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A DAY IN THE LIFE OF CLANDESTINE WOMEN
WAR WORKERS AT CASA LOMA: USING FEMINIST
FICTION-BASED RESEARCH TO PEDAGOGICALLY
PEEL BACK LAYERS OF INVISIBILITY

Adrienne Kitchin and Nancy Taber

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A DAY IN THE LIFE OF CLANDESTINE WOMEN WAR WORKERS AT CASA LOMA: USING FEMINIST FICTION-BASED RESEARCH TO PEDAGOGICALLY PEEL BACK LAYERS OF INVISIBILITY

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Abstract

In this article, we discuss the learning processes of our feminist fiction-based research, which makes visible the often forgotten and essentialized stories of Toronto-based women World War II workers. We describe this gendered war work through the lenses of intersectional feminism and feminist antimilitarism. We detail the power of fiction-based research as feminist methodology and pedagogy, situating it within the sphere of feminist adult education scholarship. We explain our fiction-based research study, which resulted in thematic vignettes from a day-in-the-life short story about women war workers involved in a clandestine project at Casa Loma. We conclude with implications of fiction-based research for feminist adult education.

Résumé

Dans le présent article, nous discutons des processus d'apprentissage utilisés dans le cadre de nos recherches féministes axées sur la fiction, qui dévoilent les expériences souvent oubliées et essentialisées des travailleuses de guerre à Toronto pendant la Deuxième Guerre mondiale. Nous décrivons ce travail de guerre genré à travers le prisme du féminisme intersectionnel et de l'antimilitarisme féministe. Nous exposons les avantages de la recherche axée sur la fiction en ce qui concerne la méthodologie et la pédagogie féministe dans le cadre de travaux académiques pour l'éducation féministe des adultes. Nous présentons notre étude sur la recherche axée sur la fiction, qui a menée à la création d'une courte histoire prenant la forme de vignettes portant sur la vie quotidienne de travailleuses de guerre participant à un projet clandestin à Casa Loma. Nous terminons en présentant les implications de la recherche axée sur la fiction en ce qui a trait à l'éducation féministe des adultes.

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This article details our feminist fiction-based research processes that helped us make visible the often forgotten and essentialized stories of Toronto-based women World War II (WWII) workers. Applying principles of feminist adult education—specifically Grissom-Broughton’s (2019) belief that “where feminist pedagogy is employed, the learning process is democratic, and power is shared among students and the instructor” (p. 161)—we engaged in a relational process of knowledge creation as a professor and graduate student in collaboration. Our process aimed to gain a deeper understanding of women war workers by using fiction to connect with the research, with one another, and with potential readers.

The study shared in this article is a result of a Match of Minds grant the co-authors received that was “intended to expand . . . [students’] potential to participate in research,” which “also encourages the development of skills and abilities of students” (Brock University, 2023, n.p.). Adrienne, the first author and a graduate student, approached the second author, Nancy, a professor, based on shared interests in fiction as a research methodology and in the experiences of Canadian women war workers in WWII. We met to discuss the study as a whole and then spent several meetings discussing literature about women’s war work at General Engineering Company (GECO) in Scarborough and Casa Loma in Toronto, both in Ontario, Canada; feminist theories; and the methodology of fiction-based research. Our research question became: How can a short story about WWII women war workers in Ontario, Canada, bring to life the gendered, militarized, and complicated nature of their work? The research process itself was based in feminist pedagogy (Grissom-Broughton, 2019), with the professor and student working together as collaborators in a process that specifically aimed to build capacity with respect to the student’s research skills and understanding. As such, this article focuses on pedagogically peeling back the layers of Canadian women’s war work through fiction-based research as well as exploring the implications of the learning context enabled by the university grant for student capacity-building.

The first step of our research explored the tensions between the many ways women war workers both conformed to and transgressed gendered expectations (Dickson, 2015). Their complex and complicated experiences are too often subsumed under gendered and militarized stereotypes (Gentile, 2006; Smith & Wakewich, 2012; Spencer, 2006; Yesil, 2004), such as those represented by Rosie the Riveter and Ronnie the Bren Gun Girl. Our exploration of gendered war work was informed by the lenses of feminist antimilitarism (Enloe, 2016, 2023) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991). The second step entailed examining the power of fiction-based research as methodology and pedagogy, situating it within the sphere of adult education scholars who use fiction in their research. The third step was writing a day-in-the-life short story about women war workers involved in a clandestine project at Casa Loma in Toronto, Canada. The fourth step was choosing three thematic vignettes from the short story

that demonstrated the connections between qualitative research and fiction-based research. After describing each of these steps, we conclude with implications as they relate to feminist pedagogy and fiction-based research.

