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APPLYING THEORY TO SHAPE A FICTIONAL  
NARRATIVE BASED ON HISTORICAL FACT

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# WOMEN PIRATES LEARNING THROUGH LEGITIMATE PERIPHERAL PARTICIPATION: APPLYING THEORY TO SHAPE A FICTIONAL NARRATIVE BASED ON HISTORICAL FACT

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## Abstract

*In this field note article, I discuss my in-progress historical novel about privateering in the 17th century to demonstrate how adult education theories of situated learning have informed my fiction-based research. I introduce situated learning in gendered communities of practice, explain women's experiences with legitimate peripheral participation in (para)military organizations, and describe fiction-based research. I then compare feminist theoretical concepts and quotations with excerpts from my fiction to explore situated learning theories, women in non-traditional roles, and fiction-based research. I conclude with a discussion of how adult educators can use fiction to engage with theory in their own teaching and research. In ways similar to Watson (2016), who has argued that "fiction offers sociologists a medium for doing sociological work" (p. 434), in this article, I explore how fiction can offer adult educators a medium for doing pedagogical work.*

## Résumé

*Dans cet article de note de terrain, je parle de mon roman historique en cours d'écriture portant sur les activités de corsaires au 17e siècle afin d'explicitier l'influence de théories féministes d'apprentissage situé en éducation des adultes sur mes recherches pour fins de fiction. Je présente l'apprentissage situé au sein de communautés de pratique genrées, explique les expériences des femmes au sein d'organisations (para)militaires et décris la recherche pour fins de fiction. Je compare ensuite des concepts théoriques et des citations avec des extraits de mon texte fictif pour explorer les théories féministes d'apprentissage situé en éducation des adultes, les femmes occupant des rôles non traditionnels, la recherche pour fins de fiction et les manières dont les vies des femmes du 17e siècle font écho à celles du 21e. Je conclus en explorant de quelles manières le personnel d'éducation des adultes peut utiliser des textes fictifs pour explorer la théorie dans son propre enseignement et ses propres recherches. À l'instar de Watson (2016), qui soutient que « la fiction offre*

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*aux sociologues un moyen de faire le travail sociologique » (p. 434, traduction libre), dans le présent article, j'explore de quelles manières la fiction peut offrir au personnel d'éducation des adultes un moyen de faire le travail pédagogique.*

## Keywords

*Communities of practice, fiction-based research, feminism, gender, legitimate peripheral participation, military, piracy, privateering, situated learning, theory.*

Canadian adult education scholarship often takes a critical, social justice approach (Nesbit, 2013), with researchers working to “confront traditional hierarchies...and consider new pathways” (Mizzi, 2021, p. i) through innovative and emancipatory uses of theory, methodology, and research dissemination (Mizzi, 2021). As Gouthro (2019) has explained, “critical theory provides an important analytical lens to counter injustice and shape social action” (p. 60). Formal theory, however, can be “dense, challenging, and laden with jargon” (p. 67) and may be viewed as inaccessible. Similarly, methodological conceptualizations, processes, terminologies, and forms of dissemination are often incomprehensible to those without graduate degrees.

Nonetheless, in much of my career as a feminist scholar exploring the intersection of gender, militarism, and learning, I have used traditionally academic forms of theory, methodology, and dissemination. While I still believe there is a place for this important work, I now also aim to reach a wider non-academic audience through the use of fiction-based research. My first encounter with this methodology was in reading *Fiction as Research Practice: Short Stories, Novellas, and Novels* (Leavy, 2013). At about the same time, I learned of a Canadian woman in World War II who, along with her children, travelled on a passenger ship that was attacked by a German submarine (Gossage, 2012). When she was slated to go to a prisoner of war camp, she was given the option of keeping her children with her or sending them to the United States with a group of missionaries, to be kept in their care until the end of the war. She ultimately decided her children would remain with her, but there was no information about any of her considerations in making this choice. I wanted to know more and realized this was an ideal opportunity to try my hand at fiction, to fill the gaps in the historical record (Taber, 2019). I have since maintained fiction-based research as one element of my research agenda.

