

DISSERTATION

OVERWORKED AND UNDERPAID: HOLLYWOOD GATEKEEPING IN ASSISTANT  
LABOR AND DISCOURSE

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## ABSTRACT

### OVERWORKED AND UNDERPAID: HOLLYWOOD GATEKEEPING IN ASSISTANT LABOR AND DISCOURSE

Ubiquitous, yet unseen, exploited assistants' unseen labor hems the fabric of Hollywood and entertainment industries. In this dissertation, I interrogate the unseen cultural discourses of Hollywood that obfuscate the exploitation of the overworked, underpaid underclass of future creatives and executives: assistants. I argue that the position of an "assistant" – as an entry-level position for Hollywood executive and creative professions – materially, discursively, and socially acts as a gatekeeping mechanism against workers based on class, ability, race, and gender. Meanwhile, Hollywood production and hiring practices must adapt to contemporary demands for accurate representation of diverse positions on-screen and behind-the-scenes diversity. However, Hollywood is inherently white, masculine, middle-to-upper class, and able-bodiedminded in its expectations and values. Therefore, I demonstrate how Hollywood uses the position of assistantship to *appear* diverse, meanwhile the material and cultural conditions of this position gatekeep difference out of Hollywood's creative and executive decision-making roles.

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*Introduction: Across-the-Line Assistants and Hollywood Gatekeeping*

Each song you hear, outfit you wear, movie you watch, television program you binge, and celebrity you follow has at least one simple thing in common: it would not exist were it not for the hard, unseen work of Hollywood assistants. Long overlooked, assistants in entertainment industries are speaking up about the exploitation and precarity they experience in their entry-level positions, trying to move into creative positions in Los Angeles, New York City, Chicago, or Atlanta. It is hard to comprehend how anyone in Hollywood could be *suffering* when juxtaposed with the incredible profitability of the industry. Nonetheless, indeed, while features and premium television have the potential to rake in hundreds of millions of dollars in profits, in contrast, a 2020 report shows that 80% of assistants (predominantly living in Los Angeles and New York City) make about \$50,000 or less with 35% of assistants making less than \$30,000.<sup>1</sup>

Ubiquitous, yet unseen, exploited assistants' unseen labor hems the fabric of Hollywood and entertainment industries. In this dissertation, I interrogate the unseen cultural discourses of Hollywood that obfuscate the exploitation of the overworked, underpaid underclass of future creatives and executives: assistants. I argue that the position of an "assistant" – as an entry-level position for Hollywood executive and creative professions – materially, discursively, and socially acts as a gatekeeping mechanism against workers based on class, ability, race, and gender. Meanwhile, Hollywood production and hiring practices must adapt to contemporary demands for accurate representation of diverse positions on-screen and behind-the-scenes diversity. However, Hollywood is inherently white, masculine, middle-to-upper class, and able-bodiedminded in its expectations and values. Therefore, I demonstrate how Hollywood uses the position of assistantship to *appear* diverse, meanwhile the material and cultural conditions of this

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<sup>1</sup> #PayUpHollywood, "The 2020 Entertainment Support Staff Survey Results" (Los Angeles: #PayUpHollywood, February 1, 2021).

position gatekeep difference out of Hollywood's creative and executive decision-making roles. This gatekeeping prohibits the promotion of BIPOC, feminine, working class, and/or disabled assistants into positions of institutional power that could affect representational, on-screen changes.

Due to the contemporary shift towards a post-Fordist, neoliberal work structure, because of 1980s industrial deregulation and post-broadcast proliferation of distributors, I posit that the Hollywood industry yielded an ambiguous workforce of "across-the-line" workers. Assistants, as across-the-line workers, thus meet industry's material needs of shrunken budgets *and* increased demands for labor through low pay and long hours. Moreover, as the entirety of this dissertation demonstrates, this across-the-line emergence is not the only way assistantship functions as a "catch-all" for Hollywood's economic, social, and vocational needs.

My project is invested in understanding not only the position of assistantship, but also how Hollywood's above-the-line executives and creatives wield this position to gatekeep against difference. As this dissertation progresses, in each chapter, I illustrate how racist, sexist, classist, and ableist gatekeeping manifests within assistantship. However, before I analyze these gatekeeping tactics, I first illustrate both the organizational structure of Hollywood and assistants' place within it. In the following introduction, after providing both a methodological and theoretical framework for my dissertation, I highlight how assistants' across-the-line position and Hollywood's various organizational expectations facilitate forms of classist, ableist, racist, and sexist oppression. I conclude this introduction with a chapter overview of the remainder of my dissertation. However, before this definitional work and framework constructing, I define who assistants are within Hollywood.

### *Assistants, Their Roles, and their Responsibilities*

I name assistants as an “ambiguous class” in part because there is no single role or definition for the position of assistant. Assistant jobs are inherently nebulous, open to expansion, and dependent on the context in which they enact assisting. This ambiguity provides an opening in which exploitation and various forms of discrimination become justified as job expectations or worker expectations. Nonetheless, after reviewing fifty-six job calls, I have listed here the most frequent responsibilities, descriptions of ideal candidates, descriptions of the work environment, and minimum prerequisites to give an idea of what assistantship looks like at a quotidian level:

calendar/scheduling, travel arrangements, rolling calls, facilitating, managing, and documenting communication via phone and email for supervisors, keeping expense reports, reading and researching for new projects, data entry, running office errands, desk coverage, managing and prioritizing logistics of supervisor’s projects, providing creative input, personal errands for one’s superior, anticipating supervisor’s needs, managing crises, managing social media, managing internship programs, and maintaining knowledge of contemporary, often unpublicized, information about creative projects and executive decisions.

Additionally, employers frequently reference that their assistants must have grit, must be self-motivated and driven, and be knowledgeable on both the position and industry ongoing. And an assistant’s work week is not a typical Monday to Friday, nine-to-five experience. As many assistants reported in interviews, while it is in bad taste to contact assistants outside of working hours, it’s also very common. Many assistants informed me that they are on-call 24/7, unless they confirm boundaries with their supervisors, at the risk of losing their position if their

employer requires their assistant to be consistently available, which functions as a form of debilitation.

Before returning to my description of assistants' labor, I briefly want to highlight how many gatekeeping tactics function to debilitate. Throughout this dissertation I illustrate how – as a result of both their ever-expanding, ambiguous job expectations *and* the capitalist push that urges workers to reach an imagined potentiality past any person's ability – assistants are constantly being debilitated, or the profound process of being worn out.<sup>2</sup> Grounded in Marxist disability studies, debilitation is the process by which neoliberal capitalist demand, with its profit-driven pursuit, places responsibility of survival on individuals rather than addressing the ways the *system* overworks and incapacitates them.<sup>3</sup> The rate at which an assistant is debilitated is dependent on how well they are able to assimilate to Hollywood's white, masculine, middle-to-upper class, able-bodied cultural expectations. Each chapter illustrates the specific ways different identity positions experience debilitation as a form of gatekeeping. In other words, throughout this dissertation, I evidence how racism, sexism, classism, and ableism uniquely, but connectedly, debilitate assistants. Nonetheless, understanding the position itself and its organizational context is necessary to this dissertation.

Broadly speaking, across-the-line workers' labor centers on creative service, comprised of various tasks ranging from “proxying for and filtering non-creative work away from employers, to delimiting creative solutions to problems (for example, generating writer lists or narrowing a field of a hundred scripts to the best).”<sup>4</sup> Run of the mill requirements of keeping

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<sup>2</sup> Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Maim : Debility, Capacity, Disability*, Anima (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 13.

<sup>3</sup> Puar, xv, 8–11.

<sup>4</sup> Erin Hill, *Never Done: A History of Women's Work in Media Production* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 133, 217.

calendars, meetings, and communication organized are typical to across-the-line roles. In addition to this, “assistant work is usually some combination of clerical and administrative work, personal errands, and creative- executive–level work on an employer’s projects, as well as a heaping helping of service and emotional labor.”<sup>5</sup>

For example, the job requirement for a writer’s room assistant typically looks like taking notes in the writers’ room and sharing them with the writers, emailing these notes to showrunners, producers, or directors connected to the project, at times taking lunch orders for the office, scheduling on behalf of head writer, and keeping track of and reporting out decisions and changes to the writers’ work in pre-production and production. However, depending on the specific position, a writer’s room assistant might *also* have to grab lunch or coffee orders, run professional and/or personal errands for the writer’s room, and various other tasks not *directly* related to the writer’s room.

Additionally, as the above example suggests, my population of interest in this dissertation is that of assistants to creatives and executives in development (writers, financial executives, showrunners, casting directors...), pre-production (directors, executive producers, talent...), the creative and executive sides of production (staff writers, in addition to positions that continue to oversee the text’s development, like showrunners, directors, and funders), and representation (managers, agents, talent). To better understand the specifics of the assistant population that I study, I briefly summarize the way a mediated text is produced from idea to distribution.

My academic inquiry observes the creative, executive, and representative silos of the entertainment industry. The process of television (and, somewhat similarly, film) production

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<sup>5</sup> Hill, 215.

work can be broken into five, chronologically-positioned siloes – development, pre-production, production, post-production, distribution – and a sixth silo – representation – as connected to each of the other five silos in their respective stages. I describe these six stages and silos below, providing more detail to the processes of development, pre-production, distribution, and representation, as production and post-production are past the scope of this project (for reference: see Mayer and Caldwell’s work on below-the-line labor).<sup>6</sup>

A television text begins in development, wherein writers create and pitch an idea – potentially with a producer, actor, or showrunner who has already optioned and attached to the idea and is working with or independent of the writer to pitch to studios. Depending on the form of the pitch and who was brought into development pre-pitch, the development process splits into two tracks with budgeting happening simultaneously in negotiations on both tracks. On one track, after a successful pitch by a writer, this idea is either sold or optioned to a studio, wherein the packaging process begins. During packaging, negotiations between the studio executives, producers, writers, directors/showrunners, and the agents and managers who represent them begin to determine the logistics of talent and staff and meet the studio’s standards before greenlighting a project or putting it in turnaround, where the studio technically owns it but is not yet satisfied with the assembly of staff or talent.

On the second track, attaching, or connecting oneself to a project, takes place at two stages in the development process. First, it takes place pre-pitch, when directors, producers, showrunners, or actors invest in a writer’s idea, as summarized above. Occasionally, in this process, agents will also get involved to package their clients together on a project. Then, once

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<sup>6</sup> John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Culture : Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television*, Console-Ing Passions (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008); Vicki Mayer, “The Production of Extras in a Precarious Creative Economy,” in *Precarious Creativity*, ed. Michael Curtin and Kevin Sanson, Global Media, Local Labor (University of California Press, 2016), 63–73, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1ffjn40.9](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1ffjn40.9).

the text is sold or optioned to a studio after their pitch, the studio executives and text's creatives go into negotiations on staff and talent. These negotiations last until the studio is satisfied and greenlights the project.

Once a project is greenlit, it moves into the pre-production phase/silo. Pre-production is the planning phase of a project wherein the idea from development transforms into a blueprint that will later be manifest in the production of the text. Pre-production begins by the "crewing up" process, wherein depending on the scope of the project, the producer and/or showrunner hires a line producer, location manager, director, cast, production designer, editor, musical composer, and graphics and special effects personnel, along with essential crew like camera operators, audio recordists, lighting designers and areas of production like make-up, wardrobe, props, construction, transportation, catering, etc. Budgetary and scheduling plans are laid for production crews, locations, and equipment rentals, and these logistical necessities of scheduling and budgeting for production are finalized.

Once the logistics are laid, a project moves from pre-production into production, wherein the material process of capturing video and audio takes place. Producers, directors, and/or showrunners still oversee the discursive process and management of production. However, the material work in this phase is done by the crew that was hired on in pre-production. The material from this stage then moves from the capturing phase in production, to the editing phase of post-production. In post-production, the visual and audio aspects are edited, considering A-roll, B-roll, cutaways, sound effects, music, etc., to craft a cohesive narrative and cinematic experience in the final product of a text. Lastly, once a text is finalized, it moves into distribution, wherein workers receive the last of their compensation, advertising and promotional

campaigns go into effect, rights and licensing decisions are finalized, and the text is released to the public.

Along this production cycle, there are many opportunities for workers to infuse meaning into the product of the text. Entertainment industries are not only sites of cultural meaning that are cyclically informed by and informing broader public belief and discourse.<sup>7</sup> In addition, industries are made up of multiple subcultures that must collaborate to produce a cohesive text. Therefore, I investigate assistants' subcultures within the broader industry to better understand how meaning is infused into texts at different stages and levels of creation.<sup>8</sup> I extend Caldwell's work on production cultures to evidence how the position of assistants "express[es] an emerging but unstable economic and social order in Hollywood"<sup>9</sup> evidenced in their work expectations, rituals, deep texts, and precarious positionality in the Hollywood hierarchy.

I suggest that the position of assistants and their across-the-line status emerged as an answer to many of the demands of Hollywood's post-Fordist organizational structure. Put otherwise, as Hollywood industry practices split from studio systems and departmental work became isolated, even when working on the same project (evidenced through the above siloing), Hollywood became dependent on clerical, administrative, and communicative work of across-the-line assistants.<sup>10</sup> I introduce the concept of across-the-line labor, as it borrows from various aspects of "above-the-line" and "below-the-line" labor that Hollywood has traditionally been separated into. Additionally, the "across" characterization of assistants' work, as they work as communicative connectors in the production process, illustrates how both symbolically and

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<sup>7</sup> Caldwell, *Production Culture*.

<sup>8</sup> Caldwell.

<sup>9</sup> Caldwell, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Miranda J. Banks, "Gender Below-the-Line: Defining Feminist Production Studies," in *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, ed. Vicki Mayer, John T. Caldwell, and Miranda J. Banks (London: Taylor and Francis, 2009), 8–9.



discursively, their position in Hollywood is a liminal one. However, above, below, or across the line labor are given salience in the context of the material and symbolic meaning of “the line.”

The line is a commonly used term in Hollywood that refers both to a budgetary and social hierarchy “line” in the creation of entertainment texts. Economically, the line refers to workers’ positions in relation to creative and technical costs, “establishing a hierarchy that stratifies levels of creative and craft labor.”<sup>11</sup> Ideologically, the function of the line is two-fold. First, above-the-line workers are understood as the creatives who generate symbolic meaning through the products of their work;<sup>12</sup> “The work of writers, directors, producers, and celebrity actors is considered, and is compensated, above the line.”<sup>13</sup> Above-the-line comes with an ideological symbol of prestige, accolade, and fame, as these are the names found on movie posters and achieve celebrity-status like the one seen here for 2011 action-thriller, *Drive*. Conversely, below-



Figure 1. *Drive* Movie Poster

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<sup>11</sup> Banks, “Gender Below-the-Line.”

<sup>12</sup> Miranda Janis Banks, *Bodies of Work: Rituals of Doubling and the Erasure of Film /TV Production Labor* (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2006); David Hesmondhalgh, *The Cultural Industries, The Cultural Industries*, Fourth edition., YBP Print DDA (London: Sage Publications Ltd., 2018), 22, 70–73.

<sup>13</sup> Banks, “Gender Below-the-Line,” 89–90.

the-line creatives and administrators remain largely unknown outside of Hollywood.

Additionally, above-the-line work predominantly takes place in the development and pre-production silos in the creation of a text and connects to the kind of labor that takes place in representation, as often above-the-line workers hire managers and agents.

Conversely, below-the-line “is used to diminish workers with fixed salaries,” standardized by union contracts, “distinctly separate from creatively or managerial important above-the-line workers with negotiable salaries.”<sup>14</sup> Below-the-line workers are typically the blue-collar workers who perform day-to-day, on-set, manual labor, needed in a production (e.g. cinematographers, editors, production designers, costume designers, gaffers, camera loaders, body doubles, hair departments, make-up departments). Notable, the socioeconomic relations of white-collar and blue-collar labor still translate in discourses across “the line” in Hollywood. In other words, Hollywood is not exempt from the raced, classed, ableist, and gendered ideological stigmas connected to the colors of one’s collar in broader U.S. culture.

Plainly, this dissertation focuses on the assistants to above-the-line professionals. However, these assistants do not have the same fiscal and social privileges of their supervisors. In effort with some of my interviewees, I theorize that this group of assistants exist as “across-the-line.” I make this distinction to highlight the specificity of the “class” of assistants I am talking about. To be clear, below-the-line assistants do exist, however a below-the-line assistant would typically be considered apprentices rather than assistants, and there are fewer of them as compared to assistants I analyze throughout the remainder of this dissertation. Moreover, like assistants, below-the-line workers’ labor is unseen, but the positions differ in that below-the-line workers’ labor has protections due to labor unions. Suffice to say both above-the-line and below-

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<sup>14</sup> Hill, *Never Done*, 8–9.

the-line workers have worked to unionize workers to protect their health/care, work safety and security, and engage in collective bargaining for workers' rights and negotiating fixed or flexible salaries. Assistants, however, do not fit into either of these categories. Gilded or unionized negotiations on behalf of higher-ranking assistants' rights only began as writers' assistants and script coordinators (who are ideologically considered assistants) were permitted to unionize within IATSE in the summer of 2019.

Returning to the idea of assistants' across-the-line position, this perspective is one that is adjacent to existing hierarchies in Hollywood, additionally, requires that assistants be knowledgeable of and speak across the above and below-the-line production processes of a text. This requirement of assistants is largely because they often exist as invisible professionals who make the connections and navigate the post-Fordist shift – dividing manual and intellectual labor into distinct professions – of contract work that has become commonplace in the project-based, highly social and collaborative Hollywood industry.<sup>15</sup> As industry shifted from an understanding of quasi-Fordist vertically integrated production to post-Fordist modes of production, largely dependent on contract and gig work, drawn from various production companies, studios, and independent contractors, the need for across-the-line labor increased yielding the position we currently understand as assistants.

While much has been written about above and below-the-line labor, production cultures, and political economy of entertainment industries, there is very little written in academic arenas about the *existence* of assistants (save for the works of Erin Hill, and, briefly, John Caldwell),<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Richard Florida, "The New Industrial Revolution," *Futures: The Journal of Policy, Planning and Futures Studies* 23, no. 6 (1991): 559–76; Richard L Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class, Revisited, The rise of the creative class, Revisited* (New York: Basic Books, 2012); George Pleios, "Communication and Symbolic Capitalism. Rethinking Marxist Communication Theory in the Light of the Information Society," *TripleC* 10, no. 2 (2012): 230–52.

<sup>16</sup> Caldwell, *Production Culture*; Hill, *Never Done*; Erin Hill, "Hollywood Assisting," in *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, ed. Vicki Mayer, John T. Caldwell, and Miranda J. Banks (London: Taylor and Francis, 2009).

let alone their roles, duties, and position in existing hierarchies. Part of my academic project in this dissertation is both giving shape to what is missing, and infusing existing theorizations and writings with data collected from assistants, whose voices are not explicitly represented in scholarship.

### *The Methodological and Theoretical Framework of this Study*

My project attempts to fill the absence in the examination of survey data by assistants, ethnographic fieldwork from 2019-2021, deep texts including “how-to be an assistant” books and blogs, and thirty-two, 60–90-minute interviews with current and past assistants. In this effort, I position myself within British Cultural Studies and the emergent field of critical media industry studies. Critical media industry studies is both a methodological and hermeneutic approach to media studies interested in understanding culture as a product of both social and material conditions.<sup>17</sup> These analysis “are not simply about the meanings generated [media products] ..., but about meanings in the material sense of discursive practices that involve physical bodies, physical workplaces, the materiality of households or other viewing spaces, and the subjective feelings generated (as well as the more idea-oriented aspects involved).”<sup>18</sup> Indeed, in this project, I connect how material, discursive, and social conditions of a Hollywood production has the ability to influence the industry’s textual output as a whole. Understanding production culture is just as important as understanding the products it produces.

In efforts to illustrate both the sub-disciplinary bounds and methodological practices of media industry studies, Herbert, Lotz, and Punathambekar state, “cultural studies, in fact, prompts us to understand media industries as sites of meaning making and power, defined

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<sup>17</sup> Stuart Hall, “Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms,” *Media, Culture & Society* 2, no. 1 (1980): 72.

<sup>18</sup> Julie D’Acci, “Cultural Studies, Television Studies, and the Crisis in the Humanities,” in *Television after TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*, ed. Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson (Durham: Durham : Duke University Press, 2004), 436.

contextually within a wider field of lived and social experiences and enables researchers to draw upon diverse research methods from both the humanities and social sciences, as well as diverse sources of data.”<sup>19</sup> Herbert et al. continue to demonstrate these various methods, approaches, and forms of data throughout their book with each chapter centered “around levels or scales of industry study.”<sup>20</sup> These levels/scales are understood as (1) individuals and roles, (2) “production” cultures, (3) organizations, (4) industries and practices, and (5) the macro view.<sup>21</sup> While these all levels can work as self-contained bounds for researchers, I contend that the analysis of the role and position of assistants transcend the bounds of the first four of these levels *and* that the analysis of assistants within any of these levels implies an analysis of the other levels because assistants are the individuals who move into the decision-making positions of power – at least, that is how the system is designed.

My project reflects Herbert et al.’s methodological flexibility and ability to analyze media industries through multiple data sources. Explicitly, in Summer 2021, I collected survey data from forty assistants who have access to the online closed, assistant-only forum in which the survey was posted. The questions of this survey were crafted to better understand assistants’

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<sup>19</sup> Daniel Herbert, Amanda Lotz, and Aswin Punathambekar, *Media Industry Studies: Short Introductions* (Wiley, 2020), 22.

<sup>20</sup> Herbert, Lotz, and Punathambekar, 29.

<sup>21</sup> Briefly, Herbert et al. define these levels as follows: “Thus industrial study of individuals and roles within the media often have a double charge: first, to provide a clear, detailed portrait of that specific individual or role and, second, to demonstrate how these figures illustrate traits or issues facing media industries” (p. 48). For “production” cultures, “one common feature of this scholarship is the consistent interest in looking at media production as a site of meaning making – not necessarily the meanings that are made in the media texts and commodities, but more in the meanings and values that media workers hold about themselves and their jobs. ... While many kinds of media industry study might conduct similar research, production cultures work consistently aims to interpret such data somewhat differently, as specific manifestations of a community’s cultural meanings and values” (p. 66). In terms of organizational analyses, they “examine specific companies or institutions that typically operate in one or more domains of industry and that change over time in response to economic, technological, and cultural forces. ... [Organizational-level research] might seek to explain the interconnection among roles within an organization or how they negotiate various pressures from those that employ them, how they assert agency in their tasks, and the simple yet powerful constraints that shape how and what they do” (pp. 67-68). “Industry-level research explores how different media industries are organized to produce and circulate a specific kind of cultural commodity and the consequences of that industrial organization” (p. 81).

demographic make-up, cultural expectations, workplace experiences, and the frequency with which they experience discrimination in Hollywood industry. Additionally, an assistant interview-participant provided me with results of #PayUpHollywood's – an organization committed to shining a light on the industry-wide abuses assistants and coordinators experience – internal survey that 1014 assistants about the 2020 work year, their pay and benefits, tenure in industry, and work experiences.

In addition to this survey data, I also conducted semi-structured, thematically constructed interviews with assistants from 2019 to 2021. My interview participants were collected largely via snowball sampling, wherein assistants suggested colleagues and friends that I could reach out to for interviewing. In addition to this word-of-mouth connection making for interviewees, I also included an option in my 2021 survey posted to the assistant-only forum for a follow-up interview with me. I did both the snowball and survey sampling to get an array of opinions from various social circles. Additionally, I chose to do semi-structured interviews in 2019 to gather data about what it means to be an assistant, as there is little written about assistantship in academia or popular press. Additionally, in these interviews, I learned of the “deep texts” that I read up on, like *The Assistant Handbook*, and different websites that offered advice or job calls which I used in my analyses throughout this dissertation. I continued with semi-structured interviews in 2021 so that my study could follow the various forms and experiences that interviewees had; I wanted to center their voices and experiences in what they deemed important for me to know while also questioning around similar themes like experiences with supervisors, how they got to their place across-the-line, and what it means to pay dues in industry throughout all interviews to compare differences.

