

Introducing ficto-feminism: a non-fiction, fictitious conversation with Hallie Flanagan, director of the Federal Theatre Project (1935–1939)

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Abstract

Purpose – Ficto-feminism is offered here as a creative method for feminist historical inquiry in management and organizational studies (MOSs).

Design/methodology/approach – This paper introduces a new method called ficto-feminism. Using feminist polemics as a starting point, ficto-feminism fuses aspects of collective biography with the emic potential of autoethnography and rhizomatic capacity of fictocriticism to advance not only a new account of history in subject but also in style of writing.

Findings – The aim of ficto-feminism is to create a plausible, powerful and persuasive account of an overlooked female figure which not only challenges convention but also surfaces her lost lessons and accomplishments to benefit today's development of theory and practice.

Research limitations/implications – The paper reviews the methodological components of ficto-feminism and speaks to the merit of writing differently and incorporating fictional techniques.

Originality/value – To illustrate the method in action, the paper features a non-fiction, fictitious conversation with Hallie Flanagan (1890–1969) and investigates her role as national director of the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) (1935–1939). The FTP was part of the most elaborate relief programs ever conceived as part of the New Deal (a series of public works projects and financial reforms enacted in the 1930s in the USA).

Keywords Leadership, Autoethnography, Feminism, Collective biography, Critical historiography, Ficto-feminism, Fictocriticism, Polemics

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The past is an elusive place to find women, particularly female organizational actors and their many vital contributions. I write polemics of the heart, which involve challenging conventions that silence women with assertive autobiographical literary strategies (Ferguson, 1986). In this paper, I introduce ficto-feminism; a novel postmodern, prowoman method that invites writers to draw on various sources to present a faithful but fictitious conversation between a female historical figure (a protagonist) and the researcher/author. This method allows for the creation of a more intimate portrait of a woman for whom we might only have scant traces of her endeavours, her career and of her life. Management and organizational studies (MOS) and management history (MH) have developed largely under the discourses of masculinity,



coloniality and capitalism. The result has been an abundance of scholarship devoid of feminist approaches (theories and praxis). Ficto-feminism is a strategy for studying the past and promoting neglected subjects within these studies.

My work is rooted in a social justice project, campaigning for the excluded, while simultaneously broadening our ideas of MOS and MH and who the important players are (subjects and writers). Generally, I want to challenge the limits imposed on the field by the dominant discourses of capitalism and patriarchy and to reveal overlooked figures and their accomplishments. Management and its history have been forged by privileged players, privileged subjects and privileged methods (Calas and Smircich, 2020).

Ficto-feminism is an activist method for two reasons. First, it is a method which confronts and protests against current taken-for-granted strategies of reconciling the historical record by simply adding in missing pieces (for example, see Graham, 1996; Mills and Williams, 2021). Instead, I wish to offer an account which constructs a rich portrayal of a neglected historical actor and her contributions, to management theory and practice. The second reason is related to the power of this alternative account to offer women in the present access to historical mentors, organizational theories and insights into alternative methods of practice. This portrait is meant to go beyond fixing the so-called limited historical record, to creating a vivid portrait of a female leader.

Despite much encouragement by early feminist historians like Joan Acker and Joan Wallach Scott, very few researchers have taken on this area of combined scholarship, namely feminism and gender and MOS/MH. A recent study by Mills and Novicevic (2020) reviewed the scholarly output of three top MH journals between 2006 and 2018 and found that only 1.8% had anything to say about gender, feminism or women's history (*Management and Organizational History*, *Business History* and *Journal of Management History*). A forthcoming article by Mills and Williams (2021) reveals that the journal *Business History* (one of the field's most prominent journals) indicates that the trend to engage with women as historical actors or gender and feminism has decreased over the last 10 years. Granted, MH journals are not the only place where scholarship should engage with gender, feminism and history, but it speaks to systemic exclusions in MOS/MH, and it makes the call by the *Qualitative Research Journal* for activist methodologies inside and outside of the academy all the timelier and more important.

