

Volume 31 Issue 2

cjsae

the canadian journal for the study of adult education

la revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes

rceéa

APPLYING A FEMINIST ANTI-MILITARIST LENS
TO MUSEOLOGICAL LEARNING: MOVING FROM
THEORY TO THE REAL-WORLD SETTING OF
THE ATLANTA HISTORY CENTER AND THE
SOUTHERN MUSEUM OF CIVIL WAR AND
LOCOMOTIVE HISTORY

Monica Drenth

*The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education/
La revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes*

Editor-in-Chief: Robert Mizzi

*Special Edition Editors: Darlene Clover, Nancy Taber, and Kathy Sanford
www.cjsae-rceea.ca*

31,2 November/novembre 2019, 107–114

ISSN1925-993X (online)

© Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education/
L'Association canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes
www.casae-aceea.ca

APPLYING A FEMINIST ANTI-MILITARIST LENS TO MUSEOLOGICAL LEARNING: MOVING FROM THEORY TO THE REAL-WORLD SETTING OF THE ATLANTA HISTORY CENTER AND THE SOUTHERN MUSEUM OF CIVIL WAR AND LOCOMOTIVE HISTORY

Monica Drenth
Brock University

Abstract

This essay explores the ways that museums educate adults and reveals that, as cultural educators, museums have the ability to promote hegemonic stories through their displays. I discuss these ideas through my visits to two museums in Atlanta, Georgia: the Atlanta History Center and the Southern Museum of Civil War and Locomotive History. Application of my in-class learning, including a feminist anti-militarist lens and various feminist anti-militarist hack questions, reveals a common theme of gendered violence in the museums. I argue that thoughtful examinations of museological displays that foster critical learning are ideal ways in which to advance understanding and encourage change.

Résumé

Cet article explore les manières dont les musées procèdent à l'éducation adulte et révèle que, à titre d'institutions d'éducation culturelle, les expositions de musée sont en mesure de promouvoir les discours hégémoniques. J'aborde ces idées dans le contexte de mes visites dans deux musées d'Atlanta (Géorgie) : l'Atlanta History Center et le Southern Museum of Civil War and Locomotive History. L'application de mes apprentissages en classe, notamment d'une perspective féministe et anti-militariste et d'une variété de questions de « hacks » féministes et anti-militaristes, révèle la thématique commune de violence genrée dans les musées. Je soutiens qu'un examen réfléchi d'expositions muséologiques favorisant l'apprentissage critique représente une excellente stratégie pour faire avancer les connaissances et pour encourager le changement.

As a graduate student studying adult education, I found myself fascinated by the unit on museums and learning in one of the courses in which I was enrolled. I had never given much thought to the learning that takes place in these public institutions. Given my

*The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education/
La revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes
31,2 November/novembre 2019, 107–114*

ISSN1925-993X (online)

© Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education/
L'Association canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes

attraction to the topic, I decided to apply what I had learned to two museums while on a trip to Atlanta, Georgia: the Atlanta History Center and the Southern Museum of Civil War and Locomotive History. I selected these museums for their distinct themes, which coincided with my interest in history and civil rights. I did not research the museums prior to my visits; I wanted to go to the museums and experience them as a typical visitor might.

My course taught me that museums are important sites of adult learning (Barr, 2016) that tell stories to better understand a culture (Kawalilak & Groen, 2016); however, my visits took my learning to a real-world setting by revealing to me the difference between reading and doing. As such, I was able to understand the learning that occurs in these institutions in different and meaningful ways. As I walked through the first museum, I noted an extensive focus on the American Civil War, and given the theme of the museum I was to visit the following day, I felt that my recent in-class exposure to the feminist anti-militarism analytic lens (Taber, 2009, 2011) would be an effective way to evaluate/view critically what I was seeing. Ultimately, my application of this lens to these institutions revealed that they share a common warring theme whereby the fostering of hegemonic masculine and stereotypical traditional feminine values serves to promote these biased norms. Informed by these visits, I contend that museums ought not be spaces where we passively consume information that "support dominant interests" (Ang, 2017, p. 1) of violence; instead, museums should be turned into places of "social change...for the interests and concerns of minority groups" (Ang, 2017, p. 1). Employing an adult educational framework such as the feminist anti-militarist lens produces alternative and more thoughtful interpretations inside museological spaces, and these readings can, in turn, promote change. While I understood the militaristic nature of war museums at a theoretical level (i.e., Thivierge, 2016) before my visit, involving myself in situ enriched my learning.