I engage interviews and their analyses through the practice of “studying sideways,” which is interested in studying across different power hierarchies, rather than analyzing them up and down.<sup>22</sup> I utilize this form of inquiry in two ways: first, as is implied within the method itself, I as the researcher share the same social-professional “space” as my “informants.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, and as my interviewees explained to me, assistantships in Hollywood, especially agents’ assistants, are known to be the “grad students of industry.” The result of this power dynamic (or potential lack thereof) is an openness and sort of kinship with each other. Because I am in a similar position within academia to my interviewees, survey respondents, and population of inquiry within the entertainment industry, I attained a sort of de facto trust; a sense that I *get* it to an extent and that I am an ally in their struggle. In this sense, though it is past the scope of this dissertation, studying sideways could allow for a broader analysis of power structures for the similarities and differences in the mythologies, cultures, and gatekeeping across industries. Second, studying sideways allows me to understand *assistants’* culture, which is decidedly more egalitarian than Hollywood hierarchies of labor, as expressed in interviews.

Interviews took place in one-on-one and group settings both in-person in Los Angeles and virtually via video chat platforms. I decided to do both one-on-one and group settings out of both convenience and to shape the interviews. On the one hand, group interviews often inspired connection between assistants and the interviews became a sort of story exchange to provide me with examples of “war stories” that they had experienced. On the other hand, one-on-one interviews allowed me to ask more in-depth follow-up questions and often lead to more vulnerable stories with the safety of total anonymity.

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<sup>22</sup> Herbert, Lotz, and Punathambekar, *Media Industry Studies*, 54; Sherry Ortner, “Studying Sideways: Ethnographic Access in Hollywood,” in *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, ed. Vicki Mayer, John T. Caldwell, and Miranda J. Banks (London: Taylor and Francis, 2009), 184.

<sup>23</sup> Ortner, “Studying Sideways,” 184.

While in Los Angeles, various assistant-interviewees provided me access to industrial spaces – e.g., writers’ offices, common public spaces for meetings – and allowed me to “shadow” them in their work-from-home environments and expectations. This access permitted Caldwell’s extension of Geertz’s ethnographic technique to “look over the shoulder” of assistants and their work to better understand the “social semantics” of these cultural forms as interpretive, critical, and industrial theory-building texts for analysis.<sup>24</sup> This “over the shoulder” look shaped the way I observed my interview data once I began my analysis.

My process of interview analysis consisted of recording interviews for later transcription, done both by me and by a transcription service. After transcribed, I anonymized all identifiers for assistants or their workplaces and sent the transcripts to participants for approval. Once approved or edits were made to assistants’ comfort level, I performed a textual analysis taking notes on themes of racial, gendered, classed, or ableist discrimination. I also looked for descriptions of paying dues, job processes, hierarchy within industry, and other aspects key to Hollywood’s organizational culture. Each decision for analysis was made from a British cultural studies position.

I shaped my methodological and analytical approaches within Havens, Lotz, and Tinic’s critical media industry studies’ paradigm. Other critical approaches examine macro-level political economy studies of industry or more micro-level discursive approaches which are unconcerned with power in the production and meaning making processes. By contrast, critical industry studies is a mid-level, “helicopter view” approach that “emphasizes the complex interplay of economic and cultural forces” with “attention to the complex and ambivalent

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<sup>24</sup> Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 5.



operations of power as exercised through the struggle for hegemony.”<sup>25</sup> In practical terms, as Herbert, Lotz, and Punathambekar describe that media industry studies enacts,

critical analysis of *how individuals, institutions, and industries produce and circulate cultural forms* in historically and geographically contextualized ways... [which might take form in] the routines, norms, and infrastructural conditions in which *cultural* dynamics are worked out as likewise central to study, and include studies of media making and circulation as cultures in their own right.<sup>26</sup>

Media industry studies are centrally concerned with the historically constructed power latent in quotidian practices that foster hegemonic messages, which are then distributed to national and international audiences.

I posit that assistants are an essential entry point for this helicopter view of examining the meaning-making processes that manifest in the everyday material, discursive, and social practices of gatekeeping in Hollywood.<sup>27</sup> Because they are entry-level positions and culturally considered disposable, trends of gatekeeping are most obvious and traceable at this position. Additionally, assistants have no vocational protections, like above- or below-the-line positions do, and the position’s inherent ambiguity permits material precarity, discursive conditions, and social practices of discrimination that function to gatekeep difference out of above-the-line positions.

### *The Construction of Hollywood Gatekeeping*

Gatekeepers are people of particular social or vocational status, who are “responsible for making the decision between ‘in’ and ‘out’,” who have symbolic authority to “influence the

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<sup>25</sup> Timothy Havens, Amanda D. Lotz, and Serra Tinic, “Critical Media Industry Studies: A Research Approach,” *Communication, Culture & Critique* 2, no. 2 (2009): 235.

<sup>26</sup> Herbert, Lotz, and Punathambekar, *Media Industry Studies: Short Introductions*, 7, emphasis original.

<sup>27</sup> Havens, Lotz, and Tinic, “Critical Media Industry Studies: A Research Approach.”

future valuation of cultural goods.”<sup>28</sup> Namely, gatekeepers play a mediating role, allowing access to those they deem as worthy and limiting access to others; “These mediating practices include evaluation, networking, disseminating, marketing, and selling practices, and are performed by cultural mediators or intermediaries.”<sup>29</sup> Scholarship often focuses on the role of gatekeepers in cultural products, however, as Hamann illustrates, “gatekeepers may also affect the career trajectories of cultural producers more directly by controlling access to established social positions.”<sup>30</sup>

In this project, I am interested in this type of gatekeeper, as “career gatekeepers” influence not only who has access to playing a creative or executive role in Hollywood, but also the output of Hollywood products. Because assistantship is an entry-level position for future above-the-line creatives and executives who will become the decision-makers in creating, representing, and funding what stories are heard and which stay as pitches, their superiors (aka “career gatekeepers”) influence Hollywood’s future textual output. In other words, above-the-line workers gatekeep not only *which* assistants they promote into above-the-line positions, but also the potential types of cultural products that see the light of day.

Additionally, Hollywood’s gatekeeping process is implied in assistants’ across-the-line status. While assistants’ work, indeed, must navigate various production subcultures, they also are working to get promoted *across* into above-the-line positions, and are frequently gatekept out. The process of cultural or career gatekeeping is inherently subjective, as gatekeeping is based on the social and cultural organization and “the characteristics of labor markets and career

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<sup>28</sup> Mads Møller T Andersen, “Gatekeeping within the Simplicity Regime: Evaluative Practices in Television Idea Development,” *Media, Culture & Society* 42, no. 4 (2020): 573; Julian Hamann and Stefan Beljean, “Career Gatekeeping in Cultural Fields,” *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 9, no. 1 (2021): 45–46.

<sup>29</sup> Hamann and Beljean, “Career Gatekeeping in Cultural Fields,” 46.

<sup>30</sup> Hamann and Beljean, 46–47.

structures in which cultural producers compete with each other.”<sup>31</sup> To understand gatekeeping in Hollywood, one must have an understanding of the labor market and cultural beliefs that industry is built on in their organizational culture. Briefly, by organizational culture, I refer to the shared meanings that distinguish the organization as different from other organizations.<sup>32</sup> It is based on shared beliefs, values, and expectations of discourse to promote internal integration and external adaptation.<sup>33</sup>

Gatekeeping is a function that determines in- and out-group constructions. Within this dissertation, I illustrate how Hollywood is culturally white, masculine, able-bodied/minded, and middle-to-upper class. Therefore, this dissertation points to the ways that Hollywood executives and creatives gatekeep against assistants who do not conform to this cultural norm. Assistants’ across-the-line nature within Hollywood’s fractured, post-Fordist organizational structure creates an ambiguity around cultural expectations that allows these forms of discrimination to sustain. Hollywood must remain profitable. To do so, its cultural expectations around race, class, ability, and gender must *appear* to progress with mainstream political stances. In this dissertation, I demonstrate how much of Hollywood’s political and representational progress is an *appearance*, and the close examination of assistants’ experiences illustrates how industry continues to surreptitiously gatekeep against difference. To be clear, I address manifestations that illustrate how racist, sexist, classist, and ableist gatekeeping are enacted and naturalized at the assistant-level.

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<sup>31</sup> Hamann and Beljean, 79.

<sup>32</sup> Stephan Robbins and Timothy Judge, *Organizational Behavior*, MyManagementLab Series (Prentice Hall, 2011), <https://books.google.com/books?id=RmhaAAAAYAAJ>.

<sup>33</sup> Elina Penttinen, Marjut Jyrkinen, and Elisabeth Wide, *Emotional Workplace Abuse A New Research Approach*, 1st ed. 2019., Palgrave EBA 2016 – 2019 Imprints (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 5.

Broadly speaking, however, a lack of managerial training for above-the-line creatives and executives or standard practices poses widespread issues, including forms of implicit gatekeeping, as each chapter of this dissertation addresses. There is no standard required training for supervisors in Hollywood. And, as one assistant informed me, the trainings that managerial positions *do* receive – in this case, the Writer’s Guild of America’s (WGA) showrunner’s training – from studios is minimal:

**Ava:** None of these people are actually trained to be managers. They're just people who have been put in management positions, which is horrible. ... I can't tell you how many of my problems with people I've worked with really just go back to people being very kind and nice, but having zero sense of how you are a manager. Just having literally no skillset there, which again, not necessarily through any fault of their own. This industry rewards people who are creative, not people who are good managers. They put people who are creative into management positions, where being a showrunner is being a manager of 150 plus people, and not everyone is great about that.

**Izzy:** How long is the WGA Showrunners Program?

**Ava:** 25 minutes. From what I was talking to somebody, ... it sounds like most of that program is actually about budgets, and casting, and that they spend basically no time teaching you to be a manager. That's not what the program is for at all. It's to fill in gaps where it's like, if you are a writer who somehow got given a show, here's how you're not going to cost the studios \$10 million. I think that's actually the point of the program, it has nothing to do with training to be a manager.

In short, Hollywood above-the-line creatives and executives are *not* trained, and sometimes do not desire, to be managers/supervisors to assistants. Therefore, even in the cultural rearing of Hollywood’s organizational practices, above-the-line subjective perspectives, beliefs, and practice result in ambiguous standards and expectations of how to lead, treat, and train employees – aka assistants.

One result of this lack of training, and subsequent across-the-line ambiguity, is in the differential treatment of and expectations for assistants today. For example, the differences between Michael and Lara’s experiences as assistants demonstrates varying how cultural

expectations and differential treatment work in tandem to gatekeep against “difference.” Michael began working in industry as an agency assistant in 2019. As of Fall 2021, Michael has been promoted into management of development and production at a production company. When I asked him “what advice would you give to aspiring assistants?” his response centered on finding good bosses who you trust and can provide mentorship and growth in the area the assistant wants to excel. In other words, while successful execution of an assistant’s job duties is essential, to “make it” as an assistant, one must be able to trust their supervisor and find one who will train them as an apprentice. Michael’s success absolutely was developed out of hard work and effort he put in. However, his promotions and movement out of assistantship would not have been possible without the mentorship and guidance of his superiors.

By contrast, Lara persisted in her across-the-line status for over five years with little upward mobility. Besides the gendered differences between Michael and Lara, the major divergence these two expressed was in their experiences in industry, specifically with supervisors. Where Michael said he had only experienced one boss who was not supportive, Lara had repeated experiences of sexist, classist, and ableist abuses causing her to “suffer from extreme trauma [from her] work experiences.” Indeed, Lara as a well-educated, hard-working individual could not continue in the toxic environment where she was underpaid, held responsible for her health insurance expenses, and expected to additionally endure psychological harm resulting from supervisors who “never confronted their trauma that they experienced” as assistants and now “take it out on others.”

Lara’s story is one that illustrates two key elements of this dissertation. First, the lack of consistency in training and the role’s expectations creates of cycle with each experience informing their later managerial practices. Assistants’ lack of access to mentorship and

apprenticeship slows their promotion time and forces them to stay in precarious across-the-line positions longer, as their mental and physical health suffer under professional and financial distress. Assistants will either have excellent mentors with leadership skills to train and promote, fostering an apprenticeship relationship that shapes assistants' later managerial disposition; alternatively, they have supervisors who view them as minions, rather than future media workers, and mistreat them via various forms of social gatekeeping evidence throughout this dissertation. how assistants' positionalities affect how supervisors subjectively lead and/or gatekeep assistants in or out of Hollywood.

Second, Lara's story illustrates how various identity positions that do not fit Hollywood's cultural norm experience additional forms of gatekeeping. Lara experienced not only a lack of training but also emotional workplace abuse (EWA), a common form of sexist gatekeeping. EWA refers to behaviors and practices, such as "patterned maltreatment of the target, which can be work-task related (withholding information, ostracism, exclusion, belittlement of achievements) or personal (gossiping, violent outbursts, ridiculing the target in front of others)," that affect the target's integrity, sense of self, and sense of ability, contributing to a toxic work environment.<sup>34</sup> I examine assistants' EWA through the feminist, organizational standpoint that Penttinen et al. put forward, paying attention to how EWA violates a public-private division, the continuum of abuse and violations no matter the target, and the silencing effect victims experience. I contend that Hollywood's patriarchal organizational expectations justify EWA as expected and unremarkable, resulting from working with the "big personalities" of Hollywood.

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<sup>34</sup> Penttinen, Jyrkinen, and Wide, 3.

The subjective nature of promotion and gatekeeping, additionally, affects on-screen representation. Moreover, as media industry studies indicates, both material lack and cultural discourses yield classist and ableist gatekeeping that hinder lower class and disabled assistants out of above-the-line positions. These forms of gatekeeping ripple from behind-the-scenes into on-screen representation, as is evidenced in the representation of disability. Although approximately twenty-six percent of the U.S. population are disabled individuals, only six percent of Hollywood assistants identify as disabled, which dwindles further as industry practices further gatekeep them from above-the-line positions.<sup>35</sup>

This gatekeeping ultimately shapes the representation of difference that appears on-screen. A report of on-screen disability shows that only 3.5% of television's regular characters were disabled, "with very few of those being authentic."<sup>36</sup> The consequence of differential (mis)treatment in addition to implicit and structural forms of gatekeeping manifests in on-screen representations that the broader consumer audience views in television shows and films. These statistics and disparities originate, in part, at the assistant-level. The experiences assistants have with their managers discursively and intentionally inform their own leadership disposition, *and* naturalizes the industry's cultural understandings and organizational expectations.

Within Hollywood, cultural expectations and gatekeeping at the assistant-level are maintained through the "paying dues" mythology. Briefly, the "paying dues" mythology – a familiar concept about American labor practices when considering this project's broader implications in the conclusion – for assistants, as Caldwell notes, functions as a way to craft cultural hegemony within Hollywood.<sup>37</sup> Unlike paying dues in a union, which is built to protect

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<sup>35</sup> #PayUpHollywood, "The 2020 Entertainment Support Staff Survey Results."

<sup>36</sup> Megan Townsend and Raina Deerwater, "WHERE WE ARE ON TV 2020 – 2021" (GLAAD, 2021).

<sup>37</sup> Caldwell, *Production Culture*.

workers' rights, this "paying dues" mythology conversely functions rhetorically to legitimate forms of gatekeeping addressed within this dissertation. "Paying dues," by design, legitimates gatekeeping in industry. For example, Hollywood insiders legitimize assistant's low pay and lack of healthcare benefits, forms of ableist and classist gatekeeping, as part of their "paying dues" process. Assistants are rarely provided a living wage, appropriate healthcare support, and their working conditions, although required by law, do not necessarily meet ADA standards. Each of these aspects act as gatekeeping tactics that can disallow entry into industry and are permitted as part of what assistants have to "get through" to get promoted into above-the-line positions. This legitimization hegemonically protects an exploitative system servicing a very profitable entertainment industry that depends on assistants' overworked, underpaid labor. In the following chapters, I interrogate gatekeeping practices and conditions that work to uphold whiteness, masculinity, middle-to-upper class values, and compulsory ablebodiedness of Hollywood. These discourses of gatekeeping ripple into industrial logics, the types of texts that become available to us, and arguably influence broader American hegemonic beliefs on race, gender, ability, and class.

### *Chapter Overviews*

In chapter one, I investigate how racist ideologies and practices of Hollywood Jim Crow extend into across-the-line work to gatekeep BIPOC assistants out of above-the-line positions. Specifically, after tracing Hollywood's post-civil rights history, I argue that Hollywood's contemporary industrial discourses mimic the same faux-solidarity transitions that took place in industry in the mid-to-late 1970s. Namely, I illustrate how Hollywood exploits the *image* of BIPOC assistants via tokenization to *appear* more inclusive. However, while they project this



image of Hollywood progress, these same BIPOC assistants are fiscally precarious and gatekept out of above-the-line positions via discourses of “unbankability.”

The concept of unbankability, or assumed lack of profitability, is an ever present obstacle and self-fulfilling prophecy that undergirds the workings of the Hollywood Jim Crow as a mass discourse.<sup>38</sup> The Hollywood Jim Crow is a historically based, cultural-industrial practice maintained by industry insiders to “explicitly and deliberately” construct racial hierarchy and inequality by “forging connections to the Jim Crow system” based on broader U.S. cultural beliefs and/or economic value that ultimately impact industry workers’ vocational access and opportunities.<sup>39</sup> I integrate Erigha’s study on the Hollywood Jim Crow to examine how race-based discourses maintain Hollywood’s golden gates of access – including promotion practices, tokenizing, and spotlighting assistants of color.

Expanding from this institutional context and history, I then turn my attention to forms of sexist gatekeeping in chapter two. In this chapter, I illustrate how gendered discourses have maintained Hollywood’s patriarchal roots into the present-day via emotional workplace abuse (EWA) as gatekeeping. Moreover, I also argue that Hollywood’s white patriarchal roots are contemporarily maintained via white “girlboss” women executives and creatives. Namely, I historicize how post-civil rights equal opportunity policies and diversity initiatives largely benefitted white women, who simultaneously fulfilled “diversity quotas” while maintaining Hollywood’s whiteness. I highlight how these girlbosses enact EWA to approximate and maintain Hollywood’s patriarchal gender expectations. In this chapter, I examine both how women assistants navigate Hollywood’s ol’ boys club, and how women supervisors are often the

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<sup>38</sup> Maryann Erigha, *The Hollywood Jim Crow : The Racial Politics of the Movie Industry*, YBP Print DDA (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

<sup>39</sup> Erigha, 5.

perpetrators of EWA against assistants. In both cases, I interrogate these practices within the white patriarchal environment from which they emerge.

Additionally, the concept of EWA extends into chapter three. While EWA is sexist in its form, in chapter three I examine how the content of this abuse is often ableist and classist in nature. Examining both cultural expectations and material conditions of being an assistant, I argue that Hollywood positions working class and disabled assistants as misfits. I highlight how low pay and lack of health benefits debilitate working class and disabled assistants, thereby gatekeeping them out of above-the-line positions. I focus on how EWA and lack of accessibility additionally gatekeepers against disability in work conditions and job requirements.

In my conclusion chapter, I answer the many “why” questions of this dissertation: Why do assistants put up with this? Why are you studying assistants? and Why does this matter? In response to these questions, I round out my dissertation illustrating the role of the industrial mythology of “paying dues.” Namely, I demonstrate how this myth is internalized as belief that if an assistant only worked harder and debilitated themselves that much more in service to the industry, they would “make it.” In other words, “paying dues” functions within Hollywood as a justification for the debilitation and labor abuse that assistants endure, while entertainment industries gain fiscal capital from assistant exploitation. Connected to this industrial myth, I answer “why assistants” by reviewing the salient points within my dissertation. Further, I demonstrate how assistants preserve, by and large, to be able to affect change on the industry’s racist, sexist, ableist, and classists practices. However, as this dissertation illustrates, I expand on these points illustrating that by buying into “paying dues,” assistants buy into Hollywood’s ableist, sexist, racist, capitalistic structure. Finally, I answer questions of importance by illustrating how this ambiguous, apprenticeship-based organizational structure is not exclusive to

Hollywood. Plainly, I very briefly trace similarities to academia, demonstrating the importance of continued efforts made to DEI efforts and an explicit need for anti-racist, -sexist, -classist, and -ableist education for academics (professors, administration, and researchers, alike). We, like Hollywood creatives and executives, have cultural influence. We, like Hollywood creatives and executives, have the power to open the (ivory) gates to difference.

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*“No Wonder You have a Diversity Problem”: Hollywood’s Systemic Gatekeeping Against  
BIPOC Assistants*

“The showrunner on season one I know now was clinically a narcissist. She [was emotionally abusive and manipulative] and ... made me do a lot of personal stuff without paying me for it. ... I just got to the point where ... I went into the bathroom one day and just cried. I just broke down in the stall. I had this moment of: we're making a children's TV show and I'm *crying* in the *bathroom*. I need to not be here. This is not where I should be, and so that's what made me quit.” In the summer of 2021, Olivia, a woman of color who has been working as an assistant in Hollywood for the last six years, told me of her journey in Los Angeles working to become a staff writer. This quote outlines a contrast between the entertainment we consume and the unpublicized harm behind it is not an uncommon experience for BIPOC assistants.

In tandem with Olivia’s experience, public conversations about Hollywood’s whiteness made their way from trade journals into mainstream news with the start of “a social justice campaign” #OscarsSoWhite.<sup>1</sup> April Reign tweeted, “#OscarsSoWhite they asked to touch my hair. 🙄,” responding to the 2015 Academy Awards nominee announcements of predominantly white creatives and talent, with all twenty acting nominations given to white actors.<sup>2</sup> Reign’s tweet broke through two layers of post-racist ideology silencing dissent; #OscarsSoWhite spoke to both the U.S.’s expanding post-racist belief catalyzed by the re-election of Barack Obama, the U.S.’s first Black president, for his second term *and* post-civil rights Hollywood’s post-racist

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<sup>1</sup> Reggie Ugwu, “The Hashtag That Changed the Oscars: An Oral History,” *The New York Times*, February 6, 2020, sec. Movies, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/06/movies/oscarssowhite-history.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Ugwu; April (@ReignofApril) Reign, “#OscarsSoWhite They Asked to Touch My Hair. 🙄,” Tweet, @ReignOfApril (blog), January 15, 2015, <https://twitter.com/ReignOfApril/status/555725291512168448>.

ideology. These compounding post-racial discourses, however, function as pillars upholding white supremacy within Hollywood.

Namely, in this chapter, I illustrate how post-racial discourses and beliefs work to invalidate calls for racial equality *while* some of the industry's present racial gatekeeping tactics remain well in-tact. Through the analysis of interviews, trade materials, demographic information, and survey data examining BIPOC assistants' experiences, I argue that logics and mechanisms rooted in white supremacy and capitalism are indelibly infused into Hollywood's cultural expectations of assistants as entry-level workers. In addition to the data collection and analysis I laid out in my introduction, in this chapter I analyze popular trade journal conversations about Hollywood's contemporary institutional DEI efforts. I pulled from these trades as they are popularly circulated through industry and broadly read, therefore they mirror the cultural sentiments around diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. Through these efforts, I conclude that the conditions and experiences in which across-the-line, BIPOC assistants persist work to gatekeep them out of above-the-line Hollywood positions. Additionally, the centrality of whiteness in Hollywood, and whiteness as connected to elite status within Hollywood, renders contemporary industry DEI initiatives as well as calls for diverse creatives and executives ineffective.

To be clear, white supremacy in this context comprises “a set of social relations in which white people are at the top of a hierarchy by virtue of their white identity and as a result they hold power (consciously or not) over those who are non-white.”<sup>3</sup> In a note on terminology usage, in the following chapter, I refer to this ideological construct and its set of social relations as white supremacy and whiteness, respectively. However, when referring to individuals I use the

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<sup>3</sup> Kalwant Bhopal, *White Privilege: The Myth of a Post-Racial Society*, 1st ed. (Bristol: Policy Press, 2018), 21.



term non-melanated. I use non-melanated to distinguish individual workers (assistants) who would colloquially be referred to as white from discourses of whiteness latent in Hollywood's organizational, while acknowledging that non-melanated assistants, by virtue of their race, also implicitly carry with them white cultural beliefs and understandings. Lastly, I use non-melanated to center identifiers used within BIPOC communities and decenter culturally white terms. In this chapter, I evidence my argument by examining the material conditions as well as social and discursive experiences of BIPOC assistants in the current cultural context. I build this argument through a historicization of post-civil rights Hollywood and mapping it onto present-day U.S. and Hollywood cultural trends.