The outcomes of my fiction-based research, in the form of short stories and novels, do not include theoretical discussions about gendered communities of practice, as is the focus here (Paechter, 2003, 2006). Instead, theories are embedded in the narrative, with readers implicitly learning about them while explicitly engaging with character and plot arcs. A close writer friend recently told me she feels that she gets slices of my academic work in reading my fiction, but was inferring much of it. I was thrilled—that is exactly my aim as a fiction author.

In this field note article, I discuss my in-progress historical novel about privateering in the 17th century to demonstrate how adult education theories of situated learning have informed my fiction-based research. I introduce situated learning in gendered communities of practice, explain women's experiences of legitimate peripheral participation in (para) military organizations, and describe fiction-based research. I then compare theoretical concepts and quotations with excerpts from my fiction to explore situated learning theories,

women in non-traditional roles, and fiction-based research. I conclude with a discussion of how adult educators can use fiction to engage with theory in their own teaching and research. In ways similar to Watson (2016), who argued that “fiction offers sociologists a medium for doing sociological work” (p. 434), in this article I explore how fiction can offer adult educators a medium for doing pedagogical work.

### **Situated Learning in (Para)Military Gendered Communities of Practice**

Theories of situated learning through legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) in communities of practice (CoP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) explore how newcomers and old-timers interact in a learning trajectory in groups that have mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire. The learning is contextual, as group members move from peripheral to more central organizational tasks, and is connected to individual and group identity. Paechter (2003, 2006) argued that CoPs cannot be understood without examining how masculinities and femininities intersect, privileging some bodies and identities over others. Learning trajectories are laden with power relations in that members who are perceived as not fitting into the organization may find their participation inhibited by old-timers and/or their path to full membership blocked, which often results in their leaving (Barton & Tusting, 2009). These power relations can be heavily gendered in the ways in which they value particular forms of masculinity and femininity while devaluing others (Paechter, 2003, 2006). This is particularly so in (para)military contexts.

Western militaries were created by and for white able-bodied cisgender heterosexual men who were assumed to have a female spouse to care for the family and the home (Eichler, 2021). Military culture is hypermasculine, with the expectation that ideal members demonstrate a quite specific and narrow type of heroism, courage, stoicism, and toughness (Taber, 2020). Anyone viewed as outside this ideal (e.g., women, those with a disability, people of colour, Indigenous people, LGBTQ2S+ people) is often othered; their path to full membership is more challenging than the path for those viewed as an ideal, and is often inhibited or blocked (Taber, 2011, 2016, 2022). Hypermasculinity is also found in paramilitary organizations, such as police forces and firefighting forces, for much the same reason as it occurs in militaries.

In the 17th century, the paramilitary context of privateering offered nation-states a way to arrange for assaults against enemy countries without beginning a war. With a letter of marque signed by the king, privateers could (and indeed, were expected to) engage in state-sponsored violence by attacking enemy ships and stealing their cargo (Latimer, 2009). Privateers tended to adhere to democratic practices (Latimer, 2009), giving all crew members a vote when possible (with the captain making decisions in battle and emergency situations), dividing their plunder, and setting aside a certain amount of money for those injured (Klausmann et al., 1997). The line between privateers (also known as buccaneers, freebooters, and corsairs) and pirates (not state sanctioned) was thin, with crews sometimes moving between one identity and the other depending on the degree to which they followed privateering rules (Duncombe, 2019). Regardless, both privateers and pirates perpetrated a “violent masculinity” (Tucker, 2014).

While often viewed as victims, women were also participants and supporters of piracy (Tucker, 2014). Wives of pirate captains sometimes sailed with their husbands. Other women were full-fledged pirates, such as, in the 16th century, Grace O’Malley (Irish); in the 18th

century, Anne Bonny (Irish) and Mary Read (English); and, in the 19th century, Lady Ch'ing (Chinese) (Klausmann et al., 1997). A much lesser-known pirate of the 17th century was Anne Dieu-le-Veut (French), who became the main subject of one of my fiction-based research projects.