In this field note, I detail the feminist anti-militarist lens and the way it works to uncover the insidious nature of militarism in our lives. I then go on to use the lens in the real-world setting of the Atlanta History Center and the Southern Museum of Civil War and Locomotive History, showing how this useful tool can engage critical thought and enrich the learning experience.

Feminist Anti-Militarist Lens

My analysis is based on Taber's (2009, 2013) work, which revolves around a combination of feminist anti-militarism and adult education; she argued that "militarism interacts with learning processes in daily life, permeating learning across the lifespan" (2013, p. 141). Taber's critique built on the thoughts of Cynthia Enloe (2000, 2004, 2016), who explained that a feminist anti-militarist lens examines the ways that militarization is woven into the fabric of our lives (2000). Enloe (2004) suggested investigating militarization with a "feminist curiosity" (2004), which

provokes serious questioning about the workings of masculinized and feminized meanings. It is the sort of curiosity that prompts one to pay attention to things that conventionally are treated as if they were either "natural" or, even if acknowledged to be artificial, are imagined to be "trivial," that is, imagined to be without explanatory significance. (p. 220)

Employing this lens involves questioning the ideological practices of militarization, including the belief in and propagation of the following notions: all forms of command are hierarchical; physical and/or armed force is unavoidable in solving conflict; having enemies is natural; men are innate protectors and women need protection; a fully realized state needs a military; refusing to take up arms in a crisis is unmanly; and soldiers warrant glory (Enloe, 2004, 2016). These assumptions are both commonplace and invisible in society and, as such, an application of the lens is necessary to make them visible in order to critique them. While I made my way through the museum spaces, I asked myself the following questions, based on ideas for a feminist anti-militarist learning hack (Clover, Taber, & Sanford, 2018):

How is war represented? How is the military represented? How are the military personnel represented?...Who are the protectors and who are the protected? How many of the exhibitions are about women and how many are about men? Which ones are permanent and which are temporary? What women and men are represented (race, class disability, sexuality)? What are they doing? How are they positioned? (p. 19)

Asking these questions helped me to see the ubiquitous nature of the ways in which museums “structur[e] images to perpetuate and naturalise masculinised notions of gender” (p. 18) in relation to war.

Day One: The Atlanta History Center

As I entered the DuBose Gallery of this museum, military music playing in the background, I felt as though I was being called to take up arms; at the very least, I was being asked to think patriotically, as the music seemed an attempt to put me into the mindset of a soldier. Adult educator Fiona McLean (1998), whose research interests include national identity formation in museums, explained that these institutions play a large role in promoting a national character: “A museum, the repository of a nation’s culture, which connects the past to the present through recounting stories about the artefacts of past cultures, is...significant in representing the culture of the nation” (p. 244). Decidedly, this exhibit was telling me that it was noble and necessary to fight for one’s rights; more specifically, this museum, set in Atlanta, was telling me the story of the Civil War through the eyes of White, male Southerners who believed they needed to fight for their right to own slaves. As I passed by case after case, what I saw was a story focused on the achievements of the White male soldier who was uncritically depicted as a courageous hero, fighting for his national ideals. As a person who is new to a pedagogical critique of museums, I found these depictions of soldiers to be surprisingly common, and I was taken aback by the glorification of war everywhere I turned. I was surprised by the lack of equitable representations inside this museological space; nowhere did I see an opposing story, or even a complex narrative of war’s destructive nature; instead, I saw a unilateral celebration of force, power, and violence repeatedly depicted. Additionally, there was a distinct lack of focus on the “suffering and loss” (Winter, 2013, p. 32) that inevitably come along with armed conflict.