Specifically, I contend that Hollywood's contemporary diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies and how they are enacted regarding BIPOC assistants bear stark resemblance to Hollywood's post-civil rights industrial policies and practices. After an overview of industrial history, I examine contemporary Hollywood industry as in a transitional period, wherein executives and creatives must contend with clashing cultural expectations of Hollywood's whiteness and mainstream U.S. calls for diversification. Above-the-line decision makers are answering broad calls for racial diversity, equity, and inclusion in above-the-line positions. However, above-the-line executives and creatives must contend with market demands *within* an industry that is culturally inhospitable to racial diversity, equity, and inclusion. Therefore, in this chapter, I additionally argue that assistants' ambiguous across-the-line status, rid of protections and privileges of below-the-line or above-the-line positions, works as an industrial risk reduction. Hollywood executives and creatives hire BIPOC assistants, pay them little, and have no requirement for further investment to maintain profitable racial difference as market demands call for industrial DEI.

Contextualized by these adverse externalities, I analyze BIPOC assistant's experiences as similar to Thakore's analysis of 1960 Hollywood racial integration. I evidence how common practices feign the same discourses in that BIPOC assistants are "tokenized or face 'glass ceilings' in their abilities to move up the institutional ladders."<sup>4</sup> Using interview and survey data collected from and about BIPOC assistants, I analyze how instances of institutional racism tokenize BIPOC assistants to maintain Hollywood's progressive public image. However, when BIPOC assistants do not fulfill a tokenizing purpose, they are institutionally rendered "unbankable" to maintain its underlying, historically rooted white supremacy.

### *Hollywood's History of White Supremacy*

The Hollywood industry has a well-documented history of organizational whiteness that informs and is informed by broader U.S. cultural beliefs.<sup>5</sup> While Hollywood's organizational whiteness extends to its genesis, following Quinn's historicization, my overview focuses specifically on post-civil rights era Hollywood as a transitional period. In response to policy and mainstream demand, Quinn illustrates how, in post-civil rights Hollywood, "new forms of racial reaction were mobilized."<sup>6</sup> In these reactions, Hollywood executives, creatives, and union leadership "learned to incorporate movement themes and some moderate movement demands while remaining deeply racially unequal."<sup>7</sup> In other words, I place my analysis within the

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<sup>4</sup> Bhoomi K Thakore, "On the Origin of White Hollywood: The Racialized Space of the U.S. Film Industry," *The American Behavioral Scientist (Beverly Hills)* 64, no. 14 (2020): 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764220975085>.

<sup>5</sup> Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2001); Jason Smith, "Between Colorblind and Colorconscious: Contemporary Hollywood Films and Struggles Over Racial Representation," *Journal of Black Studies* 44, no. 8 (2013): 779–97; Minjeong Kim and Rachel J. Brunn-Bevel, "Hollywood's Global Expansion and Racialized Film Industry," *Humanity & Society* 44, no. 1 (2020): 37–66, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0160597619832045>; Maryann Erigha, *The Hollywood Jim Crow: The Racial Politics of the Movie Industry*, YBP Print DDA (New York: New York University Press, 2019); Thakore, "On the Origin of White Hollywood: The Racialized Space of the U.S. Film Industry."

<sup>6</sup> Eithne Quinn, *A Piece of the Action: Race and Labor in Post-Civil Rights Hollywood* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 7, <https://doi.org/10.7312/quinn16436>.

<sup>7</sup> Quinn, 7.

analogous contemporary time period, wherein calls for racial equity are mainstream and transitioning into policy.

The post-civil rights Hollywood was in a transitional moment after Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (aka Civil Rights Act of 1964) passed prohibiting employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin. Transitioning from a time of activism and resistance into integration and inclusion, workers of color saw management and ownership class march, produce content, and fundraise in support of the civil rights movement efforts, and then later return to the office and fail to support BIPOC workers industrially, systemically, or economically.<sup>8</sup> Hollywood underwent an investigation by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and was found to be one of the worst industries for racial integration.<sup>9</sup> However, when the EEOC formulated a case against Hollywood's lack of integration, its close connection to Hollywood of the East (aka Washington D.C.) lobbyists protected them and maintained their progressive image.<sup>10</sup> To continue being profitable, Hollywood organizational expectations and textual output must *appear* to change with the times in the eyes of policymakers and progressively oriented consumers.

Using an overemphasis on a successful minority of BIPOC creatives and executives as an institutional lightning rod for popular progressive demand, "Hollywood was ... an early fomenter of what would come to be called postracial discourses."<sup>11</sup> In propagating the success of few as the success of many, while the majority of BIPOC workers remained economically and vocationally precarious, Hollywood's whiteness remained undisrupted, providing the image they

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<sup>8</sup> Quinn, 2–4, 100.

<sup>9</sup> Quinn, 98–100.

<sup>10</sup> Quinn, 101–2.

<sup>11</sup> Eithne Quinn, *A Piece of the Action: Race and Labor in Post-Civil Rights Hollywood* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 58, <https://doi.org/10.7312/quinn16436>.

needed to maintain to meet policy and consumer expectations. Because Hollywood is a prominent socio-political institution with public eyes on it at any given moment, lobbyists for Hollywood management and Republican leaders rallied to put an end to the EEOC's probings. In other words, lobbyists worked to put an end to investigations that would expose Hollywood's implicit and covert forms of institutional racism. Their efforts resulted in watered down language on racial equality within the impending bill. The resulting diversity requirements then became more ambiguous and less enforceable, leaning on meritocratic justifications for (perceptions of) discrimination that are inherently rooted in whiteness.<sup>12</sup>

Hollywood's dependence on meritocracy is a vehicle that maintains its organizational whiteness through the false equivalence of eliteness (the ultimate merit) to whiteness.<sup>13</sup> The historically rooted conditions of organizational whiteness manifest in cultural "colorblind" expectations that naturalize white ways of being and knowing as merit-worthy.<sup>14</sup> Hollywood's organizational whiteness implicitly functions via meritocracy, or the distribution of power, capital, position, etc. based on ability or skill; those with the most skill or ability are considered elite and have the most social power. Moreover, meritocratic gain leads to elite status levels, "as a marker of both economic rank and social status and argue that while such status must be secured through material resources, it must also be confirmed through symbolic boundaries."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Quinn, *A Piece of the Action: Race and Labor in Post-Civil Rights Hollywood*, 102.

<sup>13</sup> Bhopal, *White Privilege: The Myth of a Post-Racial Society*; Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández and Leila Angod, "Approximating Whiteness: Race, Class, and Empire in the Making of Modern Elite/White Subjects," *Educational Theory* 69, no. 6 (2019): 719–43, <https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.12397>; Stella M. Nkomo and Akram Al Ariss, "The Historical Origins of Ethnic (White) Privilege in US Organizations," *Journal of Managerial Psychology* 29, no. 4 (2014): 389–404, <https://doi.org/10.1108/JMP-06-2012-0178>.

<sup>14</sup> M. Nkomo and Al Ariss, "The Historical Origins of Ethnic (White) Privilege in US Organizations"; Stella M. Nkomo, "The Emperor Has No Clothes: Rewriting 'Race in Organizations,'" *The Academy of Management Review* 17, no. 3 (1992): 487–513, <https://doi.org/10.2307/258720>; Diane Grimes, "Putting Our Own House in Order: Whiteness, Change and Organization Studies," *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 14, no. 2 (2001): 132–49, <https://doi.org/10.1108/09534810110388054>.

<sup>15</sup> Gaztambide-Fernández and Angod, "Approximating Whiteness: Race, Class, and Empire in the Making of Modern Elite/White Subjects," 727.

As a white organization, Hollywood's elite status is inextricably hinged on whiteness; to attain high status is also, in our current structure, an aspiration towards whiteness.<sup>16</sup>

Industrial dependence on meritocratic rhetoric is a gatekeeping mechanism that covertly enables justification of systemic racism. Bhopal connects whiteness, eliteness, and meritocracy in her broad examination of whiteness in Western labor practices:

White privilege in the labour market is an example of covert and overt processes which work to keep black and minority ethnic groups excluded from senior decision-making roles and positions of power. Whiteness operates to exclude black and minority ethnic groups from certain professions. ... As a result, sections of the labour market are reserved for whites only – positions where *whiteness is used to reinforce power and status*.

Despite the emphasis on diversity and equality of opportunity, vast ethnic inequalities continue to persist in the labour market. ... Organisations value whiteness and the privilege that white identity brings, and white groups work to protect their own position of dominance and advantage – at all costs.<sup>17</sup>

Hollywood's organizational whiteness gatekeeps against non-white racial groups by making white racialization akin to elite status, thereby mobilizing white practices and qualities as aspirational to maintain whiteness' power and status within culture industries. Throughout my analysis, I refer to this phenomenon as white-as-elite.

Historically speaking, Hollywood's upholding of white standards manifests both discursively and in policy. For example, while gathering evidence in their four-month investigation of 1964 Hollywood, EEOC found that the IATSE membership application regularly included questions like "What type of vocation did your father and/or guardian pursue for a

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<sup>16</sup> Gaztambide-Fernández and Angod, 720.

<sup>17</sup> Emphasis added; Bhopal, *White Privilege: The Myth of a Post-Racial Society*, 142.

livelihood?” Like Jim Crow grandfather clauses limiting entry into the voting pool, this question uses white generational merit as a justification for below-the-line systemic racism. In 1967, forms of systemic racism via expectations of eliteness extended into above-the-line Hollywood labor practices when the Director’s Guild introduced requirements of a four year degree to hire junior creatives and executives, a thinly-veiled, merit-based justification for systemic racism.<sup>18</sup> Equating postsecondary education, another structurally racist organization, as a needed stepping stone toward Hollywood above-the-line elite status implicitly gatekeeps against aspiring BIPOC creatives who were less likely to attend four-year universities, and therefore less likely to attain the social mobility universities provide.<sup>19</sup>

Hollywood’s longstanding organizational expectations and practices, which are historically and culturally imbued with whiteness, limit BIPOC access to social capital. Learning to move through white/elite spaces of Hollywood depends on convincing others of one’s own white/elite status.<sup>20</sup> Typically, this convincing manifests in knowing how to *be* and *blend* in the space, and “having access to a ‘network of knowns’ with whom [workers] can identify, communicate and establish access to particular strategies that are needed to progress in the” industry.<sup>21</sup> White privilege additionally functions as social capital within Hollywood’s white organizational expectations. Non-melanated assistants, by virtue of their white cultural background and understanding, are predisposed to “access the correct set of unspoken criteria which enable them to secure promotions and positions of power in the” industry.<sup>22</sup> Because of their previous cultural rearing, non-melanated Hollywood workers have access to white cultural

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<sup>18</sup> Quinn, *A Piece of the Action: Race and Labor in Post-Civil Rights Hollywood*, 99.

<sup>19</sup> Bhopal, *White Privilege: The Myth of a Post-Racial Society*, 9-12, 121-22.

<sup>20</sup> Gaztambide-Fernández and Angod, “Approximating Whiteness: Race, Class, and Empire in the Making of Modern Elite/White Subjects,” 729.

<sup>21</sup> Bhopal, *White Privilege: The Myth of a Post-Racial Society*, 57.

<sup>22</sup> Bhopal, 57.

ways of being, speaking, and interacting according to expectations in Hollywood discourses, building their social capital. Additionally, Hollywood's white/elite organizational belief manifests "through people's actions and existing structural procedures, which propagate unequal outcomes for people of colour."<sup>23</sup> Hollywood's historically constructed systemic racism perpetuates through inequitable distribution of social and material capital, present in contemporary practices, procedures, and continued lack of racial equity.

### *Contemporary Hollywood*

In the introduction of this chapter, I illustrated some of the parallels between contemporary and post-civil rights Hollywood and U.S. cultural trends and practices or racial integration. Both periods exist in a transitional mode, where mainstream calls for racial equity appear to be addressed in policy and on-screen representation, maintaining both Hollywood's progressive image *and* its institutional whiteness. Meanwhile, "white liberals ... turned to laissez-faire, implicitly pro-white racial politics" in their material choices, thereby "maintaining the status quo in which a post-racial society remains a myth, and covert and overt forms of racism and exclusion continue to operate at all levels in society; in short, white identities are privileged and remain protected at all times."<sup>24</sup> Indeed, current demographic information about Hollywood's make-up, policies, and DEI initiatives evidence the maintenance of organizational white eliteness.

Before turning my attention to this chapter's focus on BIPOC assistants, I contextualize how post-racial, white-as-elite organizational beliefs have resulted in DEI initiatives, policies, and racial demographics of film and television executives and creatives. This contextualization

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<sup>23</sup> Bhopal, 19.

<sup>24</sup> Quinn, *A Piece of the Action: Race and Labor in Post-Civil Rights Hollywood*, 9; Bhopal, *White Privilege: The Myth of a Post-Racial Society*, 155.

augments my later analysis of BIPOC assistants in two ways: contemporary white Hollywood fills its bureaucratic and moral obligations of racial integration in assistants' entry-level positions *and* the vulnerable nature of these positions support unfettered systemic racism via meritocratic gatekeeping against non-white-as-elite workers.

In an analysis of on-screen racial representation compared to behind-the-scenes racial representation, equity, and access in Hollywood, UCLA concluded that "Hollywood's survival ... will rest on its ability to catch up with and better serve a diversifying America in which people of color increasingly define the new mainstream. ... Only the Hollywood of meaningful inclusion, that empowers diverse voices *in every room* and *at every level*, can make the most of the opportunity."<sup>25</sup> Implied in this quote, Hunt and Ramón highlight that hiring practices in industry have been integrating diverse voices into *some* rooms and at *some* levels. However, those rooms and levels are not ones that hold greenlighting, budgetary, and marketing power in executive suites at above-the-line level, holding the lump sum of Hollywood's social capital.

In 2020, all eleven major and mid-major film studios had predominantly white men executives, from those holding the most to least decision-making power: Studio Heads as ninety-one percent non-melanated and eighty-two percent men; Senior Executives were ninety-three percent non-melanated and eighty percent men; Unit Heads/Junior Executives were eighty-six percent non-melanated and fifty-nine percent men.<sup>26</sup> An examination of television executives shows similar racial inequity in September 2020, wherein ninety-two percent of C-level television executives were non-melanated and sixty-eight percent men; Senior Level television

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<sup>25</sup> Emphasis added; Darnell Hunt and Ana-Christina Ramón, "Hollywood Diversity Report 2021 - Part 2: Television," *Pandemic in Progress* (Los Angeles: Division of Social Sciences at UCLA, October 26, 2021), 82.

<sup>26</sup> Darnell Hunt and Ana-Christina Ramón, "Hollywood Diversity Report 2021 - Part 1: Film," *Pandemic in Progress* (Los Angeles: Division of Social Sciences at UCLA, April 22, 2021), 8.



executives were eighty-four percent non-melanated and sixty percent men; and junior executives were eighty-six percent non-melanated and forty-six percent men.<sup>27</sup>

Turning from executive racial demographics to examine creatives in film and television, the racial diversity in writers' rooms or spaces with creative agency are also largely white. In 2019, for every ten directors, 1.5 of them were BIPOC, and industry would have to “nearly triple” the amount of BIPOC promotions to directors to attain proportional representation of the broader U.S. BIPOC population (being 40.2 percent).<sup>28</sup> Similarly, only 13.9 percent of film writers in 2019 were BIPOC (1.4 out of 10 writers) which would also need to triple for proportionate representation.<sup>29</sup>

In 2019 television staffing, 10.7 percent of broadcast show creators and 10.3 percent of digital show creators were BIPOC creatives (1 out of 10), which would need to nearly quadruple to be representationally proportionate.<sup>30</sup> When examining writers' representation, white women hold the highest percentage of writers from marginalized populations, which is another factor maintaining Hollywood's whiteness while incorporating “affirmative action” measures and calls for “diversity.”<sup>31</sup> However, credited writers in broadcast scripted television were 11.3 percent BIPOC men and 12 percent BIPOC women; cable scripted television writers were 12.5 percent BIPOC men and 13.3 percent BIPOC women; and, in digital scripted television were 10.1 percent BIPOC men and 12.6 percent BIPOC women meaning that for every ten television writers 2.3 were BIPOC.<sup>32</sup> Lastly, the percent of scripted broadcast television episodes directed by BIPOC men and women in 2019 was 16.3 percent and 10 percent, respectively; in cable

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<sup>27</sup> Hunt and Ramón, “Hollywood Diversity Report 2021 - Part 2: Television,” 10–11.

<sup>28</sup> Hunt and Ramón, “Hollywood Diversity Report 2021 - Part 1: Film,” 21.

<sup>29</sup> Hunt and Ramón, 21.

<sup>30</sup> Hunt and Ramón, “Hollywood Diversity Report 2021 - Part 2: Television,” 15–17.

<sup>31</sup> Bhopal, *White Privilege: The Myth of a Post-Racial Society*, 24.

<sup>32</sup> Hunt and Ramón, “Hollywood Diversity Report 2021 - Part 2: Television,” 44–45.

scripted television, 15.9 percent and 7 percent of episodes were directed by BIPOC men and women, respectively; and in digital scripted television, 11.8 percent and 6.4 percent of episodes were directed by BIPOC men and women, respectively.<sup>33</sup>

Understanding these statistics in the context of Hollywood's whiteness and meritocratic justifications implicitly evidence that it is an inhospitable space for BIPOC expression, representation, and belonging. Indeed, there are political and juristically DEI efforts to alter the roots of white supremacy in the Hollywood industry. While historically IATSE, the union representing below-the-line workers and recently two across-the-line positions, has worked to gatekeep against BIPOC interests, contemporarily they are working as part of the Department for Professional Employees (DPE), a coalition of over twenty-for unions, to advance policy agendas for DEI in the Arts, Entertainment, and Media Industries.<sup>34</sup> In their proposed policy agenda, DPE notes the need for equitable material compensation because "Creative professionals must be able to earn fair pay and benefits. Otherwise careers in the arts, entertainment, and media industries will be limited to a narrow, non-inclusive set of people - those who can afford to hold out for the promise of a future payday that may never arrive."<sup>35</sup> DPE urges Congress to take action on their DEI agenda in multiple ways including: tax incentives for hiring diverse representation in American-based film, television, and live entertainment productions; increasing Federal Arts Funding to support aspiring BIPOC Hollywood creatives and executives, implying a lack of access through mainstream, institutional routes; and passing multiple acts that would protect marginalized workers' organizing, litigation, creative, and ownership rights.

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<sup>33</sup> Hunt and Ramón, 50–51.

<sup>34</sup> "A Policy Agenda for Advancing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in the Arts, Entertainment, and Media Industries," Department for Professional Employees, AFL-CIO, February 11, 2021, <https://www.dpeaflcio.org/policy-letters/arts-entertainment-and-media-unions-dei-policy-agenda>.

<sup>35</sup> "A Policy Agenda for Advancing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)."

While passing these policies is no doubt an important and ethical goal, as historical and sociological evidence shows, the implementation of these policies often results in both a backlash of non-melanated workers who see BIPOC DEI as restrictive to non-melanated workers *and* a refunctioning of racial gatekeeping tactics. As Quinn evidences, post-civil rights industrial “soft white backlash” fostered post-racial belief that, similar to today, motivates no real systemic change for racial equity and inclusion.<sup>36</sup> However, simultaneously “textual outputs remain heavily circumscribed by white commercial and social attitudes, producing race-themed texts that foreground economic and employment relations that tend to both legitimate and conceal their own racial identity politics.”<sup>37</sup> This discourse of feigned progress on-screen manifests in what Kristen Warner calls “plastic” representation.<sup>38</sup> “Plastic representation” is the kind of representation that lacks “a more culturally specific representation,” but instead provides a colorblind pastiche to mimic or appease representation of racial diversity in a way that maintains racial logics rooted in whiteness. A current example of this discourse is in the Netflix series *Bridgerton*.

*Bridgerton* (2020- ), a television series created by Chris Van Dusen and produced by Shonda Rhimes, is based on a series of novels set in London during the Regency Era by Julia Quinn. This series follows the “debutant” season process in London and is, as Van Dusen notes, a “marrying [of] history and fantasy in what I think is a very exciting way. One approach that we took to that is our approach to race.”<sup>39</sup> Within the show, racial integration (and equality) has been

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<sup>36</sup> Quinn, *A Piece of the Action: Race and Labor in Post-Civil Rights Hollywood*, 10–11.

<sup>37</sup> Quinn, 219.

<sup>38</sup> Kristen Warner, “‘Plastic’ Representation: The Problem of 21st Century Black Media Industry Studies,” in *Race, Gender & Sexuality in Production Studies* (Flow, Flow Journal, 2016), <https://www.flowjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/KWarner2016.pdf>.

<sup>39</sup> Polly Foreman, “Were the Bridgertons a Real Family and How Historically Accurate Is the Netflix Drama?,” *Heart*, January 28, 2021, <https://www.heart.co.uk/showbiz/tv-movies/is-bridgertons-true-story-family-real/>.

attained within the Regency period, and meaningful engagement with racial and cultural difference remains unaddressed, through shallow representations of on-screen diversity.<sup>40</sup> To be clear, Shonda Rhimes, a key producer, is a BIPOC woman, demonstrating some behind-the-scenes diversity. However, the show's resulting cultural whiteness via on-screen plastic representation demonstrates how Hollywood responds to calls for diversity, like those in a post-2020 United States, with "an insulting brand of aesthetic level justice through the common vocabulary of representation" as a placation without any real integration or stories grounded in culturally diverse narratives.<sup>41</sup>

The post-civil rights practices Quinn describes above are repeated in today's industrial discourse. When women, specifically women of color, are in Hollywood's leadership positions, the staff, casts, and crew of the projects they oversee are much more inclusive and diverse than those in projects overseen by (white) men.<sup>42</sup> This contrast illustrates not only the deep connection between whiteness and patriarchy in industry, but also how, even when on-screen representation diversifies (creating the illusion of successful industrial racial equity practices), systemic racism mutates and gatekeeps BIPOC decision-makers and creatives out of industry generation after generation.<sup>43</sup> BIPOC assistants' experiences of organizational whiteness illustrate one of the key ways that covert white supremacy sustains over generations, evidenced in my following analyses.

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<sup>40</sup> Aditi Natasha Kini, "Is 'Bridgerton' Just Color-Baiting Imperialist Fantasy?," Bitch Media, January 14, 2021, <https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/bridgerton-diversity-colorblind-storytelling-colorbaiting>.

<sup>41</sup> Natasha Kini.

<sup>42</sup> Hunt and Ramón, "Hollywood Diversity Report 2021 - Part 1: Film," 44.

<sup>43</sup> Hunt and Ramón, "Hollywood Diversity Report 2021 - Part 1: Film"; Hunt and Ramón, "Hollywood Diversity Report 2021 - Part 2: Television"; M. Nkomo and Al Ariss, "The Historical Origins of Ethnic (White) Privilege in US Organizations"; Kim and Brunn-Bevel, "Hollywood's Global Expansion and Racialized Film Industry"; Thakore, "On the Origin of White Hollywood: The Racialized Space of the U.S. Film Industry."

### *Misdirected Backlash and/at BIPOC Assistants*

I contend that this dual discourse of backlash and explicit gatekeeping manifests *in the rooms* and *at the levels* of across-the-line assistants. The longstanding practices of gatekeeping BIPOC assistants out of above-the-line promotions results in the current, sustained lack of BIPOC folks in Hollywood's positions of creative and executive power. Moreover, I focus on assistantship because of a lack of tangible (e.g., union) protections on the position. This lack of protections leaves open both social and material forms of discrimination *without* any systematized regulations. To recall, most assistants are not unionized, meaning that EEOC's, DPE's, or other policy endeavors will not protect already precarious assistants. Therefore, I contend that the dual manifestation (backlash and gatekeeping) of Hollywood is both explicitly enacted and implicitly sustained at this level. Beginning with backlash, first, it is important to acknowledge that this backlash is a reaction to the *image* of industrial diversity, which is not equivalent to the *reality* of the same. Much of this perception emerges from both the commonplace conversation around implementing DEI initiatives and the later tokenization of BIPOC assistants.

Industry practices "give the impression of 'doing diversity' but such initiatives may cause resentment from white groups towards those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds who are perceived as being given special treatment because of their race."<sup>44</sup> Sentiments of this resentment is growing among assistants, as Leon, a non-melanated, assistant whom I interviewed in 2019 and 2021, explains:

Hollywood's done a lot in the last few years in terms of addressing sexual harassment and racial disparity among creative roles, they're pushing very hard. The backswing now is "white men can't get a job in Hollywood in a creative capacity." That's not true at all, but it feels like it because [of] what Hollywood is publicizing: its push for diversity and

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<sup>44</sup> Bhopal, *White Privilege: The Myth of a Post-Racial Society*, 100.

inclusion. Because that's what is financially making sense. It didn't make financial sense before, up until just those last couple of years.