Gendered War Work in Canada: Feminist Antimilitarism and Intersectionality

Feminist antimilitarism explores the interconnections between patriarchy, militarism, capitalism, racism, and colonialism in civilian society and state militaries (Enloe, 2016, 2023). It complicates gendered binaries that function to divide the world into man/woman, masculine/feminine, friend/foe, military/civilian, with the former problematically privileged over the latter. Feminist antimilitarism refutes the ways in which military values of hierarchy, obedience, discipline, uniformity, and conflict as a zero-sum game are regarded as positive givens. This type of feminist thinking is particularly useful in our research context of women war workers, especially when viewed through an intersectional lens. Kimberlé Crenshaw stated that intersectionality is “a metaphor for understanding the ways that multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage sometimes compound themselves and . . . create obstacles that often are not understood within conventional ways of thinking” (National Association of Independent Schools, 2018, 0:08). Thus we combine feminist antimilitarism with intersectionality to enable a way of thinking about and historicizing women war workers that moves beyond the margins of established understandings.

In Canada during WWII, women workers entered the labour force in large numbers, taking part in what had previously been perceived as men’s work that directly supported the war, such as building bombs, rifles, and radar systems (Dickson, 2015). Dickson found that the reasons women took up these positions varied and intersected, and included good pay, steady work, benefits, opportunities for training and promotion, patriotism, and social expectations. These women workers existed within an overtly gendered and heteronormative environment where women’s bodies occupied a dual labour imperative. Women’s bodies were leveraged to produce labour for the war effort, but women were consistently (perhaps obsessively) reminded that the ultimate role their bodies would play would be as a wife and mother (Barker et al., 2020). As Smith and Wakewich (2012) found, women were instructed to be attractive to men in order to “boost morale,” while at the same time they were cautioned to not be too alluring lest they lead men astray into sexual relationships outside of marriage. Further, they noted that despite the versatility of women’s capabilities—with women working in roles such as fusiliers, machine and vehicle mechanics, heavy machinists, handlers of dangerous explosives, clerical workers, and more—they were never to forget that their duty was to perform the ultimate labour function: producing babies. As such, a constructed gender binary was upheld, with women as feminized support workers, despite providing labour in what were thought of as masculine occupations.

Taking intersectional identities into account helps to historicize women war workers’ experiences from a broader perspective. It offers a more inclusive history of diversity in Canada and, specifically for our research context, presents women war workers who had diverse racialized identities, including those who were Canadian-born and those who were newcomers (Museum of Toronto, n.d.). Despite this fact, typical images from the era tended to inaccurately depict all women war workers as white, young, and feminine (e.g., Barker et al., 2020). Two WWII Canadian propaganda posters are exemplars of the stereotypical image of women war workers that we complicate through our work: *Ronnie the Bren Gun*

Girl (Library and Archives Canada, 1941), promoting women's war work in factories; and *She Serves—That Men May Fly* (Toronto Public Library, 1939–1945), promoting women's support work for the air force.

The image of Ronnie the Bren Gun Girl—the nickname given to Veronica Foster, the woman in the poster (Raymond, 2020)—was created to inspire women to enter into the munitions factories for work. In Ronnie, “the Canadian government, together with the National Film Board of Canada, found a face that would rally millions of women into factories” (Campbell, 2017, para. 2). In the photograph, Ronnie, a white woman wearing light makeup, with hair tied back in a kerchief, is casually, almost languidly, smoking, her gaze on the Bren gun she has built. The photo serves to reproduce a particular aspect of femininity leveraged for patriarchal values: women can (and should) engage in militarized manual labour while appearing beautiful and feminine, even alluring. Ronnie was in fact the precursor to the more well-known Rosie the Riveter (Campbell, 2017), the iconic persona of a United States woman war worker.

The second poster, from the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF), has the caption “She serves—that men may fly.” This caption demonstrates that, during this era, women were expected to, and did, overwhelmingly serve in support roles that included work as mechanics, air-traffic control operators, administrators, and secretaries (March, 2023). The image in the poster is of a saluting woman, dressed in her RCAF uniform, who is white, strong, youthful, and feminine. As a whole, the multiple images and posters created to inspire women to join the armed forces or manufacturing plants to support the war were most typically of young white women.