Often seen as the same field, it is important to understand that labour history is generally considered a separate discipline from management and from management (capitalist) interests. There has been recognition of the important influences of the early days of social work on improving labour practice. Women such as Mary Parker Follett have been recognized in the labour movement. Parker Follett and a few exceptional women have captured the attention of MH, but overall, the examples remain limited and hard fought-for inclusions (see Calas and Smircich, 1996; Williams and Mills, 2017, 2018). For example, until recently, Frances Perkins, the architect of labour practices now taken for granted, was not regarded as a key player in management theory (Williams and Mills, 2019a; Williams, 2020a). It is argued that the lack of interest of marrying social good with capitalism is in part to blame.

Along with a growing and enthusiastic group of feminist scholars in MOS, I have been experimenting with writing differently (Rhodes, 2015; Vachhani, 2019).

Feminists, among other researchers, have grappled with how to produce research that recognizes the materiality of living gendered lives at the same time as it acknowledges postmodern notions of identities and relationships between identities as multiple, fluid and layered (Gonick *et al.*, 2011, p. 741).

I want to move beyond digging up small traces and arguing that “she” deserves a rightful place. “She” does, but when the sources are so much more insignificant by comparison to male actors, it is difficult to develop an account which compares or competes. My work invites a critique on the practices of the positivist historians and the proclivity to create a single,

authoritative standpoint version of additive history instead of an appreciation for the pluralities of history and the various ways accounts can be constructed.

This article proceeds as follows: I first explain ficto-feminism and its methodological components. I then speak to the merits of writing differently and incorporating literary techniques. I then introduce Hallie Flanagan, my protagonist, and the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) (1935–1939) through a fictitious conversation. This conversation allows me to share a sense of Hallie as a person, beyond a reified list of accomplishments. In the discussion, I briefly review the discourses which hid Hallie from view, along with how agency is enacted and the benefits of reflexivity, emotionality and resonance. I conclude with some advice on how to undertake a ficto-feminist approach.

Ficto-feminism

Ficto-feminism fuses aspects of *collective biography* with *autoethnography* and *fictocriticism* to advance not only a new account of history in subject but also in style of writing. Ficto-feminism is a creative method for feminist historical enquiry. Its implication for feminist research is not only a contribution to theory development, method and writing style but also to pedagogy. Ficto-feminism can reveal a plausible sense of an understudied female figure and demonstrate her importance in a compelling manner. My experience in writing the histories of women in management is that there are relatively limited records and women are highlighted in gendered roles and as limited historical actors. These mere fragments rarely give one an impression of these women's personality, let alone the full scope of their accomplishments in the context of the barriers they faced. Considerably, more emphasis has been placed on male actors and constructing a history of management from a capitalist and patriarchal perspective (Wallach Scott, 1994; Rose, 2010). Women are neglected as subjects and contributors, and feminist approaches exist at the margins, occupying a peripheral place in critical management studies. Women are rarely the subject of MH, despite playing significant roles. They are often falsely constructed as newcomers to the workplace or marginalized actors (Williams and Mills, 2019b).

Ficto-feminism has four descriptive dimensions which I will explain further at the end of this article. These are (1) the opportunity to surface discourses; (2) the potential to unlock agency; (3) reflexive and embodied/emic insights and (4) emotionality and resonance. The method requires some "letting go" of convention and the adoption of a new style of writing, inspired by literary studies and fictional writing.

Collective biography. Inspired by Deleuze and Guattari (1983, 1987) and further developed by Davies and Gannon (2006), collective biography is as a practice of integrating and iterating a collaboratively formed text, which ultimately generates a coherent narrative (Page and Speedy, 2012). This technique can weave back and forth between what is considered real and imagined tales "in order to deconstruct and re-construe new meanings and possibilities" (Page and Speedy, 2012, p. 236). I combine historical writings, autobiographical accounts, media reports and texts pulled from a specific time frame of the protagonist's life and career (to contextualize and historically place the protagonist). I interweave the voices of present and past writers and the protagonist herself and envisage an imaginary conversation. It is through Gannon and Davies' work that I became attracted to the opportunity that collective biography affords in understanding and undoing gendered subjectification. More so, collective biography offers opportunity for innovations in writing and revising, with the goal of achieving moments of resonance (emotional and intellectual clarity) in both writer and reader (Gonick *et al.*, 2011). Importantly, in my approach, I maintain the visibility of the sources so that the reader can navigate their origins while still following the fictitious conversation.