In this explanation, Leon illustrates how white supremacy discursively propagates through racial backlash. Backlash repeatedly produces post-racial ideology that positions non-melanated (men) assistants as victims of racial discrimination. Leon speaks plainly about the ways white men in Hollywood discuss their acute *perceived* discrimination via this backlash. As Leon addresses, though, Hollywood profitability *publicizes* this image of progress, despite its untruthful nature. The resulting perception within industry is one with fewer opportunities for white men, spurring racism-laced sentiment akin to anti-affirmative action beliefs. However all of the assistants I interviewed and the majority of those who participated in my survey have said they have experienced or witnessed systemic and/or interpersonal racism against BIPOC assistants.

Moreover, above Leon highlights that Hollywood functions on a post-politics business model, strictly interested in financial profits.<sup>45</sup> And, while the above statistics on the racial (and gendered) demographics of Hollywood executives and creatives give a picture of how white supremacy manifests in above-the-line workers, the results of #PayUpHollywood's annual survey and my own interview and survey results evidence Hollywood's financial investments perpetuate white eliteness. My data show that Hollywood does not, in fact, put its money where its mouth is; the lack of material resources afforded to assistants, their most unprotected workers, evidences this claim.

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<sup>45</sup> Nick Marx, "Expanding the Brand: Race, Gender, and the Post-Politics of Representation on Comedy Central," *Television & New Media* 17, no. 3 (2016): 272–87.

Beginning with a look at pay, as I outline in this dissertation’s introduction, #PayUpHollywood’s data show that approximately 94.34 percent of the 1,014 assistants who responded to the survey are considered “low income” to “extremely low income” based on the limits set by U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for Los Angeles in 2021 (see “#PayUpHollywood 2020 Income Results”).<sup>46</sup> In the results of my much smaller scale 40-person survey and interview responses I include racial breakdowns of pay and responses, which are not publicly distributed in #PayUpHollywood’s results. Important to note in these results, however, is that both #PayUpHollywood and my survey had many more non-melanated participants than BIPOC participants, with 24 percent and 17 percent BIPOC participants in PayUp and my surveys, respectively.<sup>47</sup> The lower percentage is not actually surprising, however, considering that there are vastly fewer people of color working as assistants to above-the-line

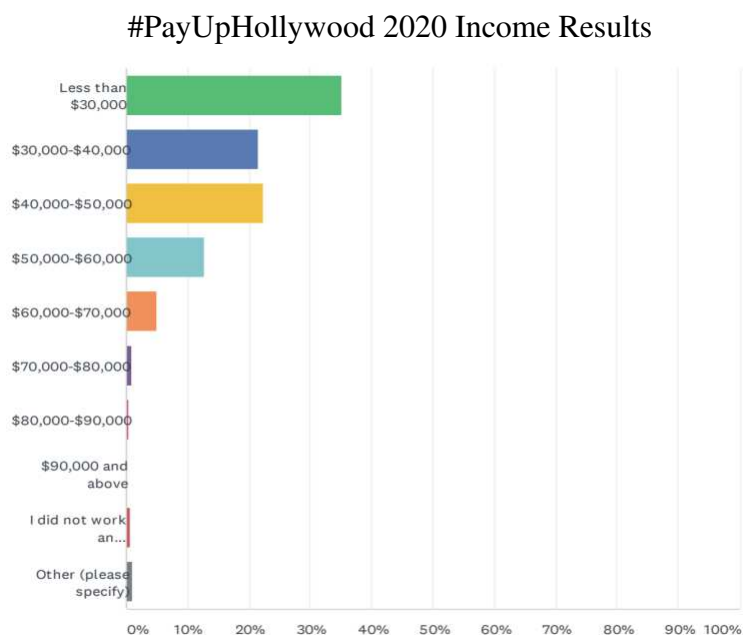


Figure 2. #PayUpHollywood 2020 Income Results

<sup>46</sup> “Fiscal Year 2021 Income Limits Documentation System - Summary for Los Angeles County, California,” Los Angeles-Long Beach-Glendale, CA HUD Metro FMR Area (Los Angeles: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)), accessed March 20, 2022, <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/datasets/il/il2021/2021summary.odn>; #PayUpHollywood, “The 2020 Entertainment Support Staff Survey Results” (Los Angeles: #PayUpHollywood, February 1, 2021).

<sup>47</sup> #PayUpHollywood, “The 2020 Entertainment Support Staff Survey Results.”

creatives and executives than non-melanated assistants. Indeed, both non-melanated and BIPOC assistants frequently remarked how their coworkers are, by and large, white, one stating specifically: “I have not personally witnessed race-based discrimination with a non-white coworker because I’ve never had any. All assistants at the places I’ve worked in the entertainment industry have been white.” The lack of BIPOC assistants, additionally, was a challenge for my interview recruitment of diverse voices and experiences and, as one assistant noted, BIPOC assistants are hesitant to speak out about their experiences for fear of being blacklisted out of any of these jobs.

“#PayUpHollywood 2020 Income Results” (above) and “2021 Assistant Income Levels” (below) illustrate not only that most assistants are cost-burdened, but that, as “2021 Assistant Income Levels” illustrates, non-melanated assistants more frequently take positions at “extremely low” to “very low” income levels, whereas BIPOC assistants more frequently take positions considered “low income.” At first glance, BIPOC assistants seem to generally receive higher pay, however a closer look at PayUpHollywood’s data show that only 22 percent of participating assistants of color received familial support by way of finances or

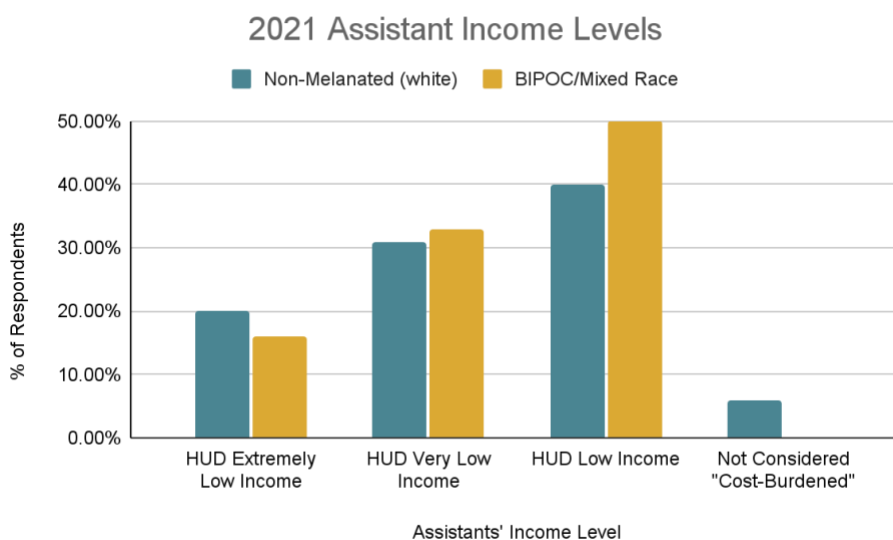


Figure 3. 2021 Assistant Income Levels



healthcare in contrast to 78 percent among non-melanated assistants.<sup>48</sup> BIPOC assistants require relatively “higher paying” assistant jobs, while non-melanated assistants report higher reliance on familial support and wealth. As one BIPOC assistant commented, “BIPOC assistants just aren’t given the same opportunity to even get in the door as [white] Asst’s. It’s infuriating.” The gate to entry for BIPOC assistants is constructed from the intimate connection between capitalism and white supremacy.

That connection, as Leon notes, extends beyond entry into assistantship. Once BIPOC assistants have acquired reached their position, it is a continued uphill battle both socially and economically. One BIPOC survey respondent stated that “My boss wouldn’t include me in conversations about race after I told her that there were a lot of barriers to entry that included low pay. She implied that I only brought it up because I wanted to be paid more,” evidencing markers of “soft white backlash” used to halt conversations on DEI in favor of capitalist profit. Additionally, each BIPOC assistant I interviewed spoke about the struggles they experienced with negotiating pay, which I analyze discursively as forms of “unbankability.”

However, here I want to highlight how meritocratic justifications do not track for BIPOC assistants, examining Noah’s, an Asian-American man, experience as a Hollywood assistant since 2016:

Every year since then, with more acquired experience that I've gained, and title bumps, my wages have gone consistently down. It has been on a decline. There's been nothing, absolutely nothing I can do about that. Every time I've ever tried to negotiate my pay and use my past experience as leverage to say, “Here's what I'm worth,” I'm always told, “This is the rate. It cannot change. It is not negotiable.” Essentially, take the job or leave it. ... There was one outlier moment where I was working as ... a writer's assistant. ... My rate there was higher hourly on paper. I was making \$21 an hour, but the caveat was they wouldn't let me clock any more than 40 hours a week. When you account for how

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<sup>48</sup> Liz Alper, “#PayUpHollywood Releases Survey of 1,500 Entertainment Industry Assistants’ Pay, Working Conditions,” *Medium* (blog), December 3, 2019.

much money that had to come out of my monthly pay for the very expensive benefits that I was required to be a part of, it all flat out to be essentially the same when I was making \$15 to \$16/hour over 60 hours a week. It just stagnated, even though it sounded good on the forefront. Then when I got my first job, my first showrunner's assistant job, the one before this one, I tried to at least use that hourly rate as proof as like, "Look, I have made this much hourly, at least meet me in the middle." They refused to negotiate with me. I made like \$16 there.

Here, Noah highlights some of the covert ways that his superiors were able to "bargain" his hourly rate down to an equivalent of \$32,240 per year, which at the time would be considered "very low income" according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development in Los Angeles.<sup>49</sup> Noah highlights how experience, a career aspect that should progressively improve one's merit as an assistant, did not lead to an effective increase in pay, but rather "it has been on a decline." This decline and arbitrary pay exist because there is no standard – other than minimum wage – by which supervisors must pay assistants. In fact, pay assignments are typically decided via an honor system, wherein supervisors are culturally expected to match, or even raise, the pay of your previous position. However, that is not the case for Noah and many BIPOC assistants like him, having starkly different socioeconomic base realities, which remain almost entirely unaddressed by regulatory authorities. Finally, Noah mentions that a 40-hour maximum for a work week is replacing the previous 40-hour minimum. Despite this 40-hour limit, Noah expresses that he worked around 60-hours. The lack of livable pay and expectations of longer hours inhibits promotion vis-a-vis the relationship between social and economic capital.

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<sup>49</sup> U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), "Fiscal Year 2018 Income Limits Documentation System -- Summary for Los Angeles County, California," Los Angeles-Long Beach-Glendale, CA HUD Metro FMR Area (Los Angeles: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)), accessed March 21, 2022, [https://www.huduser.gov/portal/datasets/il/il2018/2018summary.odn?year=2018&states=6.0&data=2018&inputname=METRO31080MM4480\\*0603799999%2BLos+Angeles+County&stname=California&statefp=06&selection\\_type=county](https://www.huduser.gov/portal/datasets/il/il2018/2018summary.odn?year=2018&states=6.0&data=2018&inputname=METRO31080MM4480*0603799999%2BLos+Angeles+County&stname=California&statefp=06&selection_type=county).

The connection between economic and social capital for assistants is a confounding one, through which BIPOC folks are implicitly disadvantaged within Hollywood's white space. BIPOC assistants' experiences of systemic and interpersonal racism fly under the radar because of their lack of social and material capital. Continuing the earlier conversation with Leon, he discusses how Hollywood only enacts change when it is fiscally viable, he also adds:

It [Hollywood] only will do what is financially beneficial, and so lots of assistants for a long time – due to race, ableism and socioeconomic [discrimination] – [were] people who came from the right schools, alumni networks, or people who learned how early on to always have a suit in the closet, and always speak a certain way, whatever those little etiquette cues that come from social status. Those are the people who have benefited first, even though they might be in the same jobs, they will be the ones who are promoted or benefit early.

Assistants who garner more social capital, through the process of approximating whiteness as elite, are those who promote through the ranks. The ability to succeed relies on social capital which typically depends on economic capital. As Hailey, a white assistant I interviewed, explains:

[Considering my economic and racial make-up], if I feel out of place in this industry, then imagine how many people don't feel like they can make it here. And they wonder why there's a diversity problem... God forbid, you have to send money to your parents. You won't see any additional income in this industry for at least 5 years, maybe ten. You will make enough to barely survive. Then on top of that, you have to go to the drinks and you have to have something to say about what you did over your weekend. Otherwise, you won't be respected and you won't be promoted. It's really maddening.

Hailey explains how accepting a lack of economic capital is not only mandatory for entry, but also sustains in connection to social capital. Because being able to network is central to an assistant's success, being able to get drinks or share about a recent ski trip to Vail with one's boss or colleague goes a long way with making connections.

Moreover, this connection between economic to social capital also works as an ideological inverse; the overall standing of assistants among above-the-line employees is very low. Therefore, low social status associated with non-whiteness via non-eliteness in Hollywood serves as justification for low pay (which further perpetuates inequities of social capital). Indeed, several of my interviewees evidence this ideological inferiority and its connection to non-whiteness by telling stories of racially derogatory language, with two assistants (who wish to remain anonymous) telling me that their supervisors referred to assistant as their “slaves.” In whatever ways these ascriptions were contextualized, they illustrate a clear lack of needed racial consciousness among Hollywood leadership and a blatant disregard for both the seriousness of the U.S.’s colonial and genocidal history *and* the separate seriousness of assistants’ contemporary precarity. Additionally, the use of the terms “slaves” carries with it an ideological ascription to economic structures that dehumanize people for the sake of capital, evidenced simply in the use of “slave” as a holistic identity rather than “enslaved person,” which recognizes the humanity of the person behind the adjective. Lastly, it is an explicit manifestation of how the white-as-elite belief functions at the assistant level by carrying white supremacy into capitalist Hollywood’s vocational and racial hierarchy.

Despite this structural backbone of racism in above-the-line production cultures, to paraphrase Amanda Lotz, Hollywood as a “cultural institution” is responsive to mainstream calls for racial equity and inclusion; it responds to market demands to remain marketable.<sup>50</sup> I contend that one of the places where this is contemporarily occurring is specifically in the position of assistantship, because of its lack of protections and inherent ambiguity. Hollywood’s DEI practices and initiatives are only skin deep; BIPOC assistants must mimic whiteness to survive

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<sup>50</sup> Amanda D. Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

and receive promotion in industry, which cyclically reinforces white supremacist industrial beliefs. Moreover, as my interviews showed, BIPOC assistants who successfully approximate whiteness are used tokenistically to symbolically “fulfill” the above DEI initiatives. In other words, BIPOC assistants are held up as crowning DEI achievements.

### *Tokenizing BIPOC Assistants*

Returning to Thakore’s historicization of Hollywood’s racial integration, contemporary discourses on BIPOC assistants’ tokenization bear striking resemblance to 1960’s discourses. By tokenizing assistants, I refer to the practice wherein industry decision-makers and assistants’ superiors participate in only superficial and symbolic efforts toward racial equity and inclusion. These efforts are enacted by recruiting a small number of BIPOC assistants giving the appearance of racial equality within Hollywood’s workforce. Often the directly tokenized experience as much psychological distress in consequence of these mechanisms as the – much larger – body of stagnated and stunted BIPOC assistants, comprising heightened (for the few) as well as lowered (for the many) social visibility, social isolation, and a higher pressure to perform well.<sup>51</sup>

Namely, assistants are used “tokenistically” to fulfill some DEI quotas. In a response to my survey, one BIPOC assistant noted in their experience, “Once I overheard a call between the head boss & the SVP [Senior Vice President] and the head boss made the SVP pick a BIPOC as an assistant just so they could reach their diversity quota. There were a few BIPOC people at this particular company who quit because of racism within the workplace.” This participant

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<sup>51</sup> Eden B. King et al., “Understanding Tokenism: Antecedents and Consequences of a Psychological Climate of Gender Inequity,” *Journal of Management* 36, no. 2 (March 1, 2010): 482–510, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206308328508>; Danielle D. Dickens, Veronica Y. Womack, and Treshae Dimes, “Managing Hypervisibility: An Exploration of Theory and Research on Identity Shifting Strategies in the Workplace among Black Women,” *Managing Visibility and Invisibility in the Workplace* 113 (August 1, 2019): 153–63, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2018.10.008>.

highlights how tokenism is openly practiced within industry to fulfill DEI expectations, and how BIPOC workers are often tokenized immediately upon entering the wider organizational structure.

My conversation with Izzy, a white-passing assistant of color, further illustrates how heightened visibility and isolation often follow tokenizing experiences.<sup>52</sup> To preface the quote, it comes in the context of Izzy explaining how she identifies as white because she was culturally raised as a white woman. She states:

I have olive skin, dark hair, dark eyes and people ask me like, "What's your ethnicity? Where are you from?" ... "what's in there? [laughs] What's your makeup? What's your background? Where's your family from?" ... I'm in this weird position where I can benefit from being Latina when it serves me and I can benefit from being a white woman when it serves me and that is a really hard line to walk sometimes because some of my bosses [who] have learned that I am half-Latina and have held on to that for those diversity inclusion reasons. ... That they want to have a diverse staff, they want to be seen as inclusive, they want to be inclusive but their version of being inclusive is very much within their comfort zone. [My whiteness is] still very much within their comfort zone. I just happen to have tan skin, there's not a whole lot of cultural difference and ... last year when things were getting really heated around George Floyd and Hollywood was being taken to task for #OscarsSoWhite and ... the lack of diversity, one of my supervisors made a comment about how white our staff was and another one said, "Well, we've got Izzy, she's at least half brown."

In this sense, Hollywood's inclusion is only skin deep. Izzy highlights the lack of racial understanding within Hollywood because, as she names, her managers not only tokenize her as "at least half-brown" but also her inclusion is dependent on her proximity to whiteness. In other words, Hollywood does not need to adjust its culturally white expectations to include Izzy, and therefore, I repeat, the understanding of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion is only skin deep.

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<sup>52</sup> King et al., "Understanding Tokenism," 484.

As the conversation went on, Izzy and her non-melanated partner Leon, considered the idea of accents, noting that BIPOC assistants who have mastered codeswitching in how they speak and how they culturally engage are the ones who will be most successful:

**Leon:** I will say something that just dawned on me about the way you look and sound is something I've noticed in Hollywood more than I think in a lot of other industries, accented English. People may look or have names or have all kinds of family history. Hollywood will buy all of that. They'll hire you for all of that but accented speaking, immigrant language, immigrant English, English as a second language is actually very uncommon in my experience in Hollywood. ... If your boss can't understand you, or you can't understand your boss, even though your English is perfect. If you speak with an accent, it's implied that you're not [efficient]. ... Those black assistants I know who have mastered code-switching are the ones who are most successful.

**Izzy:** Yes, absolutely.

**Leon:** That's just the truth of Hollywood and the sad thing about [Senior Executives] wanting a Black name on the roster, but on the phone [they expect] not being able to tell whether someone's white or Black-- *Sorry to Bother You* nailed this perfectly.

The expectation to approximate whiteness, again, extends into almost all discourses BIPOC assistants experience. Success as an assistant comes in part by one's ability to go unnoticed. By that, I mean assistants are obligated to support their supervisor's efforts and projects behind the scenes. The more invisible they make themselves, the more heightened their awareness of potential mistakes and incidents, the better they are at their jobs. This desire of invisibility, however, does not extend into communication forms, as that is one of the major areas of assistant's job responsibilities. Because communication is a prominent part of assistantship, an often unstated, and sometimes implicitly stated, job requirement is fluency in unaccented White American Vernacular English (WAVE). Implied within the requirement of WAVE, additionally, is an erasure of one's cultural way of being, which is to be replaced with a white way of being to fit Hollywood's white organizational culture and expectations. In other words, while assistants writ large expected to be unseen in their labor, BIPOC assistants are also expected to erase any markers of non-whiteness in their efforts to remain unseen.

In addition, because of Hollywood's shallow understanding and practices of DEI and simultaneous meritocratic justifications that hinge on whiteness, BIPOC assistants often feel and are subjected to vocational and cultural pressures to outperform their non-melanated peers. For example, in my 2019 conversation with Billie, a Chilean-American script coordinator, she explained that she experiences pressure to "be better" than white men assistants, not only for success' sake, but also because there is a "feeling like you can't fail for the sake of people who are like you." Billie's quote shows that BIPOC assistants within Hollywood feel *added* social pressure to achieve higher merit, knowing that whiteness (or the impression of it) is an advantage within Hollywood's white industry. Implicit in this strive is an approximation of whiteness because of Hollywood's white-as-elite belief. Indeed, within Hollywood's current organizational and cultural structure, BIPOC assistants are expected to approximate whiteness in exchange for sustained organizational admission. When they do not, however, they are rendered unbankable as an implicit form of racial gatekeeping and are left to contend with additional material adversity.

#### *BIPOC Assistants as "Unbankable"*

Whiteness is upheld in Hollywood by exchanging access to entry with expectations that BIPOC entry-level workers will align with whiteness rather than expanding industrial inclusion which would necessitate a divorce from the deeply entrenched logics of white supremacy within industry and its meritocratic promotional structure. However, this racist gatekeeping does not stop at access to entry, but rather continues once BIPOC assistants are in industry they must then contend with discourses of "unbankability."

In her book, Erigha looks at how Black creatives are gatekept out of blockbuster movie creation because unfounded racist logic renders Blackness unbankable or unprofitable; unfounded because Erigha's findings in addition to the UCLA 2021 Diversity reports show that



professional output of BIPOC creatives performs just as well as, if not better than, that of white creatives both nationally and globally.<sup>53</sup> I extend Erigha's concept of unbankability to BIPOC assistants. At the assistant level, to be bankable, means assistants have proved a merit worthy of investment to promotion into creative or executive, above-the-line" positions. In my findings, I uncover that BIPOC assistants were usually rendered unbankable in two ways: (1) via lack of/slower promotion concurrent with expanded responsibilities without pay increase and (2) harsher job expectations for BIPOC assistants to prove their merit, including more frequent experiences of verbal and emotional abuse.

BIPOC assistants are rendered unbankable through covert overloading with responsibilities that are not commensurate with pay and often only communicated extra-contractually after the hiring process. For example, in my conversation with Olivia, she told me about her experience working on a 2016 project. Not long after starting in the position of showrunner's assistant, her supervisor told her that they also needed her to serve as a script coordinator and an editor for the writer's assistant. Considering these added responsibilities, she was able to negotiate her pay from \$14.25/hour, which was minimum wage in L.A at the time, to \$15.25/hour for working more than two effective positions simultaneously. However, script coordinators are one of the two assistant positions that were recently unionized. It was not until the next season of the show, when she was promoted into the position of script coordinator, that she began earning the union-rate of \$17/hour. She struggles, "That's when I realized, 'Oh script coordinators are in a union. I should have been in a union last year when you were paying me \$2 less than I should have been making for this job.' That's the first time I was like, 'Oh you stole from me.'" It was that season that Olivia also learned that the new showrunner's assistant, a non-

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<sup>53</sup> Erigha, *The Hollywood Jim Crow*; Hunt and Ramón, "Hollywood Diversity Report 2021 - Part 1: Film"; Hunt and Ramón, "Hollywood Diversity Report 2021 - Part 2: Television."

melanated woman, was getting paid \$18/hour for the same position (minus additional responsibilities) that Olivia held in the prior season.

Additionally, Olivia's job expansion without commensurate pay is, as she names, explicitly theft. However, it is not an uncommon ground for assistants, and specifically BIPOC assistants to navigate. Indeed, Noah also experienced this "responsibility creep." Noah, to recall, is an Asian-American man who was working as a showrunner's assistant on a popular television series set in an Asiatic-inspired world. As a showrunner's assistant, he asked to "take point" on finding cultural consultants to support the storyline "to be sure you're being respectful, and that's all an entire job ... that pays higher than assistant jobs." Noah probed what his supervisor desired in a consultant, but when he kept getting vague answers, he realized that his supervisor wanted him to coordinate, interview, and find the consultant, if not be the consultant himself, occasionally. Noah was not compensated, and he was given no credit for his work.

It is hard to overlook Noah's ethnicity and background, as Asian-American holding degrees in theater and screenwriting, in this responsibility creep. He self-identifies his qualifications on the show, stating "I should not be knighted the voice of the show on what you want from cultural consultants." Olivia, his partner, suggests that he was asked to do so because he was one of few BIPOC people working in development and pre-production on the project. Much like Izzy's experience of tokenization, Noah's experience here evidences the lack of DEI industrial dedication and direction; racial equity is not holistically considered in terms of access to economic and social capital.