To further problematize the stories being told in this museum, I turn to historian Jay Winter (2013), who stated that “if [some men] do not find the narrative of war configured as the story of boys and their toys, then they are perplexed, annoyed, or disappointed” (pp. 35–36). Brady (2005, cited in Salter, 2014) elaborated on this idea: “The characteristics

of the soldier—his attitude, clothing, physicality, and accessories—have become integral to representations of masculinity in the media and political discourse" (p. 165). As "masculine violence" is celebrated when it is tied to "(male) citizenship and patriotism" (Salter, 2014, p. 165), it is difficult to change the story of, and attraction to, "boys and their toys" (Winter, 2013, p. 36) for those who seek it out. Winter (2013) suggested that "one way to do so is to ensure that for every weapon on display there is an image or an object pointing to the injury or mayhem that weapon causes to the human body" (p. 37). This is a brilliant idea; the DuBose Gallery is replete with images and tales tied to the celebration of masculine violence, and Winter's proposal would work to dismantle that glorification by telling the story of what the weapons do rather than displaying them as merely symbols of male power.

Although there are stories involving women throughout the museums (see below), only one display in the exhibit is dedicated to them: *War Production: Women in the Work Force*. However, this depiction tells only a small piece of their story; women have contributed to and been affected by war far more than through paid factory work: "Women of all kinds—nurses, farmers, prostitutes, and so on—have attended war since Mother Courage's time, and their traces matter...intrinsically" (Winter, 2013, p. 37). Furthermore, the lone woman portrayed in the display is a stark contrast to the representations of men in the museum: she is seated, in a dress, sewing, looking humble and sullen, with her back to the audience. The men represented in the gallery are standing facing front, looking powerful and controlled; none of them is diminutive and demure as the woman in this display. These representations demonstrate that "certain types of hegemonic masculinity and traditional femininity are privileged" (Taber, 2013, p. 141), thereby maintaining and fostering masculine norms. Without adequate inclusion of women's stories, the gendered myth of assumed male dominance continues unchecked; as Clover et al. (2018) pointed out: "the unseen...shapes and mobilises knowing and meaning-making by rendering invisible the experiences of marginalized groups" (p. 13). The scarcity, positioning, and traditionality of women's stories privilege male dominance and its accompanying power structures.

A plaque in another exhibit titled *Defeat: One Family's Experience* describes the war experience of Charlotte Branch, a widow who lost a son in the war and was left with two sons who were wounded and traumatized. Her hardships are described in the curatorial statements as "*typical* [emphasis added] of many white Southern families." I was reminded that as "highly authoritative agents of education and knowledge creation [museums] have socialised the public to believe that what they show and tell is always factual, objective, neutral or agenda-free" (Clover et al., 2018, p. 12), and the story being told here is seemingly factual and agenda-free. However, the exhibit does not tell much of a story about what a widowed mother of two sons requiring full-time caregiving would have done—or, indeed, reveal the Black women who were probably somewhere in the background providing a great deal of their care. Much of Charlotte Branch's story remains untold.

Not only do women's stories need to be rethought in the Atlanta History Center, but a rethinking of war as a concept is also needed, and the museum does take modest steps toward this rethinking. Projected onto a screen as guests are leaving the exhibit, a short video closes with various open-ended questions that prompt the visitor to think about the necessity (or not) of war, such as: "No law can end racism," and then asks the following questions: "What is our responsibility to the past?"; "What is the government's role?"; and "What choices will we make?" These are critical queries; as Thivierge (2016) stated, "a crucial component to the new museology and to adult education discourse is dialogue"

(p. 156). However, these questions merely open the door to this dialogue; it is important to urge visitors to consider both the past and the future of their social history throughout the museum as key elements in the education of adults.

Day Two: The Southern Museum of Civil War and Locomotive History

Like the Atlanta History Center, I went into the Southern Museum of Civil War and Locomotive History knowing nothing about it but the name; however, I suspected that, as a war museum, this institution would tell stories of war in the same gendered and violent manner as the exhibits in the Atlanta History Center. I did wonder, though, how it came to be a place that told stories of both war and trains. I soon learned that locomotives were tied to the Civil War: they were instrumental to the movement of goods related to battle. (For reasons of space and scope, I will not discuss the locomotives' place in the war here.) What is more, I saw no discussion of the events that led up to the cause of the war; the museum ignores the contentious American legacy of slavery.