Collective biography reveals how interconnected, intertwined and non-linear writing is with the promise of an expanding rhizomatic form with multiple points of entry (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) and a place of "emergent possibilities" (Davies *et al.*, 2013, p. 684). Collective biography also reveals the sociomateriality of living gendered lives. My protagonist and I are

nested in a specific spatial arrangement which reveals our individual and shared constitutive entanglement and how we are bound up in material forms and human interaction (Moura and Bispo, 2020). In a way, I map myself onto her and become part of her and she becomes part of me. I no longer feel that we are discrete entities.

I deliver on the objectives of collective biography by using stories to make “visible the discursive processes in which we each have been collectively caught up” (Davis and Gannon, 2006, p. 11). I want the reader to be aware of the discursivity at work, while still being able to be transported to a time and place. There are several tenets I have adopted from Davis and Gannon (2006), including (1) a commitment to revise history, (2) making the narrative imaginable, (3) using the writing strategy to access the past (where the past can be re-experienced), (4) developing documentary-style materials (curating source material) and (5) revealing the changeability of the past and the multiplicity of “truths”.

Autoethnography. I draw the reader’s attention to three aspects of autoethnography, which inform my method: (1) critical use of reflexivity; (2) an examination of one’s own position and (3) reflection on practices which shape the research endeavour (Styhre and Tienari, 2013). Autoethnography is here a blend of personal experience, values and the research process. The lines between researcher and subject are blurred through the recognition of the self as a part of the story to be told (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). I am drawn to an approach which is emotionally evocative (see Ellis and Bochner, 1992, 2000, 2003) and where the researcher is visible (see Anderson, 2006). Autoethnographers also recognize that we are constantly constructing meaning and social realities (Cunliffe, 2003). And though autoethnography enjoys a prominent place generally in feminist work, it is less so in the context of MOS/MH. However, its application is expanding, particularly where women are experimenting with embodied writing (Boncori and Smith, 2019; Gilmore *et al.*, 2019).

I draw on the opportunity that autoethnography provides in creating a “field work” encounter and introducing self-narrative in a specific social context (Butz and Besio, 2009). Though this encounter is fictional, it is still a deeply accountable process. In this personal encounter, I portray a relationship with my protagonist, and thus, I am committed to a fair and reasonable representation. I draw on several sources to illuminate Hallie’s contributions to MOS.

Fictocriticism. I draw on the generative capacity of fictocriticism as an interventionist tactic (Hancox and Muller, 2011). The result is a creative rendering of a figure, which highlights her many great but largely neglected contributions to female leadership. In Hallie’s case, her leadership instructs us how to improve social welfare outcomes along with creating economic stimulus. Her personality gives us insight into the traits she honed to be an effective leader; she was clearly focussed, clever, humorous, empathetic, assertive and humble.

Fictocriticism [1] involves the mobilization of different genres where fact and imagination intertwine (Williams, 2020b). Fictocriticism resists convention: “Fictocriticism is self-reflexive writing that breaks down the boundaries between fiction and criticism, reader and writer, by using aesthetic techniques” (Jiwa, 2013, p. 104). Proponents of fictocriticism argue that it challenges the limitations of traditional academic writing and offers power to the writer (see Rhodes, 2015). The application of fictocriticism in MOS/MH is in its infancy, with just a smattering of examples (see Rhodes, 2015; Weatherall, 2019; Williams, 2020).