Moreover, Noah's experience is not unlike his partner Olivia's. This job expansion without appropriate pay, whether lawful or not, is an explicit, material form of unbankability. BIPOC assistants are asked to prove that they are worthy of investment by taking on inordinate

amounts of labor – without compensation and credit. This broadening of job requirements coincides with lack of promotion and upward mobility for BIPOC assistants. As my survey and interview data show, across the board, BIPOC assistants must work in assistantship for 4-7 years more than their non-melanated counterparts, roughly double to triple the amount of time. This experience is contrasted by the rapid promotion of non-melanated men I have observed, e.g., one man who was just starting as an agency assistant, a lower ranking assistant position, at the beginning of this study in Summer 2019 was promoted to a junior level executive position at a U.S. over-the-top subscription streaming service and production company in Fall 2021.

Meanwhile, every assistant of color I interviewed, save for one who was promoted after 8 years of being an assistant, to my knowledge are still at the assistant-level within the Hollywood hierarchy or have since left in 2022. BIPOC assistants are forced to remain in precarious positions for longer, and with each passing year, they become more likely to leave the industry and start a life elsewhere with less individual and social instability, thereby lessening the pool of BIPOC folks who promote into these above-the-line executive and creative positions. If they do remain, BIPOC assistants are more likely to experience other forms of unbankability, especially in respect to emotional abuse or psychological stressors like expanded job expectations.

To examine the racialized experience of emotional abuse using Einarsen et. al's scale on bullying and harassment in the workplace, I asked assistants to rank how often they experienced specific indicators of workplace abuse.<sup>54</sup> The results were predictably mixed; in my experience interviewing, assistants often downplay the severity of their abuse and mistreatment. However, when asked about the frequency with which they received "Insulting or Offensive Remarks

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<sup>54</sup> Staale Einarsen, Helge Hoel, and Guy Notelaers, "Measuring Exposure to Bullying and Harassment at Work: Validity, Factor Structure and Psychometric Properties of the Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised," *Work and Stress* 23, no. 1 (2009): 24–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02678370902815673>.

about [their] Person, Attitudes or Your Private Life,” non-melanated assistants reported that they rarely if ever have this experience (see: “Frequency of Receiving Insulting or Offensive Remarks About Your Person, Attitudes or Private Life”); over 50% reportedly never having personally encountered any ad-hominem remarks. Meanwhile, BIPOC assistants tend to experience it more frequently, with 30% of my respondents saying they experience Insulting or Offensive Remarks about their non-professional life daily or all the time at work. These survey data are also supported by anecdotes from BIPOC interviewees.

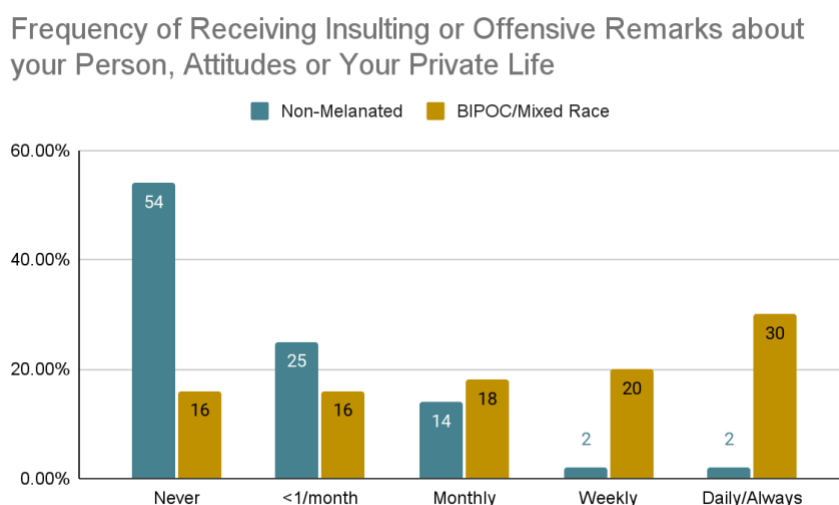


Figure 4. Frequency of Receiving Insulting or Offensive Remarks About Your Person, Attitudes or Private Life

Experiences like Olivia's crying in a bathroom stall are not uncommon. In addition to this, Rob, a Black assistant, told me horror stories of his boss, aptly comparing them to Miranda Priestly, and the excessively high expectations they had for Rob's emotional management as an entry-level worker. He remarked that his boss would frequently diminish his value or even forget his name (after he had been their assistant for 2 years) in front of their colleagues. Olivia reported being called stupid. Noah was reprimanded for saying “here you go,” after placing his supervisor's requested glass of water on his desk – in other words, for being jovial and therefore not blending in as a silent/-ced second class. Moreover, women of color assistants, and more so

than non-melanated women, were given menial tasks below their competency level and when they made mistakes, they all reported that at least one of their bosses reprimanded them, insinuating a character flaw. In this way, BIPOC assistants are asked to prove that they are worthy of being in industry by constantly demonstrating that they can put up with emotional abuse that their bosses excuse by saying “I am making you better.” To clarify, the justification of every supervisor – or the ones who supplied justifications – was that they were doing “this” (emotional abuse) to make their assistant better because it “isn't going to get easier.” The implication here is either learn to deal with Hollywood’s white supremacy and forms of systemic, cultural, and interpersonal racism or leave.

### *Conclusion*

And indeed, it “isn’t going to get easier” so long as Hollywood remains rooted in white supremacist, capitalist logics of meritocracy that equate whiteness to eliteness while also ignoring the authoritarian nature of elitism and an elite class in the first place. In the above chapter, I evidenced how BIPOC assistants are gatekept out of positions of power in Hollywood. I’ve argued that these tactics have historical and deeply ideological roots, and are not, as industry leadership might suggest, happenstance. Indeed, since its inception, Hollywood has feigned as a progressive haven while perpetuating post-racial politics. Hollywood is fiscally invested in *appearing* diverse, as this appearance appeals to its growingly diverse audience, and satisfies government and labor organizations responsible for holding Hollywood accountable for DEI initiatives and laws.

Nonetheless, white centrists in above-the-line positions have time and again maneuvered to maintain Hollywood’s meritocracy of the privileged. Contemporarily, this maneuvering affects BIPOC assistants, as one of the most unprotected, precarious worker-groups in

Hollywood. This gatekeeping manifests in pay, forms of backlash against BIPOC assistants, tokenizing, and rendering BIPOC assistants unbankable. As I have shown, BIPOC assistants' experiences in their entry level positions evidence the ways that systemic, discursive, and interpersonal racism inhibit advancement or even entry of diverse voices into creative and executive roles.

This gatekeeping at the entry-level no doubt affects the slow, incremental increase in BIPOC representation at junior and senior creative and executive levels. Gatekeeping against BIPOC assistants covertly maintains Hollywood's industrial whiteness, while they appear diverse, both on-screen and through the tokenization at across-the-line level. In other words, to see real, effective DEI measures, Hollywood decision-makers need to attend to discourses of white supremacy in the industry's cultural fabric. Organizational scholars advise that, "[i]n order to disrupt the notion of whiteness in contemporary organizations," managers must contend with their part in "sustaining white privilege" through their "subtle processes that bestow privilege on some groups and not others" by "questioning taken-for-granted organizational practices and processes."<sup>55</sup> Addressing these aspects should take place in DEI training that attends to Hollywood's organizational structures and how white privilege perpetuates white supremacy.<sup>56</sup> Hollywood's disparate, project-based work, however, presents additional challenges in implementation of DEI education. For Hollywood to persist as a leading institution of cultural influence, and undergo actual diversification, it has to do more than just 'produce' it, and effect seismic institutional efforts against systemic, interpersonal, and cultural racism.

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<sup>55</sup> M. Nkomo and Al Ariss, "The Historical Origins of Ethnic (White) Privilege in US Organizations," 399; Hunt and Ramón, "Hollywood Diversity Report 2021 - Part 1: Film"; Hunt and Ramón, "Hollywood Diversity Report 2021 - Part 2: Television"; Thakore, "On the Origin of White Hollywood: The Racialized Space of the U.S. Film Industry."

<sup>56</sup> M. Nkomo and Al Ariss, "The Historical Origins of Ethnic (White) Privilege in US Organizations," 399.

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*“That’s to Say Nothing of the Verbal Abuse”: Hollywood’s Emotional Workplace Abuse,  
Girlboss Feminism, and Sexist Gatekeeping*

Gendered abuses in Hollywood are no longer a known secret, but rather common knowledge due to the #MeToo movement in 2018. Subsequently, the dam holding back the years of patriarchal abuse and discrimination broke and floodgates opened of women – and, to a lesser extent, men – in industry. From these opened floodgates emerged retellings their stories of rape, sexual assault, threats, gaslighting, and blackmailing from superiors with high powered attorneys and economic capital unmatched to even the most economically privileged assistant. Erin Hill notes that women assistants are especially susceptible to this kind of abuse because of the relative lack of social power they hold compared to their bosses and because the position of assistant is a hold-over from that of secretaries.<sup>1</sup> Along with this hold-over comes the ritual of unwelcome sexual advances, dependence on feminine emotional labor, and the perpetuation of sexist gatekeeping that evolves under the guise of “social progress.”

Feminist movements like #MeToo have affected material and discursive changes stopping overt sexist harassment and abuse, as many of my interviewees reported. However, I am reluctant to celebrate. I do not mean to imply that the fact that folks are no longer or to a lesser extent being sexually coerced and abused is some sort of negative – this is obviously the better option. Rather, I am reluctant for two reasons. First, to celebrate that people are not being sexually abused is celebrating an industry that sets the bar for (gendered) equity on the floor. Second, aligning with feminist organizational communication studies, celebrating the mere reduction of these abuses ignores how sexism is woven into Hollywood’s organizational culture.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hill, *Never Done*.

<sup>2</sup> Joan Acker, “Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations,” *Gender & Society* 4, no. 2 (1990): 146–48; Penttinen, Jyrkinen, and Wide, *Emotional Workplace Abuse: A New Research Approach*, 5-6.

Therefore, sexist abuses evolve and persist as the industry's organizational culture remains stable. The across-the-line status of assistants maintains the sexist distribution of power and resources of the studio system; because assistantship is rendered femininely gendered, patriarchal expectations of labor justifies minimal pay to across-the-line positions via the expectation of the gender pay gap.

In this chapter, I focus on emotional workplace abuse against assistants as a quotidian manifestation of Hollywood's sexist organizational culture. I argue that, because of its historical rooting in patriarchy, sexist gatekeeping persists in Hollywood contemporarily via emotional workplace abuse (EWA). I evidence how assistants experience this gatekeeping on a continuum from immense obligations of emotional labor coercively implied in job requirements and direct experiences of EWA from their superiors by way of verbal and emotional abuse and harassment. Moreover, I also argue that Hollywood's white patriarchal roots are contemporarily maintained via white girlboss women executives. By girlbosses, I am referring to the generation of white women, currently in senior and junior executive and creative above-the-line positions, who entered industry in a post-civil rights era. These women were promoted through industry from the 1980s through the '90s as "tokens" of progress when affirmative action and equal rights policies were implemented. These girlboss above-the-line supervisors – both actively and through their presence in powerful places – virtue signal (white) feminist progress outwardly. Meanwhile, they are active arbiters of a white, ableist, upper middle-to-upper class patriarchal institution by enacting and justifying emotional abuse as part of the organizational culture.

In what follows, after a brief historical grounding of Hollywood's masculinist history as it manifests in the evolution of assistantship, I position girlboss feminists in their contemporary moment. I examine both feminist discourses within industry and broader mainstream U.S.

culture – manifest in interview content, how-to guides, and textual analysis of popular mainstream texts – to illustrate how they serve both organizational whiteness and patriarchy in their gatekeeping of assistants. I highlight how these executives, by positioning themselves in victimhood by virtue of their gender, erase other forms of marginalization thereby rendering the accusation that they could be abusers or gatekeepers absurd. After this contextualization, I analyze examples of emotional labor and emotional workplace abuse in how-to guides and interview data. The examples I selected from interviews and how-to guides were largely determined by their exemplary form and content illustrating EWA and coerciveness of emotional labor within Hollywood’s organizational culture.

Expectations of emotional labor have roots in historical gendered dynamics of Hollywood’s studio system. Furthermore, these patriarchal roots additionally extend into inappropriate forms of emotional expectation and emotional abuse against assistants. In this way, assistants – especially women assistants who enact more “emotional support” – experience gendered gatekeeping latent in their across-the-line status via mental and emotional health debilitation without (mental) healthcare support. However, first, I illustrate how illusions of “feminist progress” within Hollywood’s sexist organizational culture has ushered in girlbosses as arbiters of white patriarchy who, through their (former? continued?) victim status, are absolved of accusations of gatekeeping.

#### *Gendered History: From Patriarchal Studio System to Contemporary Girlbosses*

Hollywood’s patriarchal history persists in current cultural practices and gendered division of labor. In *Never Done*, Erin Hill demonstrates how “the entire, 120-year case of feminized labor in Hollywood reveals how conceptions of women’s work have organized and

shaped women's participation in media production at all levels.”<sup>3</sup> In these genesis years, Hollywood's gendered nature manifests in the job types, the behavioral expectations, and even the application of home care expectations in service to one's (masculine gendered) employer. To clarify, by organizational culture, I mean the shared beliefs, practices, and expectations that shape and distinguish an organization from others.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, “Organizational culture functions as a structure and a system of control that generates behavioural standards for the members.”<sup>5</sup> These standards are inherently gendered, which manifest in for example division of labor, behavioral expectations and interactions, and inequitable institutional support related to family life and care.<sup>6</sup>

Hill's archival work evidences how the post-Fordist construction of Hollywood production has always “naturally” been aligned with women because, “as secretaries, it was believed women could put to use the ‘social gifts’ that they used in the home.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, job calls expect that a successful secretary “thinks *with* her employer, thinks *for* her employer, and thinks *of* her employer.”<sup>8</sup> Hollywood has always relied upon “women's work” as labor in service to the masculine creator. The 1920s the establishment of Hollywood's craft unions “further diminished women's employment opportunities by containing them within sex-typed jobs, such as secretaries and assistants, which wielded less creative and economic power.”<sup>9</sup> Yesterday's feminine secretaries are today's across-the-line assistants, and the lack of protections and

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<sup>3</sup> Hill, *Never Done*, 8.

<sup>4</sup> Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 4; Robbins, *Essentials of Organizational Behavior*; Robbins and Judge, *Organizational Behavior*; Penttinen, Jyrkinen, and Wide, *Emotional Workplace Abuse A New Research Approach*.

<sup>5</sup> Penttinen, Jyrkinen, and Wide, *Emotional Workplace Abuse A New Research Approach*, 5.

<sup>6</sup> Acker, “Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations”; Penttinen, Jyrkinen, and Wide, *Emotional Workplace Abuse A New Research Approach*, 5–6.

<sup>7</sup> Hill, *Never Done*, 22.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Smukler, *Liberating Hollywood*, 10.

privileges latent in across-the-line work permits the ideological gender pay gap that keeps assistants in economically precarious positions. As Hill directly illustrates, this cultural and policy-written gendered difference yielded the contemporary feminine gendering of the very assistants at the center of this study.

Although men are now incorporated into this position of creative service that was formerly “women’s work,” the gendered origin and expectations of across-the-line labor has remained feminine.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, while this position is deemed feminine, it is also the gateway through which many women crossed over into above-the-line labor in post-second wave and post-civil rights organizational history. Returning to the historical roots of this contemporary expression, women’s roles in Hollywood started to shift and expand in the late 1960s-1970s. Indeed, in Smukler’s *Liberating Hollywood*, she traces the relationship between the U.S. national “second-wave” feminist movement with women’s representation as film and television directors in Hollywood industry via an expansionist history.<sup>11</sup>

Above-the-line 1960-80s political changes in Hollywood industry set the current stage for gendered expectations of assistants and their girlboss feminist supervisors. As discussed in the previous chapter, in the late 1960s Hollywood underwent an investigation of its (lack of) equitable hiring practices by the EEOC. However, in this investigation, while “the EEOC had data on both race and gender, but chose not to foreground sex along with race as a class of discrimination in its analysis of Hollywood—nor did the Justice Department in its subsequent

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<sup>10</sup> By creative service, I mean “the oft-overlooked forms of feminine performance and emotional labor ... deployed to support the movie maker or creative collective, to facilitate their creative vision and, by indirect means, to affect it” Hill, *Never Done*, 133, 217.

<sup>11</sup> Smukler, *Liberating Hollywood*, 13–14.

settlement in 1970.”<sup>12</sup> Considering the national push from both feminists and civil rights activists, Hollywood’s forward-presenting image needed to reflect *some* progress.

While the EEOC’s report on Hollywood’s hiring practices focused on racial inequities, “there is evidence to suggest that rather than black African Americans benefiting from affirmative action, the main beneficiaries have been white women.”<sup>13</sup> In 1976 Hollywood, this result of affirmative action “came in the form of jobs for white women, the majority of whom worked in clerical positions.”<sup>14</sup> Maintaining both whiteness and – through the sexist maintenance of “masculine creator-feminine supporter” power distribution within across-the-line positions – patriarchy, Hollywood’s hiring practices incorporated women via clerical positions, like assistantship. Furthermore, women’s upward advancement in Hollywood was contingent on their ability to approximate masculine leadership expectations, which inevitably placed women creatives in a double bind.<sup>15</sup>

Much like Hollywood’s present-day, profitable virtue-signaling – via BIPOC assistants in response to calls for racial equity – by the end of the 1970s “the women’s movement had begun to make an impression on Hollywood: industry leaders came to see how feminism could turn a profit.”<sup>16</sup> Therefore, women’s integration into leadership roles and above-the-line positions maintained so long as it remained profitable for Hollywood. In the 1980s, having benefited from the political organizing around racial and gender equity of the previous decades, women’s advancement into creative and executive positions inspired industrial post-feminist sentiments of “making it” that mirrored broader trends in U.S. gendered ideology.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Smukler, 54.

<sup>13</sup> Bhopal, *White Privilege: The Myth of a Post-Racial Society*, 25.

<sup>14</sup> Smukler, *Liberating Hollywood*, 61.

<sup>15</sup> Smukler, 61–79.

<sup>16</sup> Smukler, 159.

<sup>17</sup> Smukler, 278–79.



By post-feminism, I mean a cultural shift that drew from second wave feminism “and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force.”<sup>18</sup> Its neoliberal nature depoliticizes gendered oppression to be a problem with the person rather than the structure.<sup>19</sup> In 1980s Hollywood, the post-feminist organizational belief posited that women’s advancement was due to individual merit, rather than their ability to fit into and navigate the industry’s patriarchal expectations. The reverberations of these perceived feminist gains and gendered integration of women in above-the-line executive and creative roles make an impact today. Many women executives and creatives today started out as assistants in the 1980s “post-feminist” Hollywood. Therefore, their beliefs and practices maintain Hollywood’s patriarchal division of labor *and* meritocratic eliteness through implicit forms of ableism, classism, and racism. Before diving into how white women and their marketable ascription to “Girlboss Feminism” works to gatekeep out assistants, I first look at the contemporary legacy of 1980s affirmative action *and* of its ideological approach to gender acceptance and discrimination.

### *Contemporary Women in Above-the-Line Positions*

Much like its contemporary evolution with race discussed in the previous chapter, Hollywood is also currently at a crossroads/transitional moment regarding gender. Events in the 2010s catalyze mainstream conversation about gender discrimination in Hollywood. Beginning with the Sony Pictures hack in 2014, “Guardians of Peace,” a hacker-activist group, leaked confidential data from the film studio Sony Pictures including evidence of industrial gender wage gap and “how women working in front of and behind the camera are not hired or

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<sup>18</sup> McRobbie, “Post-Feminism and Popular Culture,” 351.

<sup>19</sup> Anderson, *Modern Misogyny : Anti-Feminism in a Post-Feminist Era*, 2.

compensated at the same rates as their male peers.”<sup>20</sup> This exposition catalyzed the 2015-2017 EEOC investigation of Hollywood's systemic sexism. The report of this investigation remains unpublicized, however they inspired settlement discussions among major studios, resulting in more inclusive hiring practices.<sup>21</sup>

Just as conversations of these findings and their resulting industrial shifts spread, investigative journalists Jodi Kantor, Megan Twohey, and Ronan Farrow's movement-motivating articles on Harvey Weinstein's, former Miramax and Weinstein Company executive, decades of systemically-protected sexual misconduct and abuse.<sup>22</sup> Plainly, these Pulitzer-prize winning articles described how former film producer and convicted sex offender, Harvey Weinstein, used his institutional power, connections, and status to enact sexual assault and harassment on *multiple* young women. Meanwhile, “Mr. Weinstein enforced a code of silence;” wherein many employees of the Weinstein Company signed NDAs stating “they will not criticize it or its leaders” that would harm the company or leadership's reputation.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the articles highlight how this code was organizationally systemized and victims were silenced with payouts. These articles were just the tip of the iceberg, reports of sexual harassment and misconduct and the systemic expunction of these predators continue today through the #metoo movement—exposing how deeply rooted the patriarchal boys club goes into the industry.

In the face of mainstream calls for gender diversity in Hollywood, prominent actors and celebrity creatives began the Times Up movement and gave condemnatory testimony in lieu of award season's acceptance speeches on international television. However, these censures only

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<sup>20</sup> Brannon Donoghue, “Hollywood and Gender Equity Debates in the #metoo Time's Up Era,” 241.

<sup>21</sup> Brannon Donoghue, 241–42.

<sup>22</sup> Farrow, “From Aggressive Overtures to Sexual Assault”; Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey, “Sexual Misconduct Claims Trail a Hollywood Mogul: National Desk.”

<sup>23</sup> Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey, “Sexual Misconduct Claims Trail a Hollywood Mogul: National Desk.”

served as public placation; “increased visibility may call more increased attention to gender inequities but often offers little in terms of long-term structural solutions.”<sup>24</sup> Contemporarily, the lack of industrial standards, gendered hiring expectations, or guidance of best practices or achievable outcomes pushes responsibility for gender equity practices on “willing industry players.”<sup>25</sup>

This “ad hoc” approach to Hollywood’s gender diversity is exemplified in current demographic analysis. As noted in the previous chapter, in 2020 all eleven major and mid-major film studios had predominantly white men executives. Beginning with C-Level Executives (Studio Heads), of two of the eleven were women (18 percent); of the fifty-seven Senior Executives, eleven were women (twenty percent); and last, with the closest to gendered parity, of the 102 Unit Heads/Junior Executives, approximately forty-two were women in 2020 (forty-one percent).<sup>26</sup> Television, by comparison, has much higher rates of gendered parity in executive representation: of the seventy-four C-Level Television Executives, approximately twenty-four were women (thirty-two percent); of the 140 Senior Television Executives, fifty-six were women (forty percent); and of the 705 Junior Executives/Unit Heads, approximately 381 were women (fifty-six percent).<sup>27</sup>

While lower-level executives in television tell a story of a shifting demographic make-up, it is important to highlight the lack of upper-level gender parity, as it is at these upper-levels that gender equity initiatives, greenlighting decisions, and industrial financial rearing and investing decisions are made. As critical industry studies scholars have evidenced, the patriarchal roots of

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<sup>24</sup> Brannon Donoghue, “Hollywood and Gender Equity Debates in the #metoo Time’s Up Era,” 247.

<sup>25</sup> Brannon Donoghue, 247.

<sup>26</sup> Hunt and Ramón, “Hollywood Diversity Report 2021 - Part 1: Film,” 9.

<sup>27</sup> Hunt and Ramón, “Hollywood Diversity Report 2021 - Part 2: Television,” 11.

man-creator or -financier/provider and woman-supporter maintains in Hollywood's gendered difference in hierarchical make-up.

