* a rush of somatic energy that cannot easily be articulated as a specific emotion, yet this emotional drive also evokes a sense of *what to do*. The “knowing” and subsequent actions of removing one’s hat and placing one’s hands over the heart are both a spontaneous action (no one person is directing this activity) and yet also a semiconscious gesture, cultivated through pre-existing norms about appropriate behavior acceptable in a site of commemoration. These behaviors are rhythmic, not in a formal choreographic sense, but in that they are inspired by both the affective dynamics of the space and also by a sense or expectation of what to do. To “know” to stand with hand-on-heart might be usefully understood as a “feeling rule” (Hochschild 1983), where the timing and placement of emotions “takes on a moral quality ... feeling rules are linked to and representational of the rites and social bonds they commemorate” (Koschut 2019, 84). The felt-sense articulated by this participant, therefore, reflects how militarism “make[s] sense to many people as something that is simply *felt* to be instinctively right” (McSorley 2016, 105). Participants unconsciously understood the “rules” that were expected of them, even if they could not easily “put into words” what they were feeling, as McVein indicates above.

Consider the story of Dale Bartlett, owner of six McDonald’s restaurants in the area. Bartlett was sitting in his car in the parking lot of one of the McDonald’s restaurants when a procession went by. Bartlett said “I’ll tell you, I’ve never felt that much emotion [as] when I saw the hearse go by, and witnessed everyone on the bridge—it was packed. I said to myself, now I get it. I know what war is about” (Fisher 2011, 129). Bartlett’s testimony suggests that his experience watching the procession, while limited representationally to the “sanitized coffins draped in flag” (Parashar 2014), was deeply emotional. Despite many scholars calling for increased attention to seeing/touching/feeling war bodies in their gruesome realities, the “sanitized” bodies of Western soldiers are symbolically significant in understanding the emotional relations reproduced through cultural and political narratives about war. For many citizens in Western nations, this perspective *is* their war experience. For Bartlett, “what war is about” for the average citizen is showing respect for the families of deceased soldiers by standing witness along the highway overpass in solidarity. Witnessing and honoring the deaths of military personnel is not (only) an

⁴Anti-war activists like Cindy Sheehan in the United States (Managhan 2011; Tidy 2015; Tidy 2016) are an example of how the military death of a family member (in this case, Sheehan’s son), can inspire individuals to question or legitimize military activities and foreign policies, and in Sheehan’s case, infuse anti-war protests with newfound legitimacy and drive. It is arguably, however, military families’ proximity to the military and military exceptionalism, and the families’ closeness to “ground truths” (Tidy 2016) that legitimizes their anti-war stance in a way that civilian-led anti-war resistance may not be.

individual response to tragedy, but “a public political obligation” (Millar 2017, 546).

Highway participants narrated the emotional influence of crowd rhythms, even when participants were physically isolated or alone (such as Bartlett, in his car). Participants interpreted their affect according to expectations about what citizens should do during solemn rituals for war commemoration. Such expectations may be drawn from other rituals; for example, the practice of standing while observing two minutes of silence at Remembrance Day ceremonies or the practice of standing with hat removed during the public playing of a national anthem. The rhythms of these events, unscripted in their grassroots format, draw upon other political ritual practices.

My own experience at the Portrait of Honour tour was akin to the emotions described by highway gatherers. While I listened to stories about soldiers and their lives within their communities—stories about their lives prior to their military death and about their desires to take meaningful action through their military careers—I felt moved by the stories of “who” these painted portraits were. I felt a sense of knowing them and feeling attached to them, even as they were perfect strangers to me. While the narratives stimulated a sense of connection to the portrait images, I also felt increasing awareness of how other participants in the crowd were responding to the stories, a sense of how others were feeling despite only having minor bodily cues as indicators. Rhythms of the crowd included “tsks” and gasps, shedding tears, dabbing eyes with a tissue, and murmuring in support of the narratives told. The speaker indicated with a broad gesture the friends and family with a personal connection to a deceased soldier from the community. This gesture caused a ripple effect in the crowd, as eyes and heads turned to view this group and to witness their teary eyes, red noses, and expressions of sadness.