Some place fiction on the opposite side of history, in irreconcilable contradiction (Munslow, 2010). However, Michel de Certeau (as cited in White, 2005) calls fiction, the “repressed other” (147). Fiction holds significant potential because history is “a tenuous notion, perhaps especially for those historically disenfranchised” (Steinberg, 2003, p. 385). Writers of fiction have shown an awareness of the fluidity between fiction and history. Fiction allows me to enliven so-called “facts” or historical traces, to create a more engaging narrative. My approach to fictocriticism uses first-person writing, punctuated by narratives, reflections and combined literary and academic strategies. I fill in the gaps (historical traces) with my own ideas to produce a coherent

story. I play in the liminal spaces of my sources to help construct my protagonist. The result is a fictitious encounter in which I give myself over to the fantasy of an in-person conversation.

Writing differently

Writing differently is a relatively new approach for feminists in MOS/MH. Writing differently is not just about method, it is also about so-called taboo subjects in management (Boncori and Smith, 2019; Gilmore *et al.*, 2019; Vachhani, 2019). Other disciplines have longer traditions of merging fictional writing and autobiographical work (Spry, 1999; Leskelä-Kärki, 2008). This opportunity exists for MOS/MH as well, but it has not been fully exploited for its potential. The dominant way storytelling techniques have been used in MOS/MH has been to support products and profits, various activities (Weick, 1995) narrating the “self-made” (male) entrepreneur (Weber, 1957) and leadership narratives, such as transformation leadership (Mittal and Dhar, 2015).

The general utility of fiction writing for female historical figures is clear: such “writing is also about unearthing a hidden or unacknowledged or unnoticed life” (Brown and Krog, 2011, p. 58). I use fiction to evoke empathy, interest and inspiration. My strategies include (1) building an imaginative space or describing a real space in an imaginary time, (2) writing directly to the reader and in the first person, (3) writing in the present tense even when in the apparent past, (4) creating and reflecting emotion and (5) writing visually (Farr, 2019). It is my view that writing should be affectively charged if we are expected to change hearts and minds (Keen, 2016) [2].

Ethical considerations

In writing for another, I bear the responsibility of taking a cautious approach that respects my protagonist’s own agency. My work (just as any other) runs the risk of engaging in critique of challenging one gendered account (masculine) with another gendered account (feminine) (Williams and Mills, 2019a). However, I think that prowoman, gendered writing is a powerful advocacy tool, and this fictional offering is a polemical counterinitiative in the service of women. Current practice offers little room to get to know figures like Hallie. This is not about conflating feminism with fiction (Williams, 2020b) but rather offering a feminized authoritative account, emboldened by the veracity of my research, feminist disposition and respect for Hallie.

Hallie Flanagan

Short biography

Hallie Flanagan (1890–1969) taught at Vassar College and was a student at George Baker’s famous *47 Workshop* dramatic production studio. She earned a master’s degree from Radcliffe and was the first woman to be granted the *Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship* (Hiltzik, 2011). This resulted in her book *Shifting Scenes* (1929). By 1933, US Secretary Harry Hopkins had taken on the most elaborate relief program ever conceived as part of the New Deal [3] (Taylor, 2008). Hallie was recruited to be national director of the FTP in 1935. At its peak, 12,372 workers were engaged (Flanagan, 1940). The project produced 63,928 performances, to which 30,398,726 people from 32 states attended (Flanagan, 1940). Her success was largely due to her ability to combine art with relief work (Flanagan, 1940; Mathews, 1967). After the FTP, she returned to Vassar and wrote *Arena* (1940) with funding from the *Rockefeller Foundation* (Flanagan, 1940). Between 1942 and 1946, she served as dean at Smith College and then remained as a professor in the Theater Department until she retired in 1955 (Bentley, 1988).