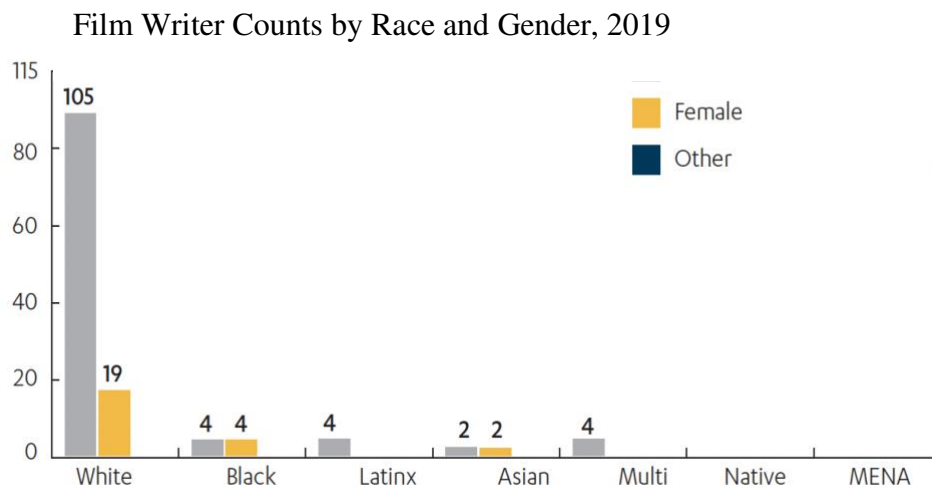


Figure 5. Film Writer Counts by Race and Gender, 2019

Turning from executives to creatives, UCLA's 2020 findings on gendered representation in above-the-line work in film and television showed there is still vast underrepresentation of women in leadership positions. First, examining film, only 1.5 out of every ten directors were women in 2019, leaving them disproportionately underrepresented compared to broader population demographics at a rate of more than three to one.<sup>28</sup> Women made up seventeen percent of film writers, meaning access and hiring women writers would need to nearly triple to meet gendered parity and proportionate representation.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, as the included figure from UCLA's report shows, women film writers are still predominantly white (76% of women directors).<sup>30</sup> This severe underrepresentation of BIWOC writers is due, in part, to the intersecting discursive and material forms of sexism and racism in industry.

<sup>28</sup> Hunt and Ramón, "Hollywood Diversity Report 2021 - Part 1: Film," 17–18.

<sup>29</sup> Hunt and Ramón, 21.

<sup>30</sup> Hunt and Ramón, 23.

In examining television creatives and gender diversity, in 2019 television staffing, 28.1 percent of broadcast show creators, 22.4 percent of cable show creators, and 28.6 percent of digital show creators were women creatives, which would need to nearly double to be representationally proportionate and achieve gender parity.<sup>31</sup> In director roles, a position often examined when looking at gender parity in above-the-line positions, in broadcast television, 29.3 percent of directors were women (of which, 21.3 percent were non-melanated and 8 percent were BIWOC); in cable television, 29.7 percent of directors were women (22.7 percent non-melanated, 7 percent BIWOC); and of directors of digital television, 29.1 percent were women (22.7 percent non-melanated, 6.4 percent BIWOC).<sup>32</sup> When examining 2019 television writers, in broadcast television 39.2 percent of writers were women (of which 27.2 percent were non-melanated women and 12 percent were BIWOC); in cable television 40.8 percent of writers were women (27.5 percent non-melanated, 13.3 percent BIWOC); and in digital television, 42.2 percent of writers were women (29.6 percent non-melanated, 12.6 percent BIWOC).<sup>33</sup>

White women hold the largest share of creative and executive positions of marginalized populations because of maintaining Hollywood's whiteness in the face of calls for affirmative action.<sup>34</sup> To recall, many (especially senior and above) women creatives and executives currently in positions of power got opportunity for advancement as a result of feminist protest within an industrial logic of post-feminism. In other words, these women historically gained advancement as tokens of progress, meanwhile industry maintained a patriarchal, post-feminist practice that required women to ascribe to systemic and cultural sexism in exchange for access to entry. White women's post-civil rights integration, indeed, was a facade as Hollywood feminists in the 1980s

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<sup>31</sup> Hunt and Ramón, "Hollywood Diversity Report 2021 - Part 2: Television," 14–17.

<sup>32</sup> Hunt and Ramón, 50–51.

<sup>33</sup> Hunt and Ramón, 44–45.

<sup>34</sup> Bhopal, *White Privilege: The Myth of a Post-Racial Society*, 24.

to today express how Hollywood's patriarchal roots constantly present barriers for gendered equity via true access, inclusion, and dismantling of sexism.<sup>35</sup>

The current rallying around Girlboss Feminism is, in part, a reaction to this post-feminist insurgence of women in more powerful positions. However, these girlbosses nonetheless perpetuate gendered gatekeeping and Hollywood's organizational patriarchy in their relationship with their assistants. In what follows I turn my attention to how the 2010 veneer-shattering exposures of sexism and misogyny in Hollywood have positioned girlboss white women above-the-line executives and creatives as the symbols of industrial progress. However, these girlbosses are simply symbols, as my analysis of assistants' gendered gatekeeping illustrates, systemic sexism is alive and well in this feminized position.

#### *Girlboss Feminism Perpetuates Patriarchal Abuse*

Mainstream popular examples of this Girlboss Feminism center around white women advising their fellow "feminists" to "get [their] ass up and work" as Kim Kardashian recently told *Variety*, following years of advice from other white women who "leaned in."<sup>36</sup> Both of these pieces of advice demonstrate how Girlboss Feminism is deeply rooted in the neoliberal ideals of post-feminism and the depoliticized, monolithic perspective of white feminism. Within Hollywood, these girlboss women are (re-?)empowered women whose voices are newly "no longer silenced" by Hollywood's muted misogyny.

As mentioned in this chapter's introduction, Hollywood's contemporary battle over gender representation in above-the-line positions is riddled with contemporary, mainstream expressions of Girlboss Feminism, which waters down political goals of feminism to fit neatly

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<sup>35</sup> Smukler, *Liberating Hollywood*, 280–81, 287; Lane, "#TimesUp: Hollywood's Lack of Progress and Failure to Believe In All Women - Ms. Magazine"; Setoodeh, "How Women in Hollywood Are Finally Taking a Stand Against Sexism"; Donahue, *This Changes Everything*.

<sup>36</sup> Wagmeister, "Money Always Matters."

within Hollywood's post-feminist, post-racist cultural beliefs. The conversion of the mainstream #metoo conversations and its impending mainstream feminist movement inspired what I mean by "girlboss" feminism. Girlboss Feminism, as a form of post-feminism rebranded to be seemingly progressive and trendy, uses the rhetoric and ideas of (white) feminism. However, like post-feminism, Girlboss Feminism individualizes empowerment and achievement, while simplifying progressive ideas to be broadly marketable to the modern-day (*white*) woman.<sup>37</sup> Within Hollywood, this manifests in white women creatives and executives in higher above-the-line positions who benefited from feminist advancement in their assistantship years and now enact Girlboss Feminism. Currently, these women are not only lauded as evidence to dispute Hollywood's patriarchal core, but also as feminist leaders and symbols who made it through an industry of #metoo's.

Moreover, I suggest that the current trend of scammer stories is on the rise by no coincidence.<sup>38</sup> Namely, television shows like *The Dropout* (2022) and *Inventing Anna* (2022) both tell the stories of a promising young woman who, despite the obstacles, believed in herself and worked to achieve her dreams – in part through well-supported scamming. These stories function as and in response to public calls for feminist representation and in the wake of Hollywood atoning for #metoo. Specifically, *The Dropout* and *Inventing Anna* both depict a story of a talented young woman who was pushed through forms of gatekeeping with the support of older, successful businessmen, who want to appear progressive, supporting feminist gains, and "onto" something.

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<sup>37</sup> Austin, "Contemporary Feminism as Portrayed in Popular Media," 5–6.

<sup>38</sup> Martin, "What We Learn from Anna Delvey"; Blake, "How Scammers and Con Artists Became TV's Laziest Way to Hook Viewers"; Wilkinson, "What's the Point of All These Scammer Stories?"

Both *The Dropout* and *Inventing Anna*, additionally, are based on the true stories of Elizabeth Holmes (played by Amanda Seyfried) and Anna Sorokin (aka Delvey, played by Julia Garner) who *did* make it through typical cross-check and vetting points in their respective endeavors. The timing of Holmes' and Sorokin/Delvey's rise to influence, as noted, was eased by public pressures for women's inclusion. Moreover, the excitement around "what could be" if "young women *just* got a chance" allowed large scale scams and fraud to persist – like the creation of breakthrough health technology that perpetually misdiagnosed users (Holmes) or feigning as a German heiress to defraud some of New York's most powerful financial institutions (Sorokin/Delvey).

Important to note in both stories, as well, is that both Holmes and Sorokin/Delvey had older, (anti-)mentor figures who served as their (attempted) gatekeepers. In both *The Dropout* and *Inventing Anna*, Phyllis Gardner (played by Laurie Metcalf) and Nora (played by Kate Burton), respectively, play roles that enforce the importance of institutional gatekeeping. In *The Dropout*, Metcalf's Gardner, after explaining to Seyfried's Holmes that their shared gender is not a basis for solidarity, states:

As a woman, let me explain something to you. You don't get to skip any steps. You have to do the work. Your work, other people's work. You have to do so much work that they have to admit that you did it and nobody helped you. You have to take away all their excuses. And then if you get anything, anything wrong, they'll destroy you. And they'll be so happy to do it. So no, as a woman, I can't help you right now.

Metcalf's Gardner here illustrates the tension between the "old guard" of feminists who protect the institutions that benefitted them and the younger, millennial era feminists who seek solidarity and guidance.



While both *The Dropout* and *Inventing Anna* tell these stories of brilliant go-getters, the “moral” of both stories is the importance of institutional gatekeeping, a gendered dynamic still at play with Hollywood assistants. To be clear, quality assurance checkpoints are not the kind of gatekeeping I mean here. Indeed, a widely available diagnostic machine that misdiagnoses users with HIV – resulting in high costs of treatment and additional, unneeded testing – requires strict quality assurance gatekeeping.<sup>39</sup> But the quote above from *The Dropout* illustrates the kind of social and cultural gatekeeping I mean. Gardner provides a quality assurance caution in *addition* to a kind of elitist investment in the same, patriarchal process that she had to claw through, rather than enacting a mentor-role through it. Seyfried’s Holmes approaches Metcalf’s Gardner, the embodiment of a former generation’s “girlbossing,” to receive a denial and social correction. The contemporary “proverb” is activated here: “There are two kinds of people: Those who think, ‘I don’t want anyone to suffer like I did’ and those who think, ‘I suffered, so why shouldn’t they?’” There is, within this, the implication of white feminism, or a feminism that disregards the experiences of non-white/lesser privileged women.

Following Moon and Holling’s position on white feminism, white women wield (white) “feminism,” which “ideologically grounds itself in a gendered victimology” that masks how these white women participate in and perpetuate non-gendered forms of oppression.<sup>40</sup> Moon and Holling specifically highlight how through the erasure of women of color’s oppression, white women are positioned purely as victims “of white male hegemony, [thereby] failing to hold white women accountable for the production and reproduction of white supremacy, ... and in doing so commits ‘discursive violence’” in its inability to see race, thereby relying on white

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<sup>39</sup> Weaver, “Agony, Alarm and Anger for People Hurt by Theranos’s Botched Blood Tests.”

<sup>40</sup> Moon and Holling, “‘White Supremacy in Heels’: (White) Feminism, White Supremacy, and Discursive Violence,” 254.

epistemology.<sup>41</sup> The authors continue on to urge feminism into “seeing race,” which is considering race as a factor in defining femininity/feminism as hinging on whiteness. Here I would further contend that (white) feminism, in its efforts against patriarchy, also fails to consider the intersections of ability, class, and sexuality – among many other positions of identity – which, much like whiteness, therefore reinscribes in its victimhood.

To this end, I argue that white women creatives and executives in Hollywood are simultaneously evidence of the “progress” of white feminism within Hollywood industry, *and* active gatekeepers for a patriarchal industry through enactments of Emotional Workplace Abuse (EWA) against assistants. Namely, I argue that for Hollywood to *appear* progressive and marketable to its varying audiences, industrial decision-makers have incorporated white women into above-the-line positions as a show of faux-progress. For true progress, “(white) feminists must work deliberately, purposefully, and consistently to explode (white) patriarchal influences” within Hollywood’s organizational culture. However, if white women creatives and executives continue to define themselves defensively as victims to Hollywood’s patriarchal organizational culture, they will perpetuate discrimination that makes other markers of difference invisible; “when women of color,” disabled women, and working-class women “are erased in (white) feminism, the racism,” classism, and ableism “inherent in (white) feminism is also conveniently made invisible.”<sup>42</sup>

When white, above-the-line girlbosses flex their white feminism and the belief that they made it so their assistants can too, it enacts discursive violence of erasure of other intersections of identity positions that experience unique forms of oppression. Girlbosses view their gender as the only category of victimhood within Hollywood’s patriarchy. Therefore, all other obstacles

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<sup>41</sup> Moon and Holling, 253–54.

<sup>42</sup> Moon and Holling, 254.

are individual problems within a neoliberal capitalist nation and industry. The harms of capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy steeped in Hollywood's industrial history and contemporary culture will continue to gatekeep and abuse difference to maintain its structure. However, unlike the masculine gatekeeping that, in part, came to light in the wake of #metoo, feminine gatekeeping within industry comes in the form of emotional workplace abuse and the continued feminization of assistantship in their expectations of large amounts of emotional labor.

#### *Assistant's Emotional Labor and Gendered Expectations*

Emotional labor is expected for Hollywood assistants. However, the extent and frequency with which assistants are to perform emotional labor, indeed, varies along very gendered lines. By emotional labor, I mean acts "to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others."<sup>43</sup> To enact emotional labor is the process of self-regulation of emotions to serve as emotional support for someone else. Abby, a writer's assistant whom I interviewed, highlights how the gendering of across-the-line positioning as feminine within its patriarchal organizational structure fosters gendered disparity of the types of assistants and the expectations of them. She highlights that the positions of writer's assistant and script coordinator are seen as more feminine and "secretarial," and therefore these entry level positions are paid less than their masculine counterparts in below-the-line work, like boom operators or grips.

Women assistants, in addition to being expected to take on more menial tasks like coffee runs or lunch orders, are also more frequently responsible for defusing the emotional outbursts of their supervisors, outbursts that are both more frequent and more dramatic when lodged at

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<sup>43</sup> Hochschild, *The Managed Heart : Commercialization of Human Feeling*, 7.

women assistants.<sup>44</sup> The result of this onslaught of emotional expectation, much like the discourses of unbankability of BIPOC assistants from the previous chapter, is a more rapid burnout and/or jaded disposition.

Additionally, Hollywood's gendered organizational culture is worth pausing on here as it affects assistants' flow of promotion. Because women are viewed as better assistants, given the feminine nature and demands of the job, promotion of women is much slower, as they are seen as the "right fit" for assistants' supportive role. Indeed, in the below vignette from a 2019 interview with Billie, a script coordinator, and Leon, a writer's assistant, they illustrate the concern of being "too good" at assisting:

**Leon:** Right, well there's a trope, too. If you're so great at your job and so invaluable that they [supervisors] won't promote you because they don't know how to do anything without you

**Billie:** which is why I was purposefully not as good at the menial as the like show tasks because it's not what I wanted to be doing and I knew if I showed competency in writing and researching that that was going to serve me better than making sure that all of the cokes in the fridge were cold. or something like that

**Kiah:** Right! interesting. That's smart and strategic.

**Billie:** Don't tell anyone that!

**Leon:** Choosing where you are efficient.

In the above interaction, Billie shares how she strategically downplays her competency in creative service and emotional labor. She downplays her feminine capacities in the workplace while forwarding her masculine capacities. In this way, she establishes strategic independence from her superior, so that they are unafraid to promote her (aka lose her) out of assistantship. Additionally, she mimics what she has seen her masculine counterparts perform in their promotion journey.

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<sup>44</sup> Hill, "Recasting the Casting Director: Managed Changed, Gendered Labor"; Hill, *Never Done*; Mayer, Caldwell, and Banks, *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*.

Through analyzing this strategy, subtle forms of sexist gatekeeping within Hollywood emerge. Namely, the belief that feminine traits are more suitable for support staff and not for the creatives and executives demystify the gendered hierarchy associated with those roles. Plainly, who is to say that a great showrunner *must* fulfill the auteurist attributes, steeped in western masculine social expectations? Indeed, the role of the showrunner is not only to care for the creative vision of the text, but also tend to the crew with creative service so the text can be successfully produced. However, because patriarchy is so steeped in Hollywood's organizational culture, the ideological expectation is that support staff are in service to the masculine creative or executive, meanwhile there is little managerial expectation or training for these supervisors, and therefore this feminine social support remains assistants' responsibility.

As opposed to the appropriate care and support that a manager should provide their employees, in Hollywood, *supervisors* (employers) expect their *assistants* (employees) to provide them emotional support and care. Within the *Hollywood Assistant Handbook*, Stamm and Norwalk advise assistants that "the secret to being a good assistant *and* staying happy is becoming the master at psychological manipulation."<sup>45</sup> They go on to list forms of manipulation rooted in strategic communication and emotional intelligence, all of which interviewees also named as survival tactics in industry. In other words, to be a successful assistant, one must have mastery over their own emotional regulation and be able to regulate the emotions of their employer, as well.

Emotional intelligence and the capacity to provide an employer emotional (as well as vocational) stability becomes a necessity for many assistants' promotion and access to above-

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<sup>45</sup> Norwalk and Stamm, *The Hollywood Assistants Handbook: 86 Rules for Aspiring Power Players*, 104.

the-line status. In the following excerpt from an interview with Olivia, she illustrates how emotional labor is a necessary part of both her job and a determinant of her professional success.

**Olivia:** That is literally on your mind at all times, especially when you're first starting, it's like, "I don't want to get fired."

You know that they can. You know that there are 10 other people at any given moment who will die to get this job and you're so afraid to fuck it up. *You do learn after a while that I need to just not tell her that this is going on so that I can work. Otherwise, it'll be a whole thing. The whole day will be gone.* Especially with my showrunner on season one, her mood would be affected for the rest of the day if one thing went sideways and it could be not a big deal to everyone on the show. To her, it's like, "I need to take this pill. I need to go meditate." Then she's grumpy for the rest of the day and everyone has to deal with it.

Especially me. She would often call me into her office and be like, "Am I crazy? Aren't they just so irritating?" I'm just like, "This cannot be my job. I am not your therapist. It's not my job to tell you that you're not crazy. You're asking so much emotional labor from me."

**Kiah:** That's an impossible question for you to answer.

**Olivia:** Impossible, impossible, especially because like, "Yes, you are." The answer to your question. You very much have to just pick and choose what they need to know. If they don't need to know, don't tell them because otherwise, it's going to be a whole thing.

In the above, Olivia highlights *multiple* ways that she was expected to provide emotional labor for her supervisor. First, she understands that the ability to successfully perform emotional labor separates her from the other ten people lined up to take her job. Next, Olivia discusses how the decision on what to tell her and when, especially with slightly bad or inconvenient news, became her responsibility. Moreover, the successful workday of the office depended on how Olivia told her showrunner supervisor the news, as it could (and would) bring the office's production to a screeching halt to accommodate for the showrunner's mood. Moreover, as Olivia notes, this showrunner expected Olivia, her employee, to validate her outrageous emotional response.

As Penttinen et al. note that emotional labor in the workplace becomes a gateway to EWA when "it is repeated and that the abuser deflects the responsibility for their behaviour and

projects it onto the target.”<sup>46</sup> In Olivia’s case, she became responsible not only for fostering the appropriate response from her boss *and* her boss viewed Olivia as responsible for whatever emotional reaction experienced. Moreover, in the office, Olivia was also responsible for discretely handling her emotional response to her boss’ repeated, inappropriate demands, which were well outside of her job description. Indeed, Olivia continued to explain the repetitiveness of the demands on emotional labor – priming her supervisor, repressing her own emotional reaction, etc. – lead to her quitting that job for her own wellbeing:

I’m paraphrasing but – this is how she asked me, she’s like, “Can you go get gas in my car, because it’s getting dark out and I was mugged at a gas station so it gives me anxiety?” I was like, “Oh, so you want your assistant who’s not getting paid enough to leave here to go risk being mugged at a gas station so you don’t have to go?” ... Which is what drove me to quit: she was asking me for all these personal things and then when I didn’t get to them as quickly as she wanted because I was doing my actual job first, she’d get mad at me. I just got to the point where ... I went into the bathroom one day and just cried. I just broke down in the stall. I just had this moment of “we’re making a children’s TV show and I’m crying in the bathroom. I need to not be here. This is not where I should be.”

In addition to attempting to manage her supervisor’s emotions by performing these personal tasks to mitigate her superior’s stressors, Olivia also must control, repress, or hide her natural response to stress, reactivity, and - at times - danger. Moreover, in the above statement, Olivia’s supervisor demands personal requests from her assistant that, through the collapse of the public-private divide, calls Olivia’s value into question. As Olivia interprets it, her superior values her safety and security so much more than Olivia’s that she would ask Olivia to perform the dangerous task, that is outside of her job requirements, rather than finding a *personal* solution to her *personal* problem.

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<sup>46</sup> Penttinen, Jyrkinen, and Wide, *Emotional Workplace Abuse A New Research Approach*, 4.

Past and contemporary supervisors constantly reinforce abuse into Hollywood organizational culture, so much so that assistants are always on guard, expecting the next outburst, because they are trained that the only thing that they can expect is their boss' emotional volatility. As Tess explains below,

I had a boss ... and she was really, really hard to read. ... I was always on her team, but there would just be some days she would just second-guess everything I said or did like I was trying to bring her down and I never understood it. I would try to counter it. ... I would try to think ahead of "how is she going to be upset about this or annoyed by this" and try to counter it and be like, "We could do it this way or this way. Whatever you think is right." I would always be phrasing it like, "Your opinion is what matters." ... I would definitely fluctuate based on what I was getting off of her. Because she had a poker face it was really hard to tell. I could only tell in the responses she said to me. ... To this day I still don't know if she likes me or dislikes me. I spent a year working for her and I couldn't tell if she liked me or disliked me. ... It was just impossible to tell. ... She wasn't a screamer, she wasn't someone who showed a lot of emotion. ... I was just like, "I don't know what to do to make you happy, because everything I do you seem to dislike." ... *I mean, she's the gatekeeper of my future.* Wanting this person to like you and then feeling like there's nothing you can do to make them like you was really exhausting.

Tess's experience illustrates another example of emotional labor in the form of assistants' strategic communication. However, she highlights a key component: her success and promotion hinges on whether her boss likes her. Therefore, assistants must marionette emotional labor in their assistant-supervisor relationship. Considering the extent of this power imbalance, gatekeeping against difference can be written off as just "personality differences" when supervisors often abuse their relatively unchecked power in an organizational culture that expects emotional labor from assistants and, at times, enacts emotional abuse against them.

Hollywood's patriarchal roots are baked into an organization's identity, creating a continuum between emotional labor and emotional abuse through a "pattern escalating from indirect violations to direct and severe forms. ... Calm phases are followed by more active



violations, and thus the calm phases should be seen as part of the pattern of violence.”<sup>47</sup> Mal demonstrates how calm phases are not actually calm for assistants:

**Mal:** *With her, it was a lot of whiplash of, "Oh, my God, you're amazing," to like, "How could you do that? You are the dumbest thing," in literally like one text conversation. It would just flip-flop. That's very hard.*

**Kiah:** How did that affect you?

**Mal:** Horribly. It was terrible, the PTSD was a problem. ... For a solid year and a half, I would honestly get a physical reaction when I would see someone who looked like her just out in the world, just a blonde woman, and like, "Oh, my God who's that?" That's not great, not ideal. ... One time a casting assistant had sent an email and my boss was on CC, but it was the assistant. It was very much the casting assistant. They had asked, "Oh, is so-and-so based in LA?" I just wrote back, "Yup." Y-U-P, yup to the assistant. I got reamed for that. "How could you ever write 'Yup' in a professional email? This is one of the biggest casting directors in this industry," just lost it on me.

I was like, "This was to their assistant and they were asking me one question." Lost it. Now I still have a visceral reaction to writing "yup" in an email. I think I've just gotten around to doing it sometimes, and I still feel really weird about it when I do it, which is-- so that was fun. Everything had to be run by her.

... My new job, where I'm at now, and ... within the first week, I was doing an itinerary for someone and my boss was leaving for the day. I was like, "Oh wait, but I haven't sent you this yet. Do you want to look over the itinerary? Should I send it to you first?" She looks at me and she goes, "I trust that you can read and write in English, right?" I was, "Yes," she goes, "Send it." ... There were a couple of times where that would happen and she'd be like, "You got a little a PTSD there, huh, don't you?" I was like, "Oh, yes, clearly." ... Those were the after-effects.

