There is no need to contort the definition of a pirate to suit the different inhabitants of the name throughout history, they all have commonalities. Through analysis of Roger Luckhurst’s, “The Timeless Allure of Pirates”, Shannon Lee Dawdy and Joe Bonni’s “Towards a General Pirate Theory”; “I Am a Pirate” by Stuart Yikona et al; and “The Swashbuckling History of Women Pirates” by Lorraine Boissoneault, regarding the true definition of a pirate there is only one way to define these transgenerational criminals. A pirate is a member of misrepresented group who, regardless of organization, commits property seizures in a morally or legally ambiguous manor, ranging from armed robbery to virtual thievery in pursuit of freedom and wealth.

The element of pirates that differentiate them from normal thieves is that they work in large groups, whether it is a ship’s crew, or a online community, pirates are notably different because of their egalitarian and rebellious nature. As stated in “Towards a General Pirate Theory”, “No pirate works alone. This is an important fact that has not been sufficiently appreciated in the literature on piracy due to a leap to legally classify piracy with individually-motivated criminal” (Dawdy and Bonni p 675). This is significant because it differentiates pirates throughout history from vandals because their group based nature allows them to not only take things, but rebel against and escape the social norms of the times. Pirate
culture is deep rooted in rebellion, whether against historical powers, modern local governments, or even the capitalist motivations of the current media moguls, these pirates must work as a group in order to send a impactful message, gain notoriety, and assist one another in the property seizures both in person and online.

A pirates core focus is to take something that does not belong to them for their own personal gain. “I Am a Pirate” defines the act of piracy as, “Any illegal acts of violence or detention, or any act of depredation, committed for private ends by the crew or the passengers of a private ship against a ship, aircraft, persons or property in a place outside the jurisdiction of any State.” (Yikona p 12). This definition encompasses numerous types of Pirates, weather aboard a ship or behind a computer, because media sought after by digital pirates is technically not under the jurisdiction of a nation, but the property of a private party. Throughout time, pirates have been trying to acquire things that don’t belong to them through suspect means, weather a chest of gold, a shipment passing through the horn of Africa that can be used for ransom, or a media file that would require purchase, these pirates all share that same desire to seize what is not rightfully theirs, blanketing these generations of marauders under the pirate name.

Pirates are known throughout history as criminals, rule breakers, and rogue sailors at sea. This is often what attracts the audience to pirate movies. As Luckhurst describes, many Golden Age Pirates began as maritime privateers, legal pirates under a, “official ‘letter of marque’ that allowed them to attack any enemy ship and take their goods, provided they gave a cut of the booty to their own government” (Luckhurst 3), but “The problem came when alliances shifted or peace was declared.”(Luckhurst 4). Problems arose due to the fact that these privateers preferred
the life they were leading to the monotony of civilian life. Many privateers only had the option to
join the navy or work in merchant shipping after wartime, and often these former privateers
continued what they were doing illegally, unprotected by letters of marque, and became pirates.
This is significant because it shows the illegality of what these pirates were doing, but also the
fact that it was a better option than rejoining civilian life.

The moral ambiguity of piracy is something that has carried through history. The thing
that differentiates pirates from regular thieves on boats is their motives. Not every criminal at sea
becomes a pirate for the same reason, one pirate mentioned in the interviews conducted by
Yikona and his associates, “I couldn’t feed my family properly. That’s when I eventually joined
piracy.”, this solidifies the claim that not everyone dreams about being pirates but are often
forced into it, either to feed their family in a futile economy, or to make a life for themselves
which they could have never imagined (Yikona et al 11). One man interviewed described his
experience coming from beyond humble beginnings and being shown the live of luxury by his
pirate cousin, “Had I been involved in a decent job at that time, I would have never got close to
that.”, this shows that the modern pirate trade preys on those in rough spots, people who are
struggling in hopes of a better life (Yikona et al 11).

One aspect of pirate culture that has stayed true throughout history is the pursuit of a
better life. Whether modern day pirates escaping Somalia, or ancient female pirates who took to
the seas to curtail the sexist gender norms in place on land. This method of escaping sexism is
brought to light by Laura Sook Duncombe in her interview with Lorraine Boissonneault, in which
she states “this was appealing [for women pirates] because they were able to more completely
divest themselves of the repressive roles that they had been cast in in their own societies. They
were able to make themselves anew.”. This method of taking to the seas to fight gender roles in search of a better life is a key point in this interview, because it showed that there was appeal in the pirate life for these women. This search for a new life is consistent generations later, as a Somalian man was lured into a life of piracy by being shown a taste of luxury. The man says in an interview, “They took care of me in Bossaaso. I used to get everything on my cousin’s name—khat, comfort… I lived that life for two to three weeks. I was living like a Minister.”, and for someone who was an unemployed fisherman just weeks before, he must have never thought about returning to his old life (Yikona et al 11). This statement confirms that people become pirates in search of a better life, regardless of generation, piracy is viewed as a escape from the norm.

A pirate is a member of misrepresented group who, regardless of organization, commits property seizures in a morally or legally ambiguous manner, ranging from armed robbery to virtual thievery in pursuit of freedom and wealth. This is proven by analyzing different types of pirates and seeing how their similarities coincide with a common definition of a pirate. This is significant because the definition of a pirate should be consistent throughout history, as modern technological pirates should share more than just a name with their Golden Age namesakes. Pirates must be consistent in their definition or else they cannot all be called pirates. This definition shows that no matter of time period, these people who share common traits and motivations should be grouped together for the sake of history.
Works Cited