The limited sources

I relied on Hallie’s book *Arena* (1940), a first-person account of the FTP. Hallie shares the specifics of the program’s success but does not take credit for many of her strategies and

contributions. In reading it, I had to grasp at the text to get a sense of her personality as she placed the outputs and outcomes of the program out front in her narrative and herself as a person, “backstage”. In *Shifting Scenes* (1929), her personality and passion for theater emerged more clearly. The Library of Congress Archives houses materials for the FTP and the Work Progress Administration (WPA) (see The New Deal Stage). These materials consist of copies of plays, photos and a few scant reports, but none of the sources are written to help us understand any of the key players in any detail. I also reviewed US Congressional records and session hearings of the House Special Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC). There is an exchange which I address in our conversation which highlights Hallie’s moral strength and integrity. Thus, while others have attempted to bring to light Hallie’s accomplishments, here I will give you a sense of her as a real person, through the creation of a vivid portrait, capable of inspiring and teaching us. My fictional additions are intended to create a sense of who Hallie was.

Setting the stage

I travel back in time to meet Hallie on her last day at Smith College in 1955. She is 65. I have my dog-eared copy of *Shifting Scenes*. My favourite passage reads,

Romance in England does not reside in the streets but passes through them, coming from nowhere and departing into mysterious obscurity. The people swarming through the streets do not reveal themselves to you as in Prague, or Naples, or Paris, by stopping in their thoroughfares to fight, make love, laugh, sing, drink, eat, quarrel, or philosophize. They are marks scrawled on a blackboard to be instantly erased. What part of this civilization at once inchoate and crystallized, shall I find upon the stage? (Flanagan, 1929, p. 4).

Hallie met the demands of a challenging labour program while serving a creative heart. She spent much of her life as a teacher, but I am interested in her time as the architect of one of the most innovative and successful labour attachment programs under the WPA in the era of the New Deal, namely the FTP.

Her office at the college is full of boxes. It overlooks a broad courtyard. She sits behind her kneehole desk. I picture it once cluttered with various plays, posters, lecture notes and student projects. She is dressed in a dark print blouse, coordinated with a smart beige cardigan; a lovely silk scarf tied at the nape of her neck. Classic wide beige linen flood pants are paired with sharp brown and white saddle shoes. She has elegant short hair and seems effortlessly chic and classy.

She invites me to call her Hallie.

Befitting the period, I have brought a vintage 1950s Ferguson reel-to-reel audio tape recorder (model 441-TR), which I found on eBay for \$118. It fits snugly into its own mint condition, mini cherry-coloured vinyl suitcase.

Unspoken thoughts of mine will now appear in italics. My comments will appear under KW, whereas Hallie’s will appear under HF in the following transcription.

In conversation with Hallie Flanagan

KW: The WPA was a very elaborate state relief program, which aimed to provide more than just shelter, clothing, medical care, and food (Taylor, 2008; Mathews, 1967). Can you tell me about how the Federal Theater Project fit into that program?

HF: The wisdom of the program was that it recognized that individuals ought to be valued for their skills and put to work in a way that tapped into those same skills (Flanagan, 1940). The arts-based programs sought to put those artists back to work doing what they did best; creative labour (Flanagan, 1940) [4].

The arts are often neglected in MOS/MH (Williams and Mills, 2018). There were five arts-based programs under the WPA. The FTP was the most outspoken politically (Taylor, 2008).

KW: What are some of the challenges that your business model had?

HF: We had social objectives bridged with economic ones. We operated under the Relief Act of 1935, which mandated us to provide 90% of our funding go to wages. Further, 80% of workers had to come from accredited theater unions, and there were ten (Flanagan, 1940).

She continues...

We were responsible for returning over 2,600 workers back to permanent work in private industry. We were the only program to do so. Additionally, we took the opportunity to focus on the deskilling that was taking place and offered training to vulnerable workers (Flanagan, 1936). We also offered educational programs to 350,000 youth across the country. We wanted to establish theaters so vital to community life that they would continue to function long afterwards (Works Progress Administration, 1935).

KW: Your program was the only one that made money – how was this accomplished?

HF: We hoped that local patronage would eventually take over for federal subsidies (Mathews, 1967). In addition to federal moneys and some modest ticket sales, we raised sponsorship dollars (Flanagan, 1936).

The discipline of management and its fundamental relationship with capitalism is a key reason for neglecting the New Deal and associated actors (Foster et al., 2014).

KW: Major changes were happening on Broadway at that time. How did this affect your program?