These posters are reflective of war propaganda that affected the daily lives of women, with the promotion of a militarized femininity that encouraged women to use their bodies for factory labour while also serving “as morale boosters to encourage male productivity” (Smith & Wakewich, 2012, p. 60). The societal message was that women war workers could be non-traditional in their roles and clothing, as long as they maintained their appeal to the male gaze.

Our fiction-based research is intended to move from the stereotypes of these iconic propaganda posters to the complex realities of women's war work. Instead of simplified notions of patriotism, militarism, and white femininity, we peel back the layers of invisibility of women's lives.

Fiction-Based Research: Methodology and Pedagogy

A research alternative to traditional qualitative methods exists in the transdisciplinary creative practice of fiction-based research, which has profound pedagogical potential for criticality (Leavy, 2013; Taber, 2024b) as well as for engaging the imaginations of fiction-based researchers and their readers. Fiction-based researchers “fictionalize data (i.e., from academic theories, archival texts, contemporary documents, field notes, folklore, participant interviews, and visual analysis of museum exhibits) into flash fiction, short stories, and novels by focusing on the literary elements of character, plot, and setting” (Taber, 2024b, p. 148). Fiction-based research is particularly powerful when conducted through a feminist lens (Leavy, 2013), as it brings attention to women's gendered experiences in contemporary as well as historical times (Taber, 2024b). It also engages the imagination through the creative process involved in producing the story and applying feminist theories through storytelling. An important

effect of fictionalizing data is reader reach: more people are likely to read fiction than a qualitative research paper (Frank, 2000; Leavy, 2013, 2023). As Leavy (2013) has reflected, “If we are attempting to understand and illuminate people’s lives, then we need to make our research accessible to the many, not the few” (p. 24). Thus, fiction-based research can bring a feminist critique that challenges the hetero-patriarchal assemblages of power to readers outside academia by engaging readers’ imaginations.

Fiction-based research disrupts the binary of researcher/reader by employing the craft of fiction writing to imaginatively immerse readers in story. As de Freitas (2008) has written, “Fiction conveys (and constructs) both the possible and the real” (p. 3). In this way, fiction can be both subversive and dangerous (de Freitas, 2008) in its ability to transgress real and perceived boundaries, particularly by asking “big questions” of social justice and “prompt[ing] reader engagement with . . . ideas” (Leavy, 2023, p.19). In our research, these “big questions” and ideas focus on the (often ignored and invisible) experiences of women.

A key component of fiction-based research is its pedagogical potential. Story itself, as Cron (2012, 2016) has explained, is educational. Humans biologically, psychologically, and sociologically learn through narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Czarniawska, 2004; Leggo & Sameshima, 2014; Pennebaker & Smyth, 2016; Riessman, 1993). Fiction-based research, which draws on the craft of writing and reading fiction, is therefore pedagogical at its core, particularly with respect to critical feminist learning. Fiction-based research should include micro-macro links that enable readers to see “connections between the characters’ lives and the larger context in which they live [with] increased . . . awareness about a particular issue [that promotes] reflection or discussion [and] stimulate[s] further learning” (Leavy, 2013, p. 86).

Fiction and the social sciences are intricately connected (Banks & Banks, 1998; Berger, 1977; Leavy, 2023; Morrison & Rantala, 2023a) in that there is a “relationship between cultural history and various creative practices” (Morrison & Rantala, 2023b, p. 3) in disciplines such as anthropology, ethnography, history, and education. Although not necessarily positioning their research as fiction-based, adult education scholars who incorporate fiction writing and reading in their scholarship and teaching illustrate its power in critical feminist learning. For instance, Gouthro and Holloway discussed how the use of fiction can enhance critical multiliteracies in teacher education and adult education for post-secondary students (2013a), support citizenship learning (2013b), and foster critical reflection (2018). Jarvis explored how fiction can be a catalyst for transformative learning (1999, 2006), generate empathy (2012), and act as feminist pedagogy (2020). Taber has situated her adult education scholarship specifically in fiction-based research that engages with embodied learning (2018), examines gendered representations in war museums (2020a, 2020b, 2022a, 2022b), engages with social learning theories and feminist antimilitarism (2023, 2024b), and explores intersections between historical and contemporary experiences of war and violence with respect to the Acadian Expulsion and folklore (2024a). As a whole, this body of research demonstrates how fiction and adult education can work together to support feminist learning.