Like narratives expressed by Highway participants, the communal affect and emotional rhythms of the event seemed to intensify with the recognition of someone’s personal loss. This recognition of grief and loss is “ubiquitous in human societies” (Nussbaum 2000, 34) whereby our shared vulnerabilities and attachments make us practiced at putting ourselves in others’ shoes (Nussbaum 2000, 38). For ethicists, the emotion of sympathy has been understood as “one of the most conspicuous features of human existence” (Smith 1984, cited in Jeffery 2011, 155). Witnessing the pain or distress of another “‘excites’ in the observer ‘some degree of the same emotion’ ... thereby eliciting some degree of the sufferer’s response in ourselves” (Smith 1984, cited in Jeffery 2011, 155). The consequence is that this alignment of emotions between sufferer and spectator “necessarily appears to be just and proper” (Jeffery 2011, 156); sensing a common emotional response to the ritual may interpellate moral significance about the narratives expressed. In war commemoration, militarism and the unquestioning support of the military appears morally proper when we take on, perform, or feel the subjectivities of sufferer and spectator. Affective attachments to those who suffer may summon ethical obligations for other participants to be good witnesses. The obligation of spectators is to express respect, reverence, and sympathy. The rhythms of these rituals reinforce subjectivities and perceived obligations by intensifying affective relations.⁵

⁵Philosophers have considered how subjectivity is relational: how our perceived ethical obligations come from recognizing the relationality of our existence, or as Levinas theorized, that the origin of our responsibilities is rooted in an encounter with the other (see also Butler 2004; Butler 2009; Nussbaum 2000,

Emotions are amplified by a crowd’s rhythms; I found my own affective responses crescendoed while watching and witnessing others’ responses to the rituals. While feeling a sense of sympathy for the grieving family in attendance, I was also moved by the rhythm of the crowd, noting the affect manifest in my own chest as a sense of heaviness. My field notes reflected my affectual dissonance; a scribbled note read “how can I push forward an anti-militarist project without considering the effects on people who have suffered loss ... what if these scripts feel comforting to those experiencing loss?” Could I or other participants, face-to-face, challenge a grieving family member’s pro-militarist scripts about the nature of soldierly death or the political context in which their loved one died? I suspect not without significant discomfort or outright callousness.

My discomfort and affective dissonance stemmed from a disjuncture between my academic opposition to militarist narratives and how this position conflicted with social norms about how to behave and feel about others’ personal losses. Feminist ethics requires we remember that our research involves “real, living human beings operating within real historical circumstances” (Whitworth 1994, 121). How can we critically challenge militarism’s reproduction in micro-political spaces where strong emotional rhythms make this ideology “feel” right and when real, living human beings may be invested in these ideas? Resisting militarism, therefore, involves an ethico-political dilemma, outlined in the following.

Emotions, Ethics, and Challenging Militarism

In war commemorative rituals, the focus is on “our” pain. In this environment, criticizing military activities or militarist scripts may feel taboo, a violation of our sensed ethical obligations to support fellow community members. Yet, without an ability to challenge these rituals and narratives, ideological militarism is reified and passively condoned. The gory, awful, and political nature of war “slides out of view when our primary orientation to war takes the form of sentiment and alarm about the wellbeing of those who fight it” (MacLeish 2019, 278). Resisting militarism summons an ethical tension: how do we engage with the losses experienced by military families without inadvertently condoning the politics and militarist ideology reproduced through commemoration rituals?

Support the Troops discourse, of which war commemoration reproduces in a literal sense, normalizes war and positions dissent for war policies as taboo. States and military institutions have strong vested interests in ensuring that discourse about support(ing) the troops (or their grieving families) forecloses debates about the morality of war (Stahl 2009, 535; see also Ben Ari 2005). Yet, this is not solely an issue of state-directed ideology, as in war commemorations, participants themselves may reinforce “available cultural constructions” that make war appear worthwhile (Rashid 2020, 5). These participants may appear to support militarist discourse, even if their private, unseen feelings about the military and military actions differ. Without insight into these private emotions or alternative opinions, war commemoration rituals and their affective rhythms reproduce dominant militarist narratives that legitimize

2001; Dauphinee 2007; Robinson 2011). Yet, the constitution of obligations to others is not strictly ethical as it also creates categories of right or wrong, good or bad (Hutchings 2007). Ethical obligations are “both found and founded in the space between subjects” (Clapton and Shepherd 2019, 534) and these relations are inescapably political as they have “concomitant implications for what it may therefore be permissible to do to whom and how” (Hutchings 2007, 90).

military violence in the name of a higher cause (the nation, global good, helping others, and so on).