HF: “Almost overnight, theaters across the country closed and reopened as movie houses, making both the Great Depression and the advent of new entertainment technology the adversary of the theater worker [...]. This made the FTP a very risky prospect” (Williams and Mills, 2018, p. 284).

KW: What did Broadway think of the Federal Theater?

HF: Well, they did not take to me very kindly! We were art and relief combined, and we were trying to figure out “how to best meet the needs of both people on relief and people in the audience over a vast geographic area (Mathews, 1967, p. 29).

KW: What do you mean by “they were not kind”?

HF: “The old-line Broadway manager wise in the devious ways of the commercial theater, [was who Broadway thought] was needed for the job, not some college professor from a girls’ school” (Mathews, 1967: 35).

Hallie “was apt to embrace experimental approaches and to rethink theater in terms of contemporary arts and economics” (Mathews, 1967, p. 42).

KW: What else agitated the norms of the day?

HF: The Federal Theater became a way to reflect on and educate audiences about the economy, social priorities, and the ups and downs of modernity (Mathews, 1967).

I interject.

KW: You mean the Living Newspapers?

HF: Yes, exactly. We were asked to keep all performances free of political bias, but still offer “free, adult, uncensored theater” (Hopkins, 1935, as cited in Mathews, 1967, p. 33).

KW: Okay, I want to hear more about that, but let me first clarify: you were asked to keep all performances “free of political bias” and discrimination (Williams and Mills, 2018, p. 286), engage

and cooperate with unions, keep costs low, compete with Broadway and movie houses, and this was a project for which there was no script, excuse the pun, but – it had never been done before – and concerned an unimaginable scope, was subject to a “hypercritical political climate” and you held “the lives of desperate workers and their families in the balance” (Williams and Mills, 2018, p. 286)?

HF: Well, [*she pauses*] yes!

She continues.

And success was evaluated against three priorities: a successful theater, a successful relief plan and a successful government arts program (Williams and Mills, 2018; Mathews, 1967).

KW: please tell me about the Living Newspapers.

HF: The Living Newspapers were newsreels on stage (Mathews, 1967). The format was the most forgiving in that it helped us accommodate large casts, avoid elaborate and costly scenery (Mathews, 1967) and we could train in a hands-on manner, every aspect of theater (Flanagan, 1940).

KW: Did this also mean that you could attend to social and economic concerns originating locally?

HF: Yes, it was “a living theater, flourishing in a particular soil of a particular region and acting as an artistic and social force on the people of that region” (Flanagan, as cited in Mathews, 1967, pp. 28–29).

She is passionate about this. Her pace quickens in excitement.

A production in Iowa was called *Dirt* and it debated the loss of rich farmland. *Spirochete* in Seattle engaged in the debate about sexually transmitted disease. *Power* in New York was inspired by the new electric utility and the struggle to control a new technology (Flanagan, 1940).

KW: Is it your view that it was just not seen as serving political interests, despite meeting objectives with respect to audience engagement and work relief (Flanagan, 1940)?

HF: This is so ironic, because “in the Living Newspaper everything is factual. The records from which any living newspaper is taken are always open to all [. . .] [and there was] not one allegation [. . .] that the news [reports] were untrue” (Flanagan, as cited by US Congress, 1938, pp. 2,860–2,861).

Hallie was a victim of red baiting (targeted attacks against left-wing politics).

KW: Can I read to you a part of the transcript from the HUAC?

She nods.

The HUAC (Special House Committee on Un-American Activities and Propaganda) led partisan enquiries into suspected communist activities and conspiracies.

I look to my notes.

KW: “The Chairman. Now, will you just tell us briefly the duties of your position?

Mrs. Flanagan: Yes, Congressman Dies. Since August 29, 1935, I have been concerned with combating *un-American inactivity* [emphasis added].

The Chairman: No. We will get to that in a minute.

Mrs. Flanagan: Please listen. I said I am combating un-American inactivity.

The Chairman: Inactivity?