Feminist Historical Fiction-Based Research: Our Research Study

To conduct the research detailed here, and to meet the aims of Brock University’s Match of Minds grant, the first co-author created an annotated bibliography of fiction-based research and women’s war work. After discussing with the second author the themes that arose in the bibliography (as detailed in the gendered war work section above), the first author drafted a

short story, "Casa Loma Fillies." Both authors then discussed the short story and conducted revisions to specifically engage with issues of militarism and patriarchy; shine a lens on the gendered nature of war work; and enhance the short story by focusing on the craft of fiction writing. In the writing and revision process, the authors strove for thick description, specificity, and interiority (Leavy, 2023) to bring the experiences of women war workers to life. As such, the authors combined "fiction and speculation . . . faithful to the record of the times" (Morrison & Rantala, 2023b, p. 6) into a "critical-creative hybri[d]" (p. 8).

The story focuses on a white woman war worker's first day of work at Casa Loma, a castle-style mansion built just before World War I as a residence for Sir Henry Pellatt, a financier in Toronto. In the Casa Loma stables, an early form of sound navigation and ranging (SONAR) that came to be known as the Anti-Submarine Detection Investigation Committee (ASDIC) was clandestinely developed. The main character in the story, Alma Hitchins (who goes by the nickname Al), is a skilled mechanic and fuse filler, otherwise known as a fusilier. The authors decided that, for the research discussed in this article, the story was best presented as "day-in-the-life" vignettes thematically linked to the gendered experiences of women war workers. The character of Al, as we imagine her, is an exceptional fusilier who bristles against women's expected gender roles. Al is torn: she doesn't want war, but the absence of so many men has allowed her (and thousands of other women) to work at well-paid and non-traditional jobs. In the story, Al faces discrimination due to gender and sexual harassment in the workplace, at the same time learning how she herself is privileged due to her race and settler status.

Findings: Thematic Fictional Vignettes

In this section, we present three vignettes from the short story. Before each vignette we describe the specific research that inspired it. This pairing demonstrates how qualitative and fiction-based research can inform understandings of the diversity of women's experiences. As a whole, the vignettes focus on and illuminate relations of patriarchy, militarism, and racism as they play out in the daily lives of women war workers. Echoes of Al's story resonate in contemporary times. The vignettes, therefore, demonstrate how fiction can be leveraged for critical reflection and transformative learning (Gouthro & Holloway, 2018; Jarvis, 2020), as they allow readers to explore women's experiences of war as historically situated and connected across time.

"Casa Loma Fillies," the short story's main title, is inspired by the dual meaning of the word "filly," which can mean a young female horse but also, as noted in the Oxford English dictionary (Soanes & Stevenson, 2008), "a lively girl or young woman." The title is therefore a nod to the militarized femininity expected of women in the context of WWII work. The vignette titles serve the same purpose: to reveal and complicate gendered, racialized, and colonialized power relations. We named each of these after one of Sir Henry Pellatt's horses. In this article, we include vignettes from the sections titled "Belle," "The Widow," and "Indian Chief," using the horse names as a literary device to demonstrate intersecting forms of marginalization and privilege.

Vignette 1: Belle

During WWII, the bombing of the ASDIC site in England was what precipitated moving development to Canada. The move was shrouded in such secrecy that very few people knew about it, including local politicians (Smith, 2013). By weaving historical moments within

our story, placing Al at the centre of a highly technical and secret operation at Casa Loma in Toronto, we contextualize the skill and ability that women war workers contributed (Dickson, 2015), which goes beyond essentialized images of Ronnie the Bren Gun Girl and Rosie the Riveter. In the first vignette, “Belle,” Alma (Al) reports for her first day of work at the ASDIC site. As she arrives, she considers the war as a whole, her place in it, and her brother’s service overseas. Later in the vignette, Al meets Eula, a Black woman who is one of the senior leaders at the site. Al mistakes Eula for a cleaner because of the colour of her skin, and she critiques her problematic assumption as she reflects on it. Our goal in this vignette is to illustrate the ways in which women experienced intersecting gender and racial biases, and how these biases could also be reproduced by women themselves.

Al did a double take, imagining her shadow was a person walking silently behind her, then chided herself for being skittish. Small puffs of steam emerged on her every exhale. Was she conspicuous, walking alone up Walmer Road at 7:00 a.m. on a cold winter day? No one seemed interested in her, plainly dressed as she was, in a skirt with a smart blouse and low heels, makeup understated, her navy overcoat concealing her figure. She preferred dressing like Ronnie the Bren Gun Girl, in coveralls and men’s workboots, but they were only for the shop floor.

In a few hours, when Casa Loma opened for the day, people eager for diversion would line up for guided tours. Strange to think about life carrying on as usual. There was no getting away from the war, but people still had to pass the time, do something to take their minds off their men who were fighting.