**Kiah:** That shows how extreme in the moment it was.

**Mal:** Right, exactly.

In this explanation, Mal illustrates how even if emotional abuse is not actively happening, its threat is ever present, requiring emotional labor and causing debilitating effects in assistants. Hollywood's institutional promotion system from across- to above-the-line is made on a personal basis, without human resource overview, meaning that access to above-the-line positions is contingent exclusively on one's supervisor(s). Therefore, assistants feel pressured to provide

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<sup>47</sup> Penttinen, Jyrkinen, and Wide, 7–8.

widespread emotional labor to their potential future promoter. Herein exists the paradoxical importance of emotional labor for assistants: their bosses, who demand often inappropriate amounts of emotional labor, are the gatekeepers to above-the-line access. Therefore, to “make it,” assistants push past their limits, ignore personal boundaries, and repeatedly subject themselves to verbal abuse, while their supervisors violate boundaries with unchecked freedom; after all, if an assistant says “no” or pushes back, there are plenty of other aspiring assistants who can fill that spot and hypothetically put up with the abuse long enough to be liked and then promoted to above-the-line.

To be clear, the bids for emotional labor and support would be commonplace amongst friends asking personal favors of each other. However, in industry they are inappropriate and eventually can lead to EWA, contingent on the collapse of the public-private divide; “Abuse takes place in the public sphere but is projected onto the target as a personal issue. The target is left to ruminate on the EWA at home and with friends. The results can be stress, worry and losing self-confidence.”<sup>48</sup> The power imbalance between Olivia and her supervisor and the setting within a workplace both function as emotionally destabilizing, yielding abuse I later address. In other words, the precarity of across-the-line positions inherently functions as a sort of coercion to perform emotional labor.

When I asked Leon and Izzy about their experiences of coercive emotional labor in service to their bosses, they explain how ingrained the expectation of emotional labor and abuse is in the supervisor-assistant relationship:

**Kiah:** Have there been times when you've had to cater to your boss' emotions?

**Izzy:** 100% of the time.

**Leon:** All the time.

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<sup>48</sup> Penttinen, Jyrkinen, and Wide, 6–7.

**Kiah:** Have there been times where you're like, “this is fucking ridiculous that I have to do this?”

**Leon:** 100% of the time, because even bosses who are capable, competent humans still get stressed out. *Your job is to be around in those moments.* It becomes, even if they're not holding their hand and they just want you to fuck off, it's still absurd that they get so wrapped up in something that the person who is there to help them, they're telling you to go away. It's like any relationship, I think where you are closely aligned with someone most of the hours of the day.

**Kiah:** Except there's a clear power dynamic.

**Leon:** That's the absurdity of your 100% cater to that person's emotion because that's a relationship, but at the same time, the absurdity of the inhumanly nature of: *we're two people, we feel things, but I'm supposed to pretend that your feelings are always normal, always justified, always correct and always deleting reasonable response and then I have to match.*

**Izzy:** *It's definitely one-directional. There's no pushing back or standing up for yourself unless you've got a really strong relationship with your boss,* which I've heard of, but I've never had to have that kind of rapport, to be able to say when you're being yelled at, “Hey, that's not okay. Take five and we can go back to this.” I've heard some assistants can do that. I am not one of them or have not historically been one of them, most of the time you just take whatever it is in the moment, try to reassure yourself that it's not personal and it's not about you, and try to move on with your day, and to varying levels of success. [laughs]

In the above excerpt, Leon illustrates that the very *nature* of assistantship is to *be around* and *support* a supervisor. A successful assistant lubricates any situation that their supervisor runs into to keep the project moving forward – including emotional hiccups to hardships. In this way, this employer-employee relationship mirrors that of an intimate romantic relationship; both forms of abuse silence the victim and violate their public-private divide.<sup>49</sup> With assistants, they do not (typically) have the social power to disagree with or hold their bosses accountable because they know that, as Olivia earlier mentioned, the slightest misstep might terminate their employment.

In another example, Belle discusses how these bids for emotional labor can go so far as to add emotional distress due to the belief that assistants must care for their supervisor's well-being.

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<sup>49</sup> Penttinen, Jyrkinen, and Wide, *Emotional Workplace Abuse A New Research Approach*, 6-8.

Within the context of Belle's supervisor's mother passing due to COVID-19 in 2020, she explains:

98% of our time are communicating via text message. Every day, [my boss] Tara was just going on and on about how sad she was and the grief and what a toll it was taking on her. We all felt horrible because there is nothing you can say to make anyone feel better, or say, "How are you feeling today?" "Terrible. My mom died." It's really not a good time for anyone but it was just brought up when it didn't need to be brought up. It got to a point where [it felt] unprofessional. ... I care a lot about my bosses, I care a lot about the women I work for. I have a lot of respect and admiration for them, but it takes such a toll on us when we have to keep supporting her. When she says things like, ... "I don't know if I'll stop drinking." ... I don't think that's helping. It's like her needing to get it out of her brain and mouth and we are the receptacle. I didn't sign up to be a receptacle for your trauma. ... I spoke to Sarah who's above everyone, and I was like ... It's just far too much for me to deal with. She was completely understanding, she was like, "I completely get it," and she felt very similarly to me, that there's not a nice way to say, "Hey, can you stop talking about your dead mom." ... [My boss has] always been a defensive person but now it's times 100. Any little thing would have set her off, of just saying, "Hey, let's have this text group just be about work." It's a lot of eggshell stepping. That was a lot of emotional work that had to be dealt with. She needed a lot of support and I'm not qualified. It's not my job to do that. I don't get paid enough to also be in group therapy with you. Not even group therapy, your therapy and we listen.

In the above, Belle highlights how her supervisor used her rank and superiority as implicit justification for her public grieving in professional spaces. Additionally, Belle addresses how she had to go to the head partner of the company to attempt to set boundaries because she did not feel comfortable with the dynamic in her "nuclear" supervisor-assistant relationship and feared the impending backlash that could come with boundary setting. In this way, Belle's example illustrates how this coercion of emotional labor, knowing that one's success as an assistant might be contingent on taking on this emotional labor, intersects with discourses of Girlboss Feminism. Additionally, the feminization of assistantship (in relation to a "masculine" position of employer) empowers her supervisor to express herself while Belle must femininely absorb this discomfort.

While Belle exemplifies the intersecting relationship between coercion, emotional labor, and Hollywood's patriarchal positioning of various actors, Izzy states directly how this overlap requires assistants, rather than their supervisors with more power, to accommodate. Specifically, the conditions of the supervisor-assistant relationship limits boundary-setting capacities of *assistants*, "There is no pushing back or standing up for yourself. ...you just take whatever it is in the moment, try to reassure yourself that it's not personal and it's not about you, and try to move on with your day." The cultural expectation around assistants' lack of boundaries is one of the key points where emotional labor transitions into experiences of EWA.

#### *Emotional Workplace Abuse as Sexist Gatekeeping*

I make this point to expand on Penttinen et al.'s feminist construction of emotional workplace abuse (EWA). Namely, their definition of EWA does not identify emotional labor as abusive because, generally, emotional labor is not abusive. Exploitative? Sure, but not typically abusive. However, within the context of an assistant's responsibility of creative service in support of their supervisor, partly made of unwritten expectations for emotional labor, the emotional labor that assistants provide carries the weight of their fate and therefore allows for an easy point of entry for EWA. Consequently, in the Hollywood industry, expectations of emotional labor in the assistant-supervisor relationship are an abuse of power that harms a subordinate, by way of EWA.

EWA "refers to patterned maltreatment of the target" that span from acts to hinder assistants professionally (via withholding information, ostracism, exclusion, belittlement of achievements) to those which enact interpersonal harm (via gossiping, violent outbursts, ridiculing the target in front of others), and affect assistants' "personal integrity and the sense of

self as being a competent worker.”<sup>50</sup> In the previous section, I addressed how patriarchal expectations of emotional labor from assistants tend to yield emotional abuse. Following Penttinen et al., here I expand from interpersonal, employer-employee interactions to focus on withholding information, ostracism, exclusion as professional forms of EWA and ridiculing the target in front of others as personal.

Withholding information as a form of professional EWA might traditionally look like not providing a colleague with necessary information for their success. However, in the supervisor-assistant dynamic, this tactic would result in mutually assured destruction, as the assistant’s work and reputation reflect the person enacting EWA. Writers’ assistant Abby describes this form of information withholding as poor use of communication skills, not to be confused with the lack of capacity to communicate effectively. Anyone who is successful in Hollywood, the highly communicative industry that it is, must have excellent communication skills to succeed. Therefore, the interactions like the one Abby describes below are founded on *choices* that supervisors make with the absurd belief that their assistant can read their minds for the information they do not fill in:

I like to use the apple metaphor. My boss ... would say, "Get me an apple." You'd be like, "Okay, a red apple or a green apple? Do you want a whole apple or do you want a sliced apple? Do you need the apple right now or can the apple be next week? Tell me what you need."

Then you would try to be the good assistant, anticipate their needs and wants. Then you would say, "Oh, here's a green apple on its slice, and I got it to you ASAP." Then he'd say something like, "Oh, well, I really wanted a red apple and I didn't really need it sliced and could have been next week," and it's like, "Well then, just tell me." That's just an example but he would do something like "Oh, get me a meeting with John Smith." Then you're like, "Does it need to be in person? Is it in person, on the phone?" even before the pandemic. "A 30-minute meeting, a 60-minute meeting? Is it something that needs to happen--? Do I need to get on the calendar at the day? Is it just a catch up for later in the month?"

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<sup>50</sup> Penttinen, Jyrkinen, and Wide, 3.

As Abby's example describes, withholding information from assistants instead manifests as a sort of "test" or "*training by fire*"; in other words, supervisors might not explain how they want something done or which "John Smith" exactly they want on the phone, leaving the assistant who is bound eventually to wrongly interpret their vague instructions vulnerable to (potentially abusive) reprimands that they have come to expect within Hollywood organizational culture.

Additionally, withholding information can at times work in tandem with exclusion as EWA in Hollywood. Exclusion is the act of barring someone from entry, whereas ostracism – another form of EWA – is the practice of excluding someone from a society or community through lack of communication or acknowledgement. I address ostracism below, however here, I highlight the overlap of withholding information as exclusion when it comes to healthcare privileges. Namely, Andi explains her experience as a disabled woman needing access to healthcare, and the exclusive gatekeeping that she was met with. In the conversation leading up to the following excerpt, Andi explains to me that she went to her bosses, who directed her to HR at the network, who directed her to payroll, who then redirected her back to the network as the folks to provide healthcare assistance. She states that her backstock of insulin was running out and she attempted to express the urgency of getting healthcare coverage she was promised:

**Andi:** [After researching California law on worker's rights, I expressed to the network that] "you have to offer me health benefits, you have over ... 25 employees. You have thousands of employees. You can't skip offering me health insurance because you don't want to or try to claim it's the payroll company that's responsible because they're not." ...

They had their lawyers come up with something and apparently there are some legal loopholes where they can exclude 10% of their employees from having health benefits. That's what they were claiming that they were using was that legal loophole where they didn't have to offer them because I was in that 10%.

**Kiah:** I wonder how many assistants are in that 10%.

**Andi:** I'm guessing it's a lot more than [the] 10% that they are claiming. It wouldn't surprise me if you went through their records and found that it's a much higher percentage.

**Kiah:** I can imagine that the constant change of what shows are on and who is on with what production company makes it really easy to obscure a lot of that information for them.

**Andi:** ... They are very difficult to deal with ... They were trying to say that, "oh, you're a contract employee [not a full-time employee where we would have to provide you health benefits]." I was like, "No, no, no, I'm full-time. Here's my proof of being a full-time employee."

Then they had to come back again with some other excuse of why they refused to offer health insurance, but they always have something. It's terrible because they're already paying you minimum wage, but you're working harder than anybody else on the team and you're doing more work than anybody else, you're getting paid the least, and then they're refusing to offer you even health benefits.

**Kiah:** They're quite literally just giving you the runaround hoping you give up because you're overworked anyway.

**Andi:** That's the thing, ... especially when it comes to my health, if you're going to give me the runaround, I will run around, but you are going to have to deal with me until you just can't anymore. They will give up before I do.

While the above vignette illustrates how sexism and ableism interlock in their discriminatory enactment, here I focus on EWA's role in the above. Andi exemplifies how withholding information about how to access healthcare benefits results in exclusion from necessary support for assistants. Namely this runaround, made up of withholding information with the intent to exclude, is an institutional strategy that gatekeeps against disabled and working-class assistants by manipulating them to the point of burnout and/or needing to find a different job to support them financially. This kind of exclusion also takes place discursively, as discussed in chapter one, in gatekeeping discursively through issues of social capital that translates into needed networks for promotion.

This classist and ableist gatekeeping discourse intersectionally enacts both racist and sexist gatekeeping as well in the form of emotional workplace abuse via ostracism. Namely, while these discourses do have negative impacts to one's ability to advance in promotion, they simultaneously affect feelings (and realities) of who belongs and who does not. Namely, to be above- or below-the-line imply a belongingness, that a worker has landed, they are guild- or



union-protected, and have a named place. Being *across*-the-line however is a state of transition; assistants have not yet gotten across above (or below) the line thresholds and are still in a sort of industrial incubation period. Forms of ostracism in this incubation period weed out those who don't belong above-the-line. One way this takes place is through the sexist enmeshment of Hollywood's materialism. Within the *Hollywood Assistant Handbook*, the chapter titled "Appear Clothes Rich Even If You Are Cash Poor" gives advice on how to survive on a shoestring budget in an intensely materialistic and image-based industry. However, what it does not highlight is the latent sexism within demands to "look the part."

Since its genesis, Hollywood has been one of the most active spaces in shaping the image of ideal, hegemonic (white) femininity. Within industry, this expectation was performed with secretaries (the precursor to assistants) who were expected to appear polished, feminine, but not too sexual, as any challenges to this code (set by men) was a challenge to men's authority itself.<sup>51</sup> The overlapping oppressions of class and gender manifest in Lara's experience as an assistant at a management agency. In our interview, Lara explained that one of her supervisors, who she refers to as "Bitch Boss," would constantly make direct and indirect comments on Lara's appearance, her access to exclusive clubs, and her material consumerism to ostracize Lara and make her feel as though she doesn't belong in Hollywood:

Yes, it's [her boss' expectations] like, "Oh, no, you have to be a fashionista. You have to love fashion. I love Chanel." It's a lot of that stuff. ... the diet culture is a thing, [she would say] "I don't eat sugar. I need to watch my figure," and that sort of thing. I used to have an eating disorder. Hearing that sort of stuff was like, "No, don't please stop, please stop." ... It just like the sorts of people that Bitch Boss would hang around with were the same sort of people. She was very much into the fact that she had a membership at the Soho House. She was obsessed with that idea. "Oh, my God, have you ever been to the Soho House? It's very exclusive."

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<sup>51</sup> Hill, *Never Done*, 112–15.

... There is that element of materialism and that is something that I don't respond to. ...It's very, just the lifestyle of like people trying to be [or appear] rich. ... Then sometimes she would make comments and be like, "Lara, you should wear makeup. You look so good in mascara and stuff." I'm like, "I like my sleep, thanks. You guys do not deserve me at my mascara level."

Lara here illustrates how the materialist focus on "looking the part" and consumer feminism manifests for her girlboss supervisor here. Lara's appearance was directly and indirectly a point of ostracism and control. Because Lara was not interested in fashion, makeup, or belonging to an exclusive, high-profile club, her boss made a point to highlight where Lara fell short and didn't belong, ostracizing her to the extent that Lara eventually left Hollywood.

Of the over thirty assistants I interviewed, only Tess and Lara have left industry to pursue other careers as a voiced, *direct* result of the emotional abuse they experienced as assistants. They both expressed how their work environments, with the threat of emotional abuse lingering over them the whole time, resulted in what many assistants, including Lara and Mal, name as PTSD. This emotional abuse did not just come in the realm of professional expectations and abuse to follow when the expectations weren't met. Many of the abuses young women face are also personal and take the form of being ridiculed in front of others.

Within the *Hollywood Assistant Handbook*, Chapter 17 advises assistants to "thicken up that skin" ... "Because your wise elders here are telling you that being insulted is just another rite of passage in whatever [Hollywood] business you choose to work in."<sup>52</sup> Indeed, being humiliated and ridiculed is an expectation in Hollywood for assistants. Moreover, rather than advising supervisors on how to not emotionally abuse their employees, the general guidance from the handbook, multiple assistants including Izzy's statement above, and employers is to just "not take it personally." The onus of addressing abuse lies with the abused rather than the abuser,

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<sup>52</sup> Nowalk and Stamm, *The Hollywood Assistants Handbook: 86 Rules for Aspiring Power Players*, 47.

as Hailey and Izzy demonstrate in the conversation below. Leading up to these statements, Hailey talked about how the space she worked at in a small agency was an open floor plan, and her supervisor, Jordan, would use that to his advantage:

**Izzy:** That's to say nothing of verbal abuse.

**Hailey:** Yes, exactly.

**Izzy:** Which is rampant in every sector of the industry. Executives and creatives that get power very quickly, they don't know how to regulate their own emotions, and assistants end up becoming whipping posts for emotional outbursts for any kind of confrontation that they've had themselves. Whatever it is, rage, insecurity, frustration, gets funneled to the assistant. Kind of what you were talking to Michael about with getting thrown under the bus by your boss and having to just take it. That's the mentality behind the verbal abuse that happens pretty frequently.

**Hailey:** It's kind of like-- of course, it's not justice, you're stupid to think that it is. I remember the first couple weeks that I was getting it really bad from one of my bosses. We were also in an open concept environment office, by the way. There was no privacy, so I was being like-- He sat right beside me too. I was being regularly humiliated in front of literally everyone at the company, so, obviously everyone knew. It would be like, "What are you thinking? How could you think this way?" Basically to implicate you're stupid, whatever.

The CEO pulled me aside and was like, "Hey I know you've been getting it really bad from Jordan." Then here I am thinking, ... he's got some words of encouragement and maybe he'll give me a raise, whatever. Obviously, this is completely unfair. ... He said, "You just got to understand. You gotta be the whipping boy. This is how this industry works. You can't cry. They'll know that you're weak. You want to be a writer, you think it gets better when you actually become a writer? No, it gets worse."

This was the speech that was given to me. It was like, "You're a pussy," basically, you need to not even let it affect you in the slightest. There's no winning. What am I supposed to do? Take the abuse happily? I didn't even fight back. All I'm doing is sitting here trying to do my job, somebody is screaming at me all day and then I get pulled aside into several meetings about how that person is screaming at me. It's like you get double punished.

The above vignette offers some insight into the kind of emotional abuse that is expected by women assistants. Hailey notes that she must be "the whipping boy," who not only absorbs her supervisor's verbal abuses and ridicule, but also receives these verbal lashings to be made an example of in front of her entire office. Her reprimand was not to make her better at her job, it

was an opportunity for her boss to perform the power he had, and the simultaneous lack of power she had, in front of her colleagues.

And what's more, absorbing this abuse is *expected* as their form of "pay to play," or paying dues, as Izzy later states. Indeed, Hill provides a historical bridge to understanding how women are uniquely positioned in this industry as assistants, stating, "The only real difference between then and now is that whereas studio secretaries' were expected to suffer for their bosses simply because they were women (service being their gender's specialty and a reward unto itself), for today's assistant, doing anything and everything requested by an employer, no matter how strange or difficult, is framed as the only way to really 'make it' and be promoted through the ranks."<sup>53</sup> However, this paying dues myth is confounded by the lack of upward advancement young women experience within industry.

Supervisors tend to expect more from young women assistants by way of emotional labor. Simultaneously, women are less likely to be promoted out of this across-the-line status *because* the position has always been seen as feminine and attuned to feminine abilities.<sup>54</sup> In our conversation below, Billie explains how she has encountered this gatekeeping. To contextualize, at the time of my interview with Billie, she, Izzy, Hailey, and Danielle (all of whom I interviewed) were employed by the same white, cis-male showrunner, who has historically hired women assistants and promoted them through the across-the-line hierarchy<sup>55</sup>:

**Billie:** I will point out that often we have blonde haired, blue-eyed white men hired at the very top. Even in our writer's room, we have diverse hires. But they are always staff

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<sup>53</sup> Hill, *Never Done*, 215.

<sup>54</sup> Hill, *Never Done*.

<sup>55</sup> To recall, assistants exist within their own "across-the-line" assistant hierarchy. Near the bottom of that hierarchy would be personal assistants and agency assistants, as they are the key points of entry into assistantship. They rank lower for multiple reasons; personal assistants because they are the furthest from the creative process (which is how the hierarchy typically flows), meanwhile agency assistants while generally considered "lower ranking" is also a badge of honor and a symbol of being able to handle copious amounts of workplace stress and abuse, making them appear as desirable employees later.

writers or story editors, which are the two bottom rungs [of the writers' hierarchy]. Versus the top four people who run our show all have ...blonde hair and blue eyes.

**Leon:** Do ... you think that will change in time?

**Izzy:** like a pipeline?

**Leon:** Like in ten years, twenty years from now we will see a difference?

**Billie:** No, I've seen the people that we've had up for these positions and it's just time and again--

**Izzy:** Our newest Co-EP's one exception to that rule.

**Billie:** Yes, still not quite at the top though. She's at the bottom of the top.

**Izzy:** Yeah. She's at the bottom of the top.

**Kiah:** Why do you think that is? That, what it's sounding like is that you're able to be promoted through this bottom level [of assistantship] but not into above-the-line positions.

**Billie:** Mhm

**Kiah:** Why?

**Billie:** ... I think women have better work ethic and are more thorough in their work. And we are good workers. I love working with this team because we are very dedicated and can rely on each other to get things done. But I think when it comes to hiring people that [our boss is] really going to rely on and thinks of as people in his corner, loyal people who will back him up, you know, in his heart or gut or whatever, he looks at those people and inherently trusts him because they look like him.  
<sighs of agreement>

Additionally, as Billie also hints at previously, there is a conception that the administrative and clerical work inherent to the role of assistants is "women's work," and they are therefore less likely to receive promotions out of their across-the-line positions and into more creative roles. Hill also reflects on the conditions that promote this discourse stating, "Male assistants were ... distinguished from female assistants in the hierarchy, particularly through the amount of routine and service work they did for their employers. While female assistants were viewed as glorified secretaries, male assistants were understood as the executives' apprentices with advancement potential."<sup>56</sup> As our interview continued, Billie then informed me of her strategy to avoid this stagnation has been to perform poorly at feminine tasks and do well at the kind of tasks she

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<sup>56</sup> Hill, *Never Done*, 140.

wants to do – a strategy that has worked well for her as she has, to my knowledge, been promoted into above-the-line status.

As the examples from the *Hollywood Assistants Handbook*, Hailey, and Billie above highlight, the only way to succeed as an assistant is to repress feminine expressions of personal emotion as to not seem “weak” within a patriarchal organizational culture, embrace mediocre work that could be seen as “women’s work,” and remember that narcissistic projection runs rampant in Hollywood, as many assistants also explain. Mal expresses how narcissism fosters EWA against assistants:

**Mal:** Exactly. Well, because they dangle the carrot as well. It is absolutely psychological manipulation where they know when to dangle the carrot, which is just so fucked up.

**Kiah:** It works.

**Mal:** It does. A narcissist is a narcissist at the end of the day. I think they know what to do. The gaslighting and all of that, they're all real things for a reason.

To contextualize, in this above quote, Mal illustrates how an assistant’s success is a carrot that her supervisor uses to taunt and manipulate her. Mal’s supervisor here knows that this form of manipulation produces desired results, with disregard for how her assistant is personally, emotionally, or vocationally impacted by the resulting EWA. Penttinen et al.’s main suggestion for how to rid an organization of EWA is to screen supervisors for narcissistic personality disorder and psychopathy. While there are some latent ableist undertones to this suggestion, I highlight it to contextualize the suggestion within Hollywood because of the industry’s reputation for selfishness bordering on narcissism that fosters EWA for assistants. Therefore, here I posit that the very organizational culture is created to house, perpetuate, and protect narcissistic abuse.

Moreover, Hailey, an assistant I interviewed in both 2019 and 2021, explains how this girlboss gatekeeping and narcissistic abuse is *just now* getting industry attention:

There was a female showrunners panel. ...It was right after the Weinstein [news] and they did a live stream of it. Then the female showrunners turned against each other. I thought it was the most interesting part in the panel. They were like, “We talk about sexual harassment, but let's fucking talk about how you guys are bullies to your assistant and your staff.” Pretty much they called each other out, we need to work on this, and then it got shut down pretty quickly because that's the real deal.