### Fiction-based Research

Fiction-based research is grounded in the creative practice of story writing (Leavy, 2013, 2018). It links to other forms of research, such as autoethnography, biography, ethnography, life history, and narrative. Each of these forms agree that humans learn through story-telling (Cron, 2012). However, unlike other forms, which *story* factual data, fiction-based research fictionalizes factual data in order to engage readers' imaginations, reach a general audience, demonstrate complexity, promote empathy, and dislocate stereotypes (Leavy, 2013, 2018; Nayebzadah, 2016; Watson, 2016). Leavy (2013) explains that "'imagining' is an integral part of the process of learning" (p. 28) as it engages researcher-authors, readers, educators, and learners. In my writing of historical fiction, I also aim to show the ways in which historical and contemporary gendered power relations intersect.

In the fiction-based research discussed here (writing for the novel is ongoing), my purpose was to explore the gendered nature of privateering as it relates to individual and state violence in the 17th century in France and the Caribbean. As I am a feminist anti-militarist who critiques the ways in which patriarchy, capitalism, colonialism, and racism intersect with militarism (Enloe, 2016), one might wonder why I would write about women engaged in the violence of piracy. My interest in the topic started when I learned about Anne Dieu-le-Veut. Aside from a few spare details, not much is known about her life. She was therefore a prime candidate for fictionalization. One key fact that drew my attention was that she supposedly challenged a corsair to a duel (Klausmann et al., 1997). I structured my research question around this fact and asked: Why would a 17th-century woman challenge a corsair to a duel? What might a woman who finds herself quite unexpectedly on a pirate ship think, learn, and do to survive? I wanted to imagine—and help readers understand—the complexity of women's lives in that time and place.

In my novel, Marianne (based on Anne) joins a corsair ship. In considering how she might interact with the crew while trying to position herself as a full member, I realized that theories of situated learning, LPP, and CoPs as they relate to women in contemporary military roles could assist with the narrative. I therefore reread, reviewed, and revised my manuscript with these theories in mind. As a result, the characters and situation became more complex and realistic; more factual, even though fictionalized. Additionally, gendered echoes between the 17th and the 21st century became ever clearer.

### Discussion

In this section, I give examples of how gendered CoP and LPP theories informed my fiction-based research with respect to how my protagonist, Marianne, dealt with being a woman in a male crew on a French corsair ship. My examples are at three points in time: her first encounter with corsairs, when she is not considered a newcomer and has no path to membership; when she joins a corsair ship as a newcomer with the expectation of engaging in LPP; and when she argues for full membership in the form of a vote. The excerpts from the novel below have been edited for clarity and length, as well as to mitigate spoilers should

anyone wish to read the novel when completed. In the first example, I include an initial and revised excerpt; in the second, I discuss how the initial excerpt fit with my theoretical lens; in the third, I detail how I reframed Marianne's perspective on and experience with gaining a vote.

### *Encountering life with corsairs*

In this part of the novel, Marianne is one of several women passengers on a corsair ship sailing from France to Tortuga, in the Caribbean. Though she boarded somewhat willingly, it was not entirely her own choice. Marianne wants to learn as much as possible about their destination from listening to the corsairs. Initially I downplayed the threat she might have faced on board, with her being accepted as a passenger:

The more Marianne eavesdropped on the corsairs, the more she hoped to learn about what to expect in Tortuga, how the town of Cayona was laid out, how to survive, what alleys to avoid, what tavern might spare leftover stew. Marianne roamed the ship, from bow to stern, one hand close to the knife she'd hidden in the lining of her coat, watching and listening to the corsairs. The captain didn't comment on her presence but nodded when she passed under his gaze, a tacit authorization of her presence. It wasn't that he approved of her, of course, but that he didn't much care what she did if she didn't interfere.