Men, or teenagers. Little Jimmy’s face, his goofy smile. She’d always see her brother as a little boy, even if he was almost 20 years old. Soon it would be his birthday, if he was still . . . no, she couldn’t think that way. He would be fully out of his teens in March, and a proper young man. The fact that he was missing-in-action was still an opportunity for hope, which she would grasp at, when she didn’t have much on hand. She stood still a moment, her stomach souring at the thought of her not being there to protect him herself. Sometimes it took her over, the guilt. He had been so much bigger than her, but she was still the elder.

The motto of the poster she’d seen in the streetcar flashed in her mind, *She serves that men may fly*. Well, she didn’t want to fly anyway. She preferred her work in munitions at GECO, in Scarborough. At least there she actually got to make things.

She carried on up the road toward Casa Loma. Four turrets reached into the sky, stretching themselves unevenly. Had the tallest one been a watchtower? Standing sentinel, it felt like something from an earlier era, even though the castle wasn’t especially old.

She approached the stable, where she’d been told to report. The brick of the façade was ablaze in the rising morning sun with a warm reddening glow. The front doors were doubled, slightly arched, glass panes covered from within. Just as she’d been told, there was a sign out front that read *Construction in progress. Sorry for the inconvenience*. She hadn’t decided

if the plan was brilliant in its simplicity or naïve. The only other person in the stable area was a Black woman with a fashionable scarf pulled over her head and tied under her chin, and a cream-coloured overcoat protecting her against the late January cold. Could she be a cleaner?

A goose honked overhead, uncharacteristic for this time of year, so Al glanced into the bright morning sun. When she turned back to the stable, the woman had gone. Al walked to the door and knocked, one and then two quick to follow. The door opened a crack and she gave her name, "Alma Hitchins," although she preferred to be called Al. The door opened further, just enough for her to step in sideways. It was immediately closed and locked behind her.

For a moment, in the dim light of the interior, Al couldn't see a thing. The arched windows were blocked with a rough-looking material, certainly not drapes. More like tent canvas. Possibly army issue. Her heart pounded, one beat too quick, and she opened her mouth to get a full breath.

"Miss Hitchins?" the woman she'd seen a few moments ago asked. "Miss Hitchins are you all right?"

"Oh, yes, I'm fine." Al blinked to gain her bearings. Her eyes slowly adjusted.

There really were stalls for horses in here, the wood a deep mahogany and the smell of old hay somehow comforting. A small plaque on the first stall door read *Welcome to Sir Henry Pellatt's Casa Loma Stables*. The stalls still bore the names of his much-loved horses—*Casa Loma Belle*, *Prince Highgate (Prince)*, *Matchless (of Londesborough)*, *Lord Kitchener*, *The Widow*, and *Indian Chief*.

What had she expected in the stables? Truly, she hadn't known what to imagine. She'd been told by her boss at GECO that they'd needed someone for a new top-secret project, someone with her special mechanics skills. She could fix anything. Something about the way she thought, the way she imagined things, let her see how objects were supposed to fit. It didn't matter if it was a motor or electrical, vehicle or machine or radio. Jimmy had told her she could tinker with anything on account of her patience, but she suspected it was more like stubbornness. Either way, whenever anything needed fixing at GECO, she was the first person they'd call. When she asked her manager what they wanted her to do at Casa Loma, he said she'd find out when she arrived. She pressed him, but all he said was "Loose lips sink ships."

Now the Black woman motioned her forward. "Okay, let's move, then. Downstairs, follow me." She turned and walked away. "I'll orient you to the work we do here. Then you can get started on repairs."

Al was glad the dim light hid her blush. The woman was indeed a war worker, just like Al was. Al shouldn't have underestimated her because of her skin colour. Goodness knows Al hated being underestimated herself.

"I'm Eula, by the way," said the woman, a soft lilt to her words in an accent Al couldn't place. Eula glanced over her shoulder before she disappeared through a door just past the horse stalls.

Al waited until Eula called, "Come along, Alma," as though Al were wasting valuable time, standing there gawking. Which she was. Al walked toward the doorway and peered into the closest stall. The windows above were boarded with wood. Just under the windows, *Casa Loma Belle* was written on the blue-green tile in beautiful brass (or was it gold?) lettering, the only remnant of the majestic animal that must have once resided here.

It reminded her of a prisoner etching her name on the walls, letting some future observer know she existed: Casa Loma Belle. I was here.

I serve so that he may fly.