Mrs. Flanagan: I refer to the inactivity of professional men and women; people who, at that time when I took office, were on the relief rolls; and it was my job to expend the appropriation laid aside by congressional vote for the relief of the unemployed as it related to the field of the theater” (Dies, Flanagan, as cited by US Congress, 1938: 2,839).

She eagerly breaks in.

HF: I wanted and did express my thoughts about American democracy. I believed that the WPA was “one great bulwark of that democracy” (Flanagan, as cited by US Congress, 1938: 2,867). I believe the Federal Theater was part of a larger pattern of a democratic life (US Congress, 1938; Flanagan, 1940).

The committee marginalized Hallie’s opportunity to participate (US Congress, 1938).

KW: The critique was largely political and partisan?

HF: It was an attack on what constituted the proper use of government funds and the subjective views of the content of the plays (Flanagan, 1940). The HUAC did not agree with supporting actors as a disenfranchised group and they did not appreciate the Federal Theater as an intellectual effort (Flanagan, 1940).

KW: And this was the end?

HF: Yes, funding was dropped, and we had to wrap up the project in 1939.

KW: You took it upon yourself to tell the story of the Federal Theater in your book, *Arena* (1940). Why did you think this was important?

HF: I felt it important to document what we built and the trials and triumphs we experienced.

She pulls a copy of Arena from the top of a nearby box and opens it at a marked page. She begins to read with fluency and emotion:

[. . .] It was gusty, lusty, bad and good, sad and funny, superbly worth more wit, wisdom and imagination than we could give it. Its significance lies in its pointing to the future. The ten thousand anonymous men and women – the et ceteras and the and-so-forths who did the work, the nobodies who were everybody, the somebodies who believed it – their dreams and deeds were not the end. They were the beginning of a people’s theater in a country whose greatest plays are still to come (Flanagan, 1940, p. 373).

We both pause. She is an exceptional orator.

The FTP archive was lost between 1943 and 1974 until faculty at George Mason University found the files in Baltimore Maryland. The files were eventually moved to the Library of Congress in 1994 (George Mason University, A History, 1972-1978).

It feels like the right moment to draw our interview to a close and I ask a final question.

KW: Do you feel that you were ahead of your time [5]?

She smiles and closes her eyes, then opens them and engages me directly.

HF: I think we were exactly where we were supposed to be. “We live in a changing world: [. . .] The theater must become conscious of the implications of the changing social order, or the changing social order will ignore and rightly, the implications of theater” (Flanagan, 1940, pp. 45–46).

Regrettably, many did not share in the contemporary vision of the program.

KW: Are there any final thoughts you would like to share?

HF: I feel lucky to have been given the opportunity to contemplate the complexity of human emergency alongside the development of a country-wide peoples theater (New York Times, 1937, is cited in US Congress, 1938).

I thank her and she smiles in the most genuine way. I reluctantly take my leave.

Post-interview reflection

When I first read *Arena*, I could feel the energy and rush of the program Hallie built and the unexpected opportunities and achievements for workers and for the arts. Hallie's professional accomplishments offer (1) a female model of leadership, (2) an innovative organizational structure and (3) the bridging of enterprise with social purpose. Hallie's story and her time with the FTP have value not only for practitioners operating in a variety of sectors but also for scholars and theorists engaging in a new spectrum of capitalist behaviours and organizational structures.

In this retelling, I went beyond the sources and played in the liminal spaces, to deliver a portrait of Hallie that revealed my passion and her personality. I wanted to build on prior work which has attempted to bring Hallie to the fore (Williams and Mills, 2018). Hallie's time with the FTP offers important lessons in leadership and management practice and in fusing creative output with social good and economic stimulus.

My key objective beyond simulating dialogue with Hallie about her program was that I create a feeling of who she was, more than an abstracted and reified figure. When I first read about Hallie Flanagan, I was immediately fascinated by all that she had accomplished. I wanted to know who she was. By "writing" her, I hope to bridge the gap between a list of accomplishments, underappreciated in their own domain and a person who offers lessons, insights, humour and relatability. Perhaps some of my readers will be social welfare-driven leaders and practitioners who can see Hallie as a mentor. Perhaps others will be feminists interested in using this method to introduce other neglected figures.