I later realized that this scene was too benign—while Marianne may have been tolerated as a passenger, she was not likely to have been accepted. Furthermore, I decided the risks of such a voyage should be specifically included in the narrative. The following quotation about COPs encapsulates how Marianne may have been treated by the crew: “The establishment of the boundaries of a community of practice may involve the coercive exclusion of others and a claiming of superiority for members” (Paechter, 2006, p. 15). With this in mind, I rewrote the scene:

When Marianne woke, she climbed above decks and walked toward the stern. When she passed by the captain, she hesitated, waiting to see his reaction to her presence. He ignored her. Good then. As long as she stayed out of his way—which she most definitely would—he'd leave her be. She started toward the bow, one hand close to her hidden knife. She walked by a cooper repairing a water barrel.

“First place I'm going in Tortuga is the bawdy house,” he said. “Buy me one of you.” He pointed his adze—a small axe-like tool—at Marianne. “That's why I voted yes to bring you lot aboard.” He snapped his teeth at her.

She stepped back.

“Whaddya want?” he said.

“Nothing,” Marianne said. “Just out for a walk.”

“Then walk.” He jerked his thumb toward the other end of the ship.

She nodded and kept going, not daring to stop anywhere for more than a moment, which made it difficult to catch anything more than a snippet of conversation.

As a woman passenger, she is considered both beneath notice and worthy of harassment, demonstrating her vulnerability and her need to make decisions to keep herself safe. She is decidedly viewed as not belonging and less than.

### *Moving toward acceptance*

Later in the novel, after spending time in Tortuga, Marianne is invited to join a different corsair ship by its captain, given assurances that she will not be harmed, and told there is a possibility she can become a crew member. She accepts the invitation, as it offers a better option than her current situation. The following CoP quotation is a guide in considering how she might have been greeted by the crew: "Because full participants are seen as the custodians and enactors of knowledge of what it is to be a full member of a community of practice, they also have the power to...redefine...what it means to be a man or a woman, boy or girl...this negotiation can never be power-neutral, and one's value to the community affects what is actually negotiable" (Paechter, 2006, pp. 19–20). When I reviewed this scene through the lens of this quotation, I decided that revisions were not required. It is included here because it is an important turning point in the novel, when Marianne sees a possible path to full membership but is still devising a way to gain it.

"Enough chatter," the captain said. "You will treat her with the respect that is due me. She knows her way around a ship, so she can lend a hand."

"If I ever need a hand from a woman, I'll cut my own off," one of the corsairs said.

"I can arrange that," the first mate said.

The corsair shoved his hands behind his back.

"Welcome, Marianne," another corsair said.

She nodded hello. At least there was one friendly face in the crowd. Maybe one vote for her. The corsair nudged the man next to him, who called out a welcome, which turned into a chorus of welcomes, some clearly more forced than others.

"Right then," the captain said. "Weigh anchor and let's get us some Spanish gold."

Marianne is grudgingly accepted as a newcomer when the captain introduces her to the crew. However, as the crew has not yet redefined corsair membership to extend to a woman, whether she will be able to move on a learning trajectory from newcomer to old-timer with a vote is very much in question.

*Working for a vote*

Over the weeks that follow, Marianne proves herself as a worthy newcomer due to her assistance in battles and storms, setting herself on a path toward becoming an old-timer by gaining a vote. In the initial version of my novel, Marianne asks the captain:

“How can it be that, in the difference of a minute, I went from being an...I don’t know, an unwanted passenger, to being an accepted crew member?”

I realized that this question was misleading for Marianne, for plot and character development, and for the reader. Her acceptance, although occurring at a discrete point in time, does not occur in an instant, but is a result of gradual changes in how the other crew members view her. She was an unwanted passenger in the first example above, a woman with an unrealized but potential path to membership in the second, and, in the lead-up to the third, a newcomer engaged in LPP, slowly proving herself worthy to the old-timers.