I am here.

"Alma?" Eula called.

"I'm coming," Al said as she shook her head and pushed on.

Vignette 2: The Widow

Women war workers were desired for their labour, expected to be visually pleasing to men, and required to accept men's attentions quietly and without complaint. Smith and Wakewich (2012) explained that "the women did not generally consider themselves to have any control over men's whistling and winking which they took as normal behaviour in the masculine industrial work environment. They understood their choices to be limited to what they considered to be appropriate responses" (p. 64). In the second vignette, "The Widow," we illustrate how Al responds to unwanted attention that is directed at a younger co-worker, Norma. While Al's choices are limited, given that there was no top-down policy to address harassment in the workplace, she makes a choice to exercise the agency she does have.

Al followed Eula onto the machine floor, which was surrounded by horse stalls, each with a name on a plaque above it. *Matchless*, *The Widow*, *Highgate*.

As they approached one labelled *Matchless*, Eula gestured at the man who worked the station. "No one would ever want to date him, so the name fits," she whispered. "Ignore his insults and watch for his hands."

Al nodded.

Eula raised her voice to normal speaking level. "This is the Dialling Station, where we attach the dials to the range recorder so the machine can record the range of sound made underwater from a U-boat attacking one of our submarines. We need the transmission switch and the range switch to connect so the range transducer can push the stylus to record the marks on chemically treated paper that can indicate where the attack is coming from. We've followed the exact guidelines for how to build the machines, but these dials won't connect. That's why we need you. I'll let you get on with it, then." She walked toward an office in the back, beside one with the nameplate *Mr. Corman*.

"Like this old maid can do anything about it," Matchless said.

By some people's standards, Al was old, a 28-year-old woman with no husband, no children. Sometimes she told people she was a widow just so they'd leave her alone. Lying made her feel guilty, though, and she only did so in extreme circumstances.

She'd met men like Matchless before. They found her especially threatening because she truly did not need anything from them.

Al reached for the dial closest to her on the table. Just behind her, a woman's voice called out "Wait!" Al turned as a woman jogged toward them, the hem of her floral print dress swinging side to side, her stride dainty in her open-toed high-heeled shoes. Her chestnut brown hair bounced as she ran, waving a pair of white gloves.

"I'm Norma," she said. "And you need these if you're going to work on the range recorder. The quartz and needles inside are very sensitive."

Al raised her hands, and placed them behind her when she realized they were shaking. Shouldn't she have known that? She had a lot to learn, from Eula, from Norma.

Matchless whistled, then whinnied a nasal "Nay hey hey hey, Nay hey hey hey."

Nothing to learn from Matchless, clearly.

A few of the men laughed. Some turned to watch Norma. She was beautiful, and very young. Just like at GECO, some of the women on the floor and in the office were teenagers. As Norma handed Al the gloves, the faint but distinct scent of Chanel No. 5 came with her. It was the same scent Al's best friend, Gail, had worn to the GECO dances they attended together. Al had seen a sign that morning that advertised a dance being held at Casa Loma itself, just this coming Saturday. She'd have to let Gail know.

"That perfume just about knocks me out, Norma," Matchless said. "Just like you."

Matchless glanced toward the few men who had laughed, like he was proud of their attention. Al hated these games.

"Now be a good girl and give us a kiss," he said and reached to pull Norma's arm, the one she was holding out to hand Al the gloves.

Al grabbed at him before he could touch Norma, shoving his arm into his stomach and trying unsuccessfully to stomp on his foot, a trick Gail had taught her. She wished she'd had the good sense to change into her workboots.

"Leave her alone," she said, too loudly. The sound seemed to reverberate off the walls, focusing to a point at the machinery hall and bouncing back toward them, like an echo.

The typists stopped typing. The men stopped their machine assembling. All eyes turned to Al. Her reaction had been visceral, nowhere near using the discretion she had been told would be required to work here. She was sure she was going to be fired, and if by some miracle she wasn't, Matchless would make her pay for putting him in his place.

Mr. Corman stomped to his door and flung it open. "What the blazes is going on?"

Al started to explain, but Norma shushed her.

"It's nothing, Mr. Corman. Just a safety demonstration with the gloves," Norma said.

Matchless didn't move. He stared straight down, fists clenched.

“Well hurry up and get back to work. All of you.” Mr. Corman returned to his office and slammed his door. Everyone was quiet for a moment. Then the typists quietly clapped a few times and returned to their typing. *Clickety clack, clickety clack*, like a train gathering speed.