The entranceway of the museum contains five larger-than-life statues of White Confederate soldiers. One soldier looks calmly forward in a stately pose, hand tucked into his uniform, with his left leg forward in a strong stance. One stands with his legs spread widely apart in a commanding position. One sits atop a horse in a regal pose. Another looks to be marching forward in a determined manner. The last statue is gazing into the distance, binoculars in hand, seemingly suggesting that he can either see wisely into the future or is keen enough to predict what his men ought to do. All these men, with stern faces and pompous poses, privilege and perpetuate the myth of “masculinity...as strength” (Taber, 2013, p. 144). The first story that museum visitors are presented with is a space dominated by (White) male soldiers who look authoritative and superior.

Upon entering the main exhibit, I noticed that most of the displays were backdropped with paintings of battle scenes, comprising White men who are marching, charging, or engaged in battle. The display cases are replete with Confederate flags, with no discussion of the racist implication of these flags, tying Southern patriotism to their service. “War museums historically present a unified message that boys and men march off to fight and die courageously in battle” (Thivierge, 2016, p. 154), and this museum was no exception to this message. Winter (2013) explained that “war museums were intended to be tributes to the men and women who endure the tests of war...and in their presentation of weapons and battlefield scenes, they do tend to sanitize war” (p. 26). I would go one step further to suggest that these presentations, through their sanitization of war, promote it; from my perspective, the battle scenes and portrayals of heroic and valiant men make war look virtuous and honourable, and this exhibit, like the Atlanta History Center, endorses hegemonic masculinity. In her work on gender in the art museum, feminist adult educator Emilia Ferreira (2016) stated that as “institutions with power [museums] tend to reflect and support the status quo, which can be problematically, gendered” (p. 103). What is more, the men depicted in these scenes are (as far as I could see) White males, further perpetuating the idea that Whiteness and its associated privilege are natural (Enloe, 2004). If war exhibits continue to endorse the nobility of brave White men going to war, the status quo is further supported.

Like the Atlanta History Center, this museum incorporates problematic representations of women. Scattered among the displays when I visited were temporary placards exalting

female contributions to the Civil War in celebration of Women's Month. Most of the photos were indoor headshots of women posed in traditionally feminine fashion: they looked reserved and gentle. The Southern Museum of Civil War and Locomotive History, from my feminist perspective, needs to include more permanent representations of women who contributed to the war in ways that were just as important as men (as noted by Winter, 2013) in order to provide a gender-balanced narrative and a richer story.

The most disturbing aspect of the museum, for me, was the gift shop; here, one could see "war, violence, and militarism permeat[ing] daily life" (Taber, 2013, p. 139) in its commercialization and indulgence of war. Rifle pens, playing cards with pictures of arms and armaments, and teddy bears dressed like Confederate soldiers were available for public sale. I found the stuffed bear soldiers to be particularly unsettling. By tying a plaything to a soldier, acts of aggression enter into the imagination of the public in ubiquitous and insidious ways, and while this might be pervasive in popular culture, experiencing the museum via the feminist anti-militarist lens made this fact even more apparent and disconcerting to me. War and its attendant violence become eclipsed when toys and games are enmeshed with battles and soldiers, displaying "a cultural privileging of military ideals" (Taber, 2015, p. 232). They "demonstrate[e] the normalizing and acceptance of violence and hypermasculinity" (Taber, 2009, p. 121) and perpetuate the myth that war and violence are not only necessary, but reasonable and routine.