In the micro-political sites where war commemoration is enacted, overlapping subjectivities are formed: neighbors, strangers, civilians, military families, witnesses, and victims. Through these relations, ethico-political obligations arise, reified through social norms about what types of emotion are culturally appropriate for individuals to express (Nussbaum 2001). War commemoration is public, carried out through rituals that center mourning “our” dead and that reproduce militarist narratives, logics, and relations. Private grief and the complex spectrum of emotions that “sufferers”—such as military families—may experience are absent from these rituals. Maria Rashid (2020) documents the types of private doubts and cynicism of Pakistani families who were publicly expected to follow certain scripts in commemorative rituals, but privately expressed their discontent with the expectation that they would mourn publicly. Spectators in commemorative rituals are not privy to the private testimonies of sufferers, including testimonies that might challenge the militarist scripts and narratives offered publicly. The representations of emotions in these public spaces are limited and also limit how citizens should engage with each other.

Militarism endures, therefore, because it is entangled in affective relations. Civilians may not be uniformly opposed or enthusiastic about the use of military violence by their governments, but our ability to challenge the normative practices that legitimize the use of military violence—such as war commemorative rituals—can be limited by our emotionally driven ethical responsibilities to those affected intimately by war. Through rituals, the personal affects of war are showcased and the politics are hidden. Challenging war rituals may feel impossible without potentially damaging our relationships to others in our communities. In war commemorative rituals, the relationality of civilian spectators and sufferers is enacted. The ethical consequences of challenging militarist rituals and discourse, therefore, is how critical praxis affects community members, such as military families, who may rely upon or uphold militarist discourse as “a crutch [to] lean on to face an intolerable reality” (Rashid 2020, 215). Resisting militarism is not simply about discursively revealing militarist logics, but must also confront the emotional benefit that these scripts might offer to those who grieve.

The politics of affective militarism and the relationships it crafts through rituals and rhythms of war commemoration cast militarist practices and values as “unquestionable” when critique is understood to be disrespectful to those personally suffering loss. We must consider how to challenge to war and resist militarist logics if they “become sealed inside the affect attached to the grief and suffering of [military] death[s]” (Rashid 2020, 215).

Conclusion

Commemorative rituals, part of contemporary war’s social practices, function to divert attention away from the political effects of militaries and military power in international relations. Yet, even for those whose attention is focused on the political effects of militarism (like myself), this ideology can *feel* right, particularly within certain micro-political contexts. Resisting militarism is not simply a cognitive process, because militarism has affective components. Militarism *as affect* is reinforced by the rhythms of ritual commemorations; we therefore need affective methodologies to understand militarism’s powerful influences.

Even once we have methodologically established the ways that affective militarism can be reproduced in commemorative rituals, we must be aware of the emotional and ethical components of challenging these rituals, and consider the ways in which militarist discourse may provide solace for others. This is not simply an ethical quandary, but an ethico-political dilemma that illustrates why resisting militarism can *feel* discomforting. War commemoration rituals foster affective relations that limit critical debates about militarist discourse and practices. These rituals reinscribe subjectivities of sufferers and spectators. For those in the spectator position, speaking out or challenging militarist narratives in these rituals may feel as though it is a violation of social norms or as disrespectful to those who suffer. The affective relations established in rituals—driven strongly by the emotional rhythms of the crowd in attendance—can produce a perceived ethical obligation to respect those who are mourning. The rituals and rhythms reproduce a felt sense by spectators to not openly challenge militarist discourses within these rituals, and instead to be a silent, sympathetic witness to those experiencing personal loss.

Examining militarist rituals and understanding the power of rhythms to make militarism *feel right* is the first step in the broader project of dismantling militarism in global politics. If militarism is to be challenged, we must “deconstruct narratives of meaningful death in war ... acknowledging that [participation in war] is rarely honourable” (Rashid 2020, 217). Like other anti-militarist scholars who consider how militarism can be resisted in micro-political spaces (Rossdale 2019), dismantling narratives about the morality of war and military service is key to my research agenda. As Kenneth MacLeish notes, in contemporary liberal democracies, “war’s injuring, killing, and dying are regarded as transgressive, regrettable, and even tragic, despite the fact that these things transpire *on purpose* and in highly organized fashion” (MacLeish 2019, 275). If we are truly concerned about global practices and propagation of military violence, we need to devote more attention to the ways war and military service are legitimized, and consider the ways that war-making and its attendant violences are insulated from political critique. Challenging militarism requires critical—and difficult—conversations about the nature of military activities and broad recognition of the violent, gory realities of military employment that are not shrouded in euphemism. Yet resisting militarism must not only involve discursive deconstruction. We must also expand our methodological repertoire to understand the pernicious ways that militarism is reproduced affectively and to carefully explore the ways that militarism manifests by *feeling* right.

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