Matchless’s face had turned so red it looked purple.

“Here are your gloves,” Norma said with a smile.

“Thank you.” Al pulled the white gloves on over her yellowed fingers, stained by the tetryl from her munitions work at GEICO.

“I know who to call next time I need help keeping things in order.” Norma winked.

Al laughed, though she was well aware Matchless wouldn’t let her forget challenging him. She’d have to keep an eye out. But at least she had supportive women beside her.

She turned her attention to the Dialling Station. Sensing the weight of the dial with one gloved hand and feeling the inside of the circular cut with the other, Al knew how to get the transmission and range switches to connect with the transducer. It was basic physics; a straightforward repair, with the right training and practice.

Vignette 3: Indian Chief

In the third vignette, “Indian Chief,” the horse’s name stands as a stark example of the many ways Indigenous peoples in Canada were mythologized and fetishized, reflecting racist beliefs (Brant, 2020; Maracle, 1993). The stall’s label provides an opening for Eula and Al to speak about colonialism, with its negative repercussions for Indigenous peoples in Canada and the Taino people in Jamaica (Haile, 2022; Roden, 2016), and the history of enslavement in the Caribbean.

In relation to Eula and Al’s work as munitions workers, one of the chemicals used in the production of munitions during WWII was tetryl. For fairer-skinned people, tetryl turned their fingers and hair yellow (as mentioned in the vignette above); for darker-skinned people, it turned their fingers and hair orange. In many accounts of munitions workers, the “telltale” yellowed fingers are often referred to, but rarely do the orange ones appear. Here we demonstrate how “a single narrative of the war does not exist” (Project ’44, n.d., para. 11), and neither does a single narrative of women war workers’ experiences.

At the end of the day, Eula escorted Al upstairs. They couldn’t leave at the same time, as that might attract undue attention to the supposedly empty stables, so Eula—as the higher-ranking worker—would wait until Al was out of sight before she would be on her way.

When they reached the main floor, Eula opened her purse and pulled out a silver cigarette case. “Want one?” she asked, flipping the case open with orange-stained fingers and offering it to Al.

Al stared at the colouring. Yellow-tinged skin she’d heard of. Not orange. Eula noticed Al’s gaze.

“Sorry, I don’t mean to stare,” Al said. “But . . .”

“The tetryl. It turned my fingers and then my hair orange when I was working at GEICO myself.” She pointed to some tight curls she’d pinned

back just behind her ear. "You better believe I learned to keep my hair properly under the turban after that. It's almost grown out now."

Al nodded, as if she were curious about the staining, not the particular colour. How little did she know about Eula, about her life? She took a cigarette, thanked Eula, and they walked toward the exit, passing a stall with the name *Indian Chief* etched in brass letters. Another echo of a long-ago horse.

"Indian Chief," Eula scoffed. "Just about as offensive as naming horses after women. And vice versa."

Al agreed. Honestly, naming a horse The Widow?

"Have you heard of the Code Talkers?" Eula asked.

"No."

"Cree speakers. Canada's secret weapon." She blew out a puff of smoke. "Can't tell you more than that, with your security clearance. Though rather ironic, the Cree helping Canada, when Canada certainly didn't help them any. I wonder what the Taíno would've done, if they were still here."

"Taíno?"

"From Jamaica, where I was born."

"Are they your people?" Al asked. Eula had told her over lunch that her parents had immigrated from Jamaica before the war.

"They were the original people of my island. They all died after Columbus. After the Spanish. Before Europeans kidnapped Africans to Jamaica, they used the Taíno as forced labourers. Slaves. Until there were so few of them that . . ." Eula did not finish her sentence.

The thought of an entire people dying was too much for words. In Jamaica, in Canada. Here they were at war now, more killing. More dying.

"Back home, my aunt had mango trees and an apiary," Eula said. "The most fragrant, delicious honey you have ever tasted. I wonder if I'll ever see her again."

Al waited for Eula to continue, but she didn't. It had been a long day, so Al decided not to press it. She would ask Eula to tell her more when the time was right, another day. Return the favour with her own story. "Thank you for your help today," Al said.

"Don't mention it," Eula said. "Part of my job."

Al opened the door, the cold air a salve on her warm cheeks. She breathed in deeply, pulling the belt of her coat a little tighter at her waist, embracing the chill, and pondering the future.

Implications

The aim of our vignettes, a result of our fiction-based research, was to immerse readers in a few moments of Al's life, demonstrating that, despite the continued expectations placed on women to appear pleasing to men, ultimately marry, and bear children, opportunities for women war workers like Al and Eula allowed for a rupture (or at least a puncture) in prescribed roles.