Discussion*The dimensions of ficto-feminism*

As indicated at the start of this paper, there are several dimensions of ficto-feminism, including its potential to unlock agency, share reflexive and emic insights and to achieve emotionality and resonance. Here, I share a short summary of how these dimensions are revealed and why they are useful.

Hallie and the FTP were hidden from view because of targeted attacks by the HUAC, the general inattention and misunderstanding of the value of insights from the arts and creative labour and the controversial New Deal agenda, which bridged social welfare objectives with economic ones. The FTP's organizational model was complex and at odds with the emphasis on capitalistic models of organizational practice which dominate MH (Williams and Mills, 2018). The controversial theater design and content were boldly political and engaged with important social issues, which, along with the loss of the archive, created existential, political, ideological conditions for neglect.

By taking a novel methodological approach, I attempt to humanize Hallie, surfacing her voice by curating a conversation which highlights her successes and challenges. I was also able to demonstrate her ideas and her confidence and therefore remove some of the gendered effects, namely the socially constructed gendered roles which limit women (Langle de Paz, 2016). In Hallie's case (and during her time with the FTP), feminism was conflated with communism, she was viewed as a teacher, not a Broadway producer, the arts and social welfare were of little consequence to the objectives of capitalism.

By using a reflexive approach, my insights and sense-making helped Hallie become more alive and visible. My emotions are articulated openly in my writing and are meant to help me understand my protagonist better, develop a persuasive narrative and elicit an emotional response in you as my reader. Emotional engagement recognizes the research effort as experiential and that we engage in both thinking and feeling to understand (Campbell, 2001). In this respect, I concur with Blakely (2007) who argues that emotional engagement in the research process offers "intellectual clarity" (59).

Undertaking a ficto-feminist polemic

I would like to invite sister researchers to try ficto-feminism, so here is some practical advice to get you started. Begin by finding a historical figure who inspires you to develop a confident command of your sources. Read deeply because you will need to navigate across those sources to create a coherent narrative. Secondly, do not fall into the trap of looking in the usual spaces. As you saw with Hallie, archives (if they exist) can be lost. Some sources might surprise you. The HUAC committee records provided some lively insights into Hallie's wit and strength. The arts also offer many overlooked lessons for MOSs. Personal writings are very helpful (e.g. *Arena* and *Shifting Scenes*); they gave me confidence that I was close to mimicking her voice where I had to fill in small gaps. Perhaps, the most fun aspect of this approach is setting the scene. Though this is fictional, do some research to place your protagonist realistically in space and time (e.g. Smith College, Hallie's dress). Additionally, draw on sources which give you a sense of the sociopolitical environment (e.g. media reports).

Conclusion

The aim of ficto-feminism as a method is to afford feminists a novel way to investigate and write about neglected women. The narrative that is produced is meant to sound plausible. It is also an approach that produces an account which challenges convention, specifically in MOS and MH. This article provided an opportunity to make an overlooked figure (a female protagonist) more visible to the discipline and to reveal her experiences and contributions. My hope for this method is that figures of the past can be given new life and that we can reclaim overlooked voices.

Notes

1. It has also been referred to as postcriticism. It has also been referred to in literary studies as cross-writing (Barnard, 2012).
2. Autoethnographers refer to such texts as "performance texts" in that they are ethnographic but also novelistic (Gannon, 2006, p. 477).
3. The New Deal represents a series of public works projects and financial reforms enacted in the 1930s in the US, under the WPA.
4. In addition to actors, the FTP also employed directors, teachers, stagehands, artists, musicians, dancers, box office staff, ushers, maintenance workers, accounting and secretarial staff, writers, designers, all personnel that one might consider vital to theater and to enterprise (Flanagan, 1940).
5. This familiar trope has been used repeatedly to describe remarkable women but carries with it some challenges when undertaking historical analyses (see Calás and Smircich, 1996).

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