Conclusion

Museums are places that are "filled with possibilities for oppressing or empowering" (Johnson, 2016, p. 132), and as public pedagogical institutions, they have the responsibility to educate in ways that challenge hegemonic norms, rather than preserve them. The Atlanta History Center and the Southern Museum of Civil War and Locomotive History tell particular stories of America's political and social histories. Through the war exhibits of these two museums, one can see that many of the stories being told make these "sites for the [passive] consumption of dominant ideologies and race...and gender biases" (Johnson, 2016, p. 132). However, with my application of the feminist anti-militarist lens, I engaged in critical learning, shedding a light on the fact that certain (hi)stories are privileged over others in many museums (Johnson, 2016). Indeed, the feminist anti-militarist lens helped me to see more clearly the ways in which museum exhibits and displays often promote hegemonic masculine violence, which in turn marginalizes others (Enloe, 2016). My use of the feminist anti-militarist hack questions advanced my learning experience by connecting my in-class education to a real-world situation; in the end, the lens helped me to see that because museums are important sites of adult learning (Barr, 2016) that tell stories to help the public better understand a culture (Kawalilak & Groen, 2016), this educative component comes with an ethical obligation to interpret the material that is displayed and promoted within the museum walls thoughtfully and critically. The feminist anti-militarist lens, along with the hack questions, are tools that allow for this thoughtful and critical contemplation, and as such, they ought to be employed by adult educators to enable learners to apply learning in a real-world setting for a comprehensive educational experience.

References

- Ang, I. (2017). What are museums for? The enduring friction between nationalism and cosmopolitanism. *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 24(1), 1–5.
- Barr, J. (2016). Adult education and radical museology: The role of the museum as an archive of the commons. In D. Clover, K. Sanford, L. Bell, & K. Johnson (Eds.), *Adult education, museums and art galleries: Animating social, cultural and institutional change* (pp. 27–37). Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Clover, D., Taber, N., & Sanford, K. (2018). “Dripping pink and blue: Seeing the unseen of patriarchy through the feminist museum hack. *Andragoška spoznanja*, 24(3), 11–28.
- Enloe, C. (2000). *Maneuvers: The international politics of militarizing women’s lives*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Enloe, C. (2004). *The curious feminist: Searching for women in a new age of empire*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Enloe, C. (2016). *Globalization and militarism: Feminists make the link* (2nd ed.). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Ferreira, E. (2016). Contemporary art as pedagogical challenge: Must gender remain an obstacle in Portugal. In D. Clover, K. Sanford, L. Bell, & K. Johnson (Eds.), *Adult education, museums and art galleries: Animating social, cultural and institutional change* (pp. 103–113). Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Johnson, K. (2016). Decolonizing museum pedagogies: “Righting” history and settler education in the city of Vancouver. In D. Clover, K. Sanford, L. Bell, & K. Johnson (Eds.), *Adult education, museums and art galleries: Animating social, cultural and institutional change* (pp. 129–140). Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Kawalilak, C., & Groen, J. (2016). Restorying the present by revisiting the past: Unexpected moments of discovery and illumination through museum learning. *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education*, 22(2), 152–167.
- McLean, F. (1998). Museums and the construction of a national identity: A review. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 3(4), 244–252.
- Salter, M. (2014). Toys for the boys? Drones, pleasure and popular culture in the militarisation of policing. *Critical Criminology*, 22, 163–177.
- Taber, N. (2009). Gender in children’s books written for military families: The gendered portrayal of women and men, mothers and fathers in the Canadian military. *Journal of Integrated Social Sciences*, 1(1), 120–140.
- Taber, N. (2011). Critiquing war in the classroom: Problematizing the normalization of gendered militarism. Paper presented at the Adult Education Research Conference, Toronto. Retrieved from <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2011/papers/99>
- Taber, N. (2013). Learning war through gender: Masculinities, femininities, and militarism. In T. Nesbit, S. Brigham, N. Taber, & T. Gibb (Eds.), *Building on critical traditions: Adult education and learning in Canada* (pp. 139–148). Toronto: Thompson Publishing.
- Taber, N. (2015). Intersecting discourses of militarism: Military and academic gendered organizations. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 34(2), 230–246.
- Thivierge, J. (2016). Exhibiting dark heritage: Representation of community voice in the war museum. In D. Clover, K. Sanford, L. Bell, & K. Johnson (Eds.), *Adult education, museums and art galleries: Animating social, cultural and institutional change* (pp. 153–163). Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Winter, J. (2013). Museums and the representation of war. In W. Muchitsch (Ed.), *Does war belong in museums? The representation of violence in exhibitions* (pp. 21–37). Bielefeld: Knowledge Unlatched.