Fiction-based research holds pedagogical potential to explore contexts beyond one's own experiences, drawing readers into stories so they "begin to care for the characters and develop empathy" in order to challenge "previously held assumptions, values, stereotypes, and even worldviews" (Leavy, 2013, p. 50). Thus, fiction-based research aims to enable readers to see the ways in which humans are interconnected, despite differences, to others and to the material world. Al and Eula are connected through the militarism of war work, patriarchal expectations of women, racist privileging of whiteness, and colonialism of imperial countries.

Fictionalizing data and historical research, as we have done here, has given us an opportunity to create a more nuanced picture of what life was like for women war workers in WWII, in ways that are differently satisfying than a more straightforward research paper. As Leavy (2013) reflects, "teaching and learning should be . . . engaged experiences" (p. 276), and fiction-based research offers opportunities to engage the perspectives of researchers, educators, learners, and readers, roles that intersect with one another by providing imaginative possibilities. Considering the oppressions that women experienced due to colonialism, sexism, and racism during WWII, it is not anachronistic for Al and Eula to both critique how their lives were affected by forces outside their control while also demonstrating agency in their own lives.

Our vignettes were inspired by our interest in the fact that, while the militarized atmosphere of war work enforced the binaries of friend/foe and male/female, the actual roles women engaged in transgressed binaries and boundaries. By specifically highlighting a moment in history where social constructions of gender were at once fluid and heavily prescribed, we see many opportunities to engage with a pedagogical potential for criticality in the field of adult education and beyond. In the case of war work, women workers were essentially being asked to be both masculine and feminine at the same time. This is an interesting comment on the fluidity of gender categories, even if it would not have been described as such at the time. This is perhaps why there was so much focus on women still being attractive to men despite wearing coveralls or other uniforms that did not seek to accentuate their bodies. Further, especially in the case of GECCO, the material space where women worked was adapted to suit women and included healthy meals, child minding, social activities, and access to plots of land to grow victory gardens (Dickson, 2015). For many women, this was the best work environment they were ever to experience, before, during, and after the war.

Considering the diversity of women war workers, it becomes clear that attention to intersectional identities provides a more accurate vision of their experiences in Canada. It is as true today as it was during WWII that, in addition to gender, "a woman's race, ethnicity, religion, geographic location, or economic status also influence[s] her reception in the public realm" (Project '44, n.d., para. 2). So while a woman's intersecting identities affect and influence all aspects of her life, at the same time she asserts her own agency in the face of intersecting relations of privilege and marginalization. Readers can learn from engaging with these "micro-macro links [to see] connections between the characters' lives and the larger context in which they live" (Leavy, 2013, p. 86), providing a rich environment for adult learning contexts. In our feminist fiction-based research, we embed readers in Al's life to demonstrate how she navigates her social, cultural, and historical situatedness. By leaving elements of Al's and Eula's stories open-ended and unfinished, we further invite readers to use their imaginations when considering what the additional details of Al's and Eula's lives may be. Educators, readers, and learners can do the same themselves, to explore intersecting relations of privilege and marginalization in their own lives.

As co-authors who were funded to work together by a university grant focused on student capacity-building, we note how our process of engaging in fiction-based research was feminist in its relational and collaborative possibilities. Our research process, through the imagining of women's experiences with the aim of engaging readers with the story, provides avenues for extending relationality with others. As Clover (2021) reflected, "The coming together of the energies of feminist movements and basic principles of feminism have been applied to . . . adult education" (p. 147), and across the diverse ways in which women's knowledge is cultivated and shared, "primary amongst these is storytelling" (p. 148). By acting as co-creators writing a story based on our research about World War II women war workers; the intersections of gender, race, and social class during this historical period; and our shared love of fiction, we were able to create a collaborative and creative research and learning context.

With fiction-based research—the creation of "Casa Loma Fillies" is a first-hand example of this—the writing process is steeped in creative language expression and storytelling. Our work applied feminist adult education principles to explore "the ways in which gender, race, class, and other positionalities impact learning" in order to facilitate "more equitable and transformative educational experiences" (Zhu et al., 2023, p. 6). Fiction-based research offers a tool for such transformative educational experiences, ones that can transform traditional post-secondary learning contexts into feminist ones. By enabling us to learn with and from one another through our feminist fiction-based research project, "Casa Loma Fillies" reflects our learning and growth as well as our commitment to the relational practice of feminist adult education.

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