So I deleted that question and added more tension in earlier scenes, where Marianne interacts with crew members in the work of sailing and defending the ship, which culminates in the excerpt below. When examining how Marianne may have argued her case, I considered the following CoP quotation, “Learning full participation in a community of masculinity or femininity practice is about learning one’s identity and how to enact it...The embodied performance of community membership is crucial both to legitimacy and to full participation” (Paechter, 2006, p. 17).

Marianne put her hands on her hips, her fingertips just a smidge away from the pistol handles at her waist, and faced down the crew. “I’ve proven my worth. What more do you want? It’s time I get a vote.” She stared the corsairs down, willing herself not to break eye contact.

“Aye, that’s true,” a corsair said. “We’re supposed to be a crew of equals, woman or no. Now it’s time to see if Marianne gets to truly join us. We should vote.”

“Who cares if she’s a woman?” someone said.

“I care,” another said.

Marianne fired her pistol into the air. “Enough. I’ve proven myself.”

“She looks like a corsair to me,” the first mate said. “Smoking pistol, sea legs, and all.”

Several corsairs nodded. The captain chimed in. “If you give her a vote, she’ll have even more reason to work with us. We’re a lucky crew to have her.”

“Give her a vote,” the crew called. There were still a few dissenting voices, but that was it. She was now a full member of the crew.

It is the crew—those already with a vote—who have the power to give Marianne a vote or deny it to her. Marianne uses what she has learned to embody the identity of a corsair in her argument for why the crew should vote for her.



For a time, things go relatively well for Marianne. Until she decides she no longer belongs and goes in search of...But that's a spoiler.

### Implications

The novel not only focuses on Marianne's situated learning with respect to the paramilitary context of corsairs, but it also complicates and problematizes individual and state violence, which I did not have the space to explore in this article. My aim here was to demonstrate that, in certain situations, women may have to conform to a given set of norms (i.e., what it is to be a corsair) in order to challenge them, which Marianne indeed does later in the novel.

My application of situated learning theories in my fiction-based research informed the writing of my novel in two interrelated ways: it helped my understandings of character and plot as a researcher/author and added complexity to Marianne's learning experiences. It is important to note that I did not apply these contemporary learning theories to the 17th century in a vacuum; they are underpinned and informed by historical research about women's experiences with respect to privateering and pirating. My aim is for readers to better understand Marianne as a character and the choices she made, with the hope that readers might ask what decisions they themselves might have made in a similar context, and what those decisions mean for their own place in the world. Indeed, putting oneself in the place of a character is a key aspect of fiction, with readers learning vicariously through narrative (Cron, 2012).

Adult educators can conduct a similar exercise by guiding students in creating or analyzing pieces of fiction to engage with theoretical concepts. As Gouthro (2019) has argued, a focus on adult education theory is important for "making sense of the ways in which power exerts in every teaching and learning situation, and to understand how... adult educators can make a difference" (p. 73). While this field note discusses fiction-based research, adult educators do not have to be familiar with the methodology to use fiction in their teaching. Instead, my process, as detailed here, could be adopted as a learning activity, not to conduct research or to write a publishable short story or novel, but to use fiction to explore and discuss theory.

Adult educators have used fiction in similar ways. Gouthro and Holloway (2013) had their students read fiction to "explore alternative perspectives, envision different landscapes and consider important social, cultural and political issues" (para. 3), while Jarvis (1999, 2012) asked her research participants to read fiction that related to her research aims (in her case, love and empathy) and apply it to their own lives. Their work points to the power and possibility of fiction. My field note adds an additional way that adult educators can leverage fiction for learning.

Theory and fiction may seem to be somewhat oppositional, but they work well with one informing the other. Theories are lenses through which academics analyze concepts and data. Fiction immerses readers in worlds not their own. As such, adult educators can use theory and fiction in their research and teaching to engage imaginations, problematize the past and present, and envision a future socially just world.

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