That's what no one will talk about is the bullying. Bullying sounds like too fluffy of a word for it, but it's literally just power and abuse of power. Largely that is the engine that keeps the Hollywood machine running in a lot of dark ways.

Hailey also puts emotional abuse in conversation and context of the recent push to change the culture around sexual harassment and abuse in Hollywood. In Hollywood's patriarchal organizational culture, white women executives enact a socialized disciplining of emotional workplace abuse against assistants as the new guard of gatekeepers. However, because they are “victims” of patriarchal abuses as well – as the contrast of Weinstein's multiple, structurally protected sexual abuses against young women implies – they don't receive the scrutiny that, for example, men executives currently experience.

Simultaneously, this victimhood also serves as the excuse for why girlbosses perpetuate the abuse (i.e., they made it, so others can too, *and* they see gender as the only obstacle and therefore erase other markers of difference that they oppress in their EWA) as a means to keep a sense of control in an environment that was not made for the feminine. Mal explains her experience of being an assistant to women and how this need for control is a clear driving force behind above-the-line women's EWA:

**Mal:** Personally, I never want to work for a woman again. I think it's [the reason behind EWA] a mix of having to grapple with the fact that you're a woman in a man's world, if you will. Yes, I think it's just a control thing at the end of the day. All comes down to control. ... Honestly, that's, yes. As soon as they feel like they're losing control, that they can't deal, they freak out.

**Kiah:** Do you think that there's anything to the woman supervisor-women assistant dynamic in that?

**Mal:** ...For the boss I had at the management company, her previous assistants were men. Not all of them, but the last several were all men. I definitely think that there's something about that. ... It's because they're more insecure and they need to be more in control. It all just comes down to that. I just can't. I'm insecure enough. I don't want my boss to be insecure. I'm supposed to be learning from [her]. I want to learn how [she's] a boss bitch. Look, there were definitely moments where she was totally like that. There was one time when she got so mad at another agent and fully lost her shit in the right way ... It was probably the greatest thing I've ever witnessed just because in that moment, you could tell what a shark this person was. ... I'm happy to see it that way. It's the rest of it that I can't deal with if that's not necessary.

**Kiah:** Know when to bare your teeth kind of a thing.

**Mal:** Right, yes.

In the above, Mal aptly identifies that this “shark” behavior – this ability to efficiently, rhetorically communicate in a situation that appropriately calls for it – that her woman boss enacted is a strong, feminine trait that Mal admires. At the same time, she adds the nuance that being a woman in a man's world means that her boss' outbursts and EWA are defense mechanisms; they are a way for this boss to hold some semblance of control in an organizational culture that, since she was an assistant, threatens to push her out.

Hailey expands on how the cyclical nature of the promotion process instills this defensiveness in women as they are promoted into above-the-line positions:

**Hailey:** If you treat people that way, it'll eventually turn them into monsters. It'll keep the wrong people in the industry. I don't understand why there's this cognitive dissonance between if you treat people like they're not human for decades on end and then expect them to have humanity by the end of it, then.

**Kiah:** How?

**Hailey:** I guess that's the point, that is they don't expect you to have humanity by the end of it. It is institutionally a classist propaganda machine that serves the powerful ... At the end of the day, I fully expect my [leftist] politics to become so much a part of my personality that I'm a threat to entertainment, and I get shoved out. I fully expect that to happen. I just got to play it out, I guess.

Hailey continues to note that empathetic people get chewed up in Hollywood, which is what she expects to happen for her. In Hailey's testimony, I was intrigued by her critique that “they don't



expect you to have humanity by the end of it” followed up by calling Hollywood a propaganda machine. In her statement, she implies a central paradox of Hollywood’s political image. While the industry must speak to its audiences to make money, it is still a capitalist organization that relies on classist, sexist, and racist exploitation to produce its “progressive” content. As Hailey notes, the institution and those who wield its power are predominantly focused on making money. To make money, Hollywood incorporates the ethos of social progress into its forward-facing content while promoting an organizational culture that doesn’t expect its creators and executives to have the humanity that it purports, as evidenced by women’s perpetuation of EWA.

Despite these experiences of EWA, in many conversations, assistants spoke of a kind of loyalty to their supervisors. This indebted loyalty is another place that narcissistic abuse manifests. When speaking with Tess, a former assistant, she talked about one of her previous boss’ wielding this power as a form of indoctrination:

I think that it may have been an instance where she wasn't interested in helping lift women up. That wasn't a part of her agenda. *Her agenda was very much her.* I think she liked having this white boy under her that she got to boss around. ... I think she made it so that he got promoted when she left. ... It's also this thing of ... when you do something to make sure somebody is promoted, that person is loyal to you forever. You made a big change in their career, in their life. You've done so much for them. Even if you treated them poorly, by promoting them, ... they'll always be indebted to you and always talk good about you. I think her leaving and making sure he got the promotion was like “make sure you retain my legacy. You keep my secrets. You do my bidding. I think that's part of it.”

Tess addresses two key aspects of assistant gatekeeping here. First, she addresses how structural forms of privilege benefit both whiteness and masculinity in the form of who (girl)bosses often promote. But second, and less apparent, is the way that supervisors, as the gatekeepers admitting access to their assistants, also foster this privileging by promoting a relationship where the former assistant is indebted to their point-of-access supervisor. This relationship dynamic implies

a sense of security; because supervisors paved the way for their assistants, assistants repay them with gratitude and the assumption of silence regarding their experiences of EWA. In this way, abusers' abuses stay hidden, and serve as a model for the now-above-the-line former assistant who is soon to have their own assistant. And the cycle repeats itself.

While this abusive cycle of indoctrination takes place on an interpersonal level and is protected by the organization, these interpersonal abuses also work to protect the industry's patriarchal roots. Indeed, a generation of girlboss white women reinscribe Hollywood's patriarchal foundation while protected under the guise of victimhood. Because women have so long endured sexist abuse within Hollywood industry, their incorporation into the industry reads as progress ... until you look a bit closer to see how these white women reify patriarchy through emotional abuse.

### *Conclusion*

In this chapter, I analyze how Hollywood assistants experience gatekeeping through various forms of emotional labor, EWA, and the intersecting discourse of Girlboss Feminism in Hollywood's contemporary moment. Namely, I highlight the dialectic relationship between interpersonal abuse that supports and is supported by an industry, which profits from the abuse of not only a gender pay gap but the appearance of gendered diversity without access, wields abuse as a form of gatekeeping against difference in across-the-line positions. Importantly, while I ground this chapter in feminist organizational studies, I highlight that my feminist approach is intersectional. Through this lens, I examine how Hollywood's capitalist goals work in tandem with its patriarchal roots to wield sexist exploitation in various forms as the industry evolves. As I conclude this chapter, the question still looms: why do assistants put up with this abusive behavior? The short answer is ... the system is such that they must if they want to succeed into

above-the-line positions. The slightly longer answer has two prominent themes related to EWA: paying dues and silencing the victim.

First, the similarities the psychological survival response of EWA, sexual abuse, and intimate partner violence is telling. As Penttinen et al. highlight, the similarities between EWA and intimate partner violence and emotional abuse are surprisingly similar experiences resulting in, often, lessened self-confidence and unclear sense of self.<sup>57</sup> As Hailey's comment above indicates, the intention is this lost sense of self in service to the "capitalist propaganda machine." Moreover, as Penttinen et al. note, a prominent contributor to the perpetuation of these abuses is the lasting effects of silencing the victim – also a response to sexual abuse and intimate partner violence. This silencing is not only a response to trauma, but also an expectation within Hollywood's organizational culture. As *many* assistants and the *Hollywood Assistant Handbook* advise, assistants do not speak ill of their supervisors. And, like Hailey's comments about the women showrunners panel illustrates, this silencing strategy runs deep enough that above-the-line workers will silence *each other* to keep the machine well oiled.

Second, which I expand on in this dissertation's conclusion, EWA is expected as a part of "paying your dues." Izzy and Leon's respective responses to what it means to "paying your dues" are illustrative of this point:

**Izzy:** Paying your dues means working at jobs below your competency level in order *to learn the specific culture and skillset* needed to advance in the industry. That often takes on the idea of doing grunt work, of working very long hours for very little pay. ... I think in any industry you should pay your dues in starting at a place of learning and absorbing and probably doing it below your competency level, *but the whole working people to the bone and letting all the shit sink down to the bottom is not necessary* and something, I hope, that our cohort of assistants will change by the time they get to executive-level representatives and producer levels.

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<sup>57</sup> Penttinen, Jyrkinen, and Wide, *Emotional Workplace Abuse: A New Research Approach*.

**Leon:** I would say paying your dues is *enduring the amount of discomfort necessary, whatever level that may be, until someone above you decides you have endured the requisite amount to move to the next layer.* That layer has its own level of discomfort, but it is less or different than the one that preceded it. You keep moving through these layers of discomfort until you get to determine how discomfort is doled out, you've reached a layer that's high enough to do that.

As Izzy highlights, paying dues is a way to learn the organizational culture, and in Hollywood it serves the purpose of labor exploitation. Leon extends this definition to include the idea of endurance, and specifically enduring discomfort. Moreover, they both highlight the cyclical nature of how EWA is perpetuated through paying dues. In other words, as mentioned above, there is no “check” on a supervisor’s emotional abuse, while they simultaneously stand as the gatekeeper to their assistants’ success. They call the shots. They determine when and if an assistant is ready to promote through, thereby losing this assistant and needing to hire and onboard another (read: more labor for supervisors). Nonetheless, the intersection between these two factors – paying dues and silencing victims – is salient in the context of Hollywood’s patriarchal organizational culture.

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*“It's expensive at the bottom”: Classism, Ableism, and Systemic Debilitation of Assistants*

In 2021, an already fast-paced industry shifted production into overdrive to stave off threats of entertainment content lull and lost profits because of Hollywood's COVID-19 shutdown. Aiming to break the bottleneck of content that had been stalled, already precarious below- and across-the-line workers voted to authorize a strike of 60,000+ International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) union members, the largest U.S. private-sector strike in twenty years. While the majority of IATSE members are below-the-line laborers, at the start of my study in 2019, “upper-level” assistants and coordinators (which could be understood as the crossing-the-line position in the promotional hierarchy towards above-the-line work) were permitted to join local 871. Both IATSE and #PayUpHollywood are starting the conversation on how Hollywood's hidden discourses debilitate and gatekeep disabled and working-class assistants.

In this dissertation, thus far I have examined how organizational practices and culture gatekeep against racial and gendered differences. In this chapter, I examine the less visible identity markers of disability and socioeconomic status through the lens of debilitation. This examination is informed by assistant interviews, #PayUpHollywood internal survey results from 2019-2021, public-facing trade or news articles, 56 assistant job calls, and how-to Hollywood assistant guides. I argue that because these markers of difference are less, and at times invisible, disabled assistants and assistants of lower socioeconomic class are rendered misfits, meaning that their existence is antithetical to Hollywood's neoliberal organizational culture. Via a materialist feminist disability perspective that examines “how the particularities of embodiment interact with their environment in its broadest sense, to include both its spatial and temporal

aspects,” I evidence how these assistants are rendered Hollywood misfits.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, I highlight how the concept of “misfit” critiques the ways the embodied and social experience of disability and working class positionalities affect how one belongs (or doesn’t) and the specificities of their experience being welcomed as a good fit or gatekept out as a misfit. To be clear, the ambiguity of an across-the-line status allows for indiscriminate discrimination, easily wielded against both invisible differences and an invisible across-the-line class. Throughout this chapter, I use the term misfit to refer to two related forms: (1) the process of exclusion, *and* (2) in reference to specifically those gatekept out of above-the-line positions in part due to their class and/or ability status. Moreover, the idea of mis/fitting is important here as it implies how “fitting” appears as a natural process.

Hollywood’s organizational culture and practices socially and materially discriminate against disabled assistants and assistants of lower socioeconomic status. As my analysis below illustrates, “fitting” into Hollywood’s organizational culture is a fitting marked with ableism and classism. Briefly, by ableism, I mean forms of discrimination against bodies and minds deemed non-normative. Within U.S. workplaces, ableism typically centers around forms of “inefficiency,” as efficiency has been defined in terms of white, masculine, able-bodyminded ways of being.<sup>2</sup> In Hollywood industry and production cultures, there is little mainstream or organizational conversation around classist and ableist discrimination, because an able-bodyminded and middle to upper-class perspective and privilege is expected. Anything outside of this organizational norm is rendered as *misfit* and gatekept out. Classism and ableism gatekeep

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<sup>1</sup> Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept,” *Hypatia* 26, no. 3 (August 2011): 591, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2011.01206.x>.

<sup>2</sup> I use the term able-bodyminded to highlight how disability manifests in both visible and invisible forms of the body and mind, *and* – in anti-Cartesian efforts – to make explicit the body, mind, and emotional well-being of a person is interconnected. Therefore, bodily, emotional, or mental disability inherently affect one’s bodily, mental, and emotional well-being.

not only at these intersections of identity positions. As I evidence, they are used as base justifications to gatekeep against BIPOC and non-masculine individuals in *addition* to gatekeeping against working class and disabled assistants.

As my critical disability studies analysis below evidences, many tactics of gatekeeping within Hollywood are forms of classist and ableist debilitation, overlapping with/appearing as racist and sexist gatekeeping in hidden ways. I begin this analysis with a review of Hollywood's class and disability history. Thereafter, I briefly overview critical disability studies as this chapter's framework to contextualize contemporary Hollywood. Finally, I analyze assistant's interviews and survey data to evidence how lower-class assistants, assistants with physical disabilities, and neurodivergent assistants are gatekept out of above-the-line positions through various tactics of debilitation. However, first, I provide some definitional parameters to this chapter and illustrate the intimate connection between class and disability in the United States.

### *Defining Class and Disability*

I position this chapter within a critical disability studies (CDS) approach. Contrasting with the medical model of disability, which understands various impairments, or states of physical, chemical, or emotional atypicality, as the root cause of a disabled state, CDS understands disability as socially constructed. The cause of disability is not one's impairment(s), but rather the lack of access ability in the social structures and material context that foster disability. Within CDS, scholars understand that even if the social barriers of disability were removed, the impairment is still a disabling factor in the disabled person's life.<sup>3</sup> CDS takes both the medical and the social model into account.

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<sup>3</sup> James L. Cherney, "The Rhetoric of Ableism," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (2011); Garland-Thomson, "Misfits"; Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Feminist Disability Studies," *Signs* 30, no. 2 (2005): 1557–87, <https://doi.org/10.1086/423352>.

CDS's interrogation extends to understand power's role in the perpetuation of social aspects of disability. One way this is enacted is via the rhetoric of ableism, which sustains an ideology of ableism within capitalist societies.<sup>4</sup> In other words, capitalism depends on workers' ability to enact productive labor, or "production of surplus value near or above the prevailing rate of exploitation."<sup>5</sup> Therefore, owners, managers, and supervisors discriminate against disabled workers within capitalism, understanding that employment of disabled workers necessarily chafes against their capitalistic goal of accumulating surplus value and that the employment of disabled workers might result in expenses to accommodate for their atypical needs.<sup>6</sup> In this way, the intimate connection between one's able-bodymindedness and access to employment is not only in the social barriers (like economic discrimination) that perpetuate power differentials, but also that the material barriers of impairment and fiscal capital are also disabling.

Additionally, the United States has a long and often overlooked history of classism and ableism. Much of the classist and ableist ideology within Hollywood comes from this wider history. Understanding classist and ableist critique within U.S. contexts is a difficult feat. I suggest that one reason for this difficulty is because anti-classist and anti-ableist critiques are *directly* and *inherently* anti-capitalist. Therefore, many ways we understand living and sustaining ourselves as Westerners are rooted in ideologies of ableism and classism. To demonstrate the legacy of U.S. classism and ableism that sustains into today, I provide a *very* brief history of how the rhetoric of ableism has been institutionalized within the United States.

As I list above, CDS works as a confrontation to the traditional, historical, and ableist construction of disability in the medical model. Within the medical model, "biocertification"

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<sup>4</sup> Cherney, "The Rhetoric of Ableism."

<sup>5</sup> Marta Russell and Keith Rosenthal, *Capitalism & Disability : Selected Writings by Marta Russell*, YBP Print DDA (Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2019), 29.

<sup>6</sup> Russell and Rosenthal, 28–29.

deems an *individual* as flawed, impaired, and even a menace to society, rather than understanding societal expectations as the nucleus of deserved critique.<sup>7</sup> By marking disability as a person's flaw rather than a systemic inadequacy, the rhetoric of ableism allows for wide sweeping forms of oppression, discrimination, and abuse to occur as valid and needed for society to survive and thrive. Indeed, many forms of ableist oppression link lower class and disabled existence as a strain on the larger public, and therefore in need of disciplining.

One manifestation of this historically founded disciplining is via the “ugly laws,” which existed in various U.S. cities between 1867 and 1974.<sup>8</sup> These ugly laws (aka unsightly beggar ordinances), by threat of fines, attempted to rid “any person who is diseased, maimed, mutilated, or in any way deformed, so as to be an unsightly or disgusting object, or an improper person” from “streets, highways, thoroughfares, or public places” within their city.<sup>9</sup> In these laws, disability and class are mapped onto each other; both deemed to be social ills that ought not be seen or heard *unless*, as Schweik's work showed, they were masculine forms of disability from serving in the U.S. armed forces. Veterans did not need to abide by these ugly laws because their disability or class status was not an inherent *flaw*, but rather an earned impairment from serving their country.<sup>10</sup>

Nonetheless, ugly laws work to exclude disability and lower-class participation in broader public discourse. However, this is not the only tactic that has been used to silence, or even “dispose of” working class and disabled individuals. Focusing on the United States,

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<sup>7</sup> Garland-Thomson, “Feminist Disability Studies”; Cherney, “The Rhetoric of Ableism”; Susan M Schweik, *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public* (New York; Chesham: New York University Press ; Combined Academic [distributor, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> Albrecht, *Encyclopedia of Disability: 4. S - X. Master Bibliography Index* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publ, 2006), 1575–76.

<sup>9</sup> Schweik, *The Ugly Laws*, 1–2.

<sup>10</sup> Schweik, 150.

disability and tangentially lower-class status have been criminalized via similar logics and mechanisms of unworthiness.<sup>11</sup> Much like governmentally enacted and sanctioned criminalization of Blackness resulting in public lynchings, the criminalization of classed and disabled misfit status resulted in its own form of violent discipline. Indeed, prior to the introduction of a non-medicalized model of disability, the primary way of “dealing” with it was through the institutionalization of disabled people. This institutionalization was not rehabilitative; this was a way to get misfits out of the public and into the private, wherein lobotomies were performed without anesthesia or consent to produce easily controlled, disabled subjects.<sup>12</sup> These experimental surgeries functioned not only to silence dissent from disabled and lower-class communities, but also as a form of attempted genocide, a history that rarely gets the attention it deserves.<sup>13</sup>

The parallel, and at times collapsible, histories of classism and ableism in the United States illustrate another similarity between disability and class: both positionalities/identities can be understood in a subjective and objective sense. As described above, disability can be understood as both the social structures and the physical, mental, or emotional impairment that foster disabled experiences. Class is also both objective and subjective. Following Bourdieu’s understanding, classes are social spaces defined by economic and cultural capital that have broader implications for what class position a person is born into.<sup>14</sup> Subjectively, “class positionalities engender certain representations of the privileges and limits of those positions, a

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<sup>11</sup> Estu Arifianti, “A Political Analysis of Mental ‘Disability’ in U.S. Immigration Courts” (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2020).

<sup>12</sup> Jenell M. Johnson, *American Lobotomy : A Rhetorical History*, YBP Print DDA (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> William I Pons, Janet E Lord, and Michael Ashley Stein, “Disability, Human Rights Violations, and Crimes Against Humanity,” *The American Journal of International Law* 116, no. 1 (2022): 58–95, <https://doi.org/10.1017/ajil.2021.41>.

<sup>14</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction : A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, *Distinction : A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Routledge Classics. (London: Routledge, 1984).

habitus of both external practices and internal senses of boundaries and/or possibilities.”<sup>15</sup>

Bourdieu’s concept habitus, while similar to how we understand culture, highlights the way that one’s objective social position described above is integrated into their worldview and can be naturalized as just how the world runs. Hailey, an assistant I interviewed in 2021, explains how this habitus manifests in culture, perspective, and in a form of expression:

People ... of higher classes know how to communicate in such a way that it's just not [tacky or obvious in how one shows their wealth status of class] ... but interviewers can tell that. You'll get weeded out if you don't know the right restaurants to go to or the right-- it's just, they'll pick up on a vibe. It's not easy to trick them. I've tried. I've tried very hard.

In this quote, Hailey explains how classed habitus is naturalized in something as seemingly innocuous as sharing weekend plans or name-dropping the last restaurant you went to.

Additionally, though not evidenced in the quote above, the capitalist roots of this classed habitus and organizational culture also implies in it an ideology of ableism, furthering the two positionalities’ intimate connections. In other words, because capitalist ideology is *inherently* ableist, within classed expectations and expressions there also exists ableist beliefs because under capitalism, the need to work to sustain one’s life is predicated on a privileging of ability. These connections extend into enacting biopolitical power by businesses, government, and other institutions that shape how humans work and live. As it relates to Hollywood assistants, one of these forms of power connecting class and ability is debilitation.

To recall, debilitation, in its radical critique, focuses on how structures and systems of power enact disciplinary, biopolitical control through strategies endemic to a population’s

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<sup>15</sup> Sherry Ortner, “Identities: The Hidden Life of Class,” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 54, no. 1 (1998): 13, <https://doi.org/10.1086/jar.54.1.3631674>.

conditions and characteristics.<sup>16</sup> In other words, debilitation emerges from habitus. While debilitation appears much like disability, Puar clarifies that debility is not an identity or a way of understanding social constructs or impairment. Instead, in the vein of critical disability studies, Puar illustrates how disability and debility are supplementary to each other. However, debility is primarily a “form of massification,” where institutional systems and structures intentionally wear down particular populations to produce a desired result.<sup>17</sup>

In this sense, debility is a part of discrimination to almost all non-normative ways of being. Ableism is infused into many forms of discrimination commonly discussed, while the *ability* part of it remains invisible or unspoken. In previous chapters, I have talked about debilitation in race and gender – though the ableist basis of these forms of discrimination remain unseen. For example, I’ve mentioned the racism latent in the unspoken expectation that assistants speak white American vernacular English. However, a CDS analysis unveils that the values latent in this preference are not only capitalist and racist, but also ableist. The implication in the expectation of WAVE is not just to efficiently (capitalistically) maintain whiteness within industry, but also that other forms of speaking are inherently flawed and unsophisticated. Therefore, further unfolding the rhetorical implications in the expectation of WAVE, the humans speaking in alternative vernaculars are, in short, less intelligent, or stupid. In just this example, the interconnection between capitalist, racist, and ableist discrimination and gatekeeping is clear.

This interlocking nature of discrimination is not exclusive to this example but extends into multiple others already written about and investigated below. In addition to ableism’s deep connection to racism, ableism also functions in discourses commonly understood to be sexist.

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<sup>16</sup> Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Maim : Debility, Capacity, Disability*, Anima (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

<sup>17</sup> Puar, xvii.



For example, discriminating against uterus-havers by rejecting them for a job or promotion on the basis that they might be or get pregnant is generally understood as sexist. However, ableism also manifests in this discrimination. In short, because a body with female anatomy functions “inefficiently” and might need time away to grow, house, and sustain another human, it has an anatomical disability that employers discriminate against because of the implied lack of return on investment during one’s maternity leave. Additionally, connecting to my previous chapter, EWA is another place where ableism and sexism intersect in form. While the expression of EWA might be racist, classist, ableist, sexist in content, its enactment is ableist because of its psychologically injurious or debilitating impact. I name these intersections to highlight that, in many cases, when capitalism is a base economic structure in which discursive, cultural expectations are founded, classism and ableism are infused into discrimination. However, in this chapter, I center classism and ableism as material and discursive forms of discrimination that exist in tandem and independent from other forms of discrimination and, nonetheless, merit academic inquiry.

My below analyses address how debilitation enacts economic discrimination against lower class and disabled assistants. I argue that, explicitly or implicitly, within Hollywood debilitation is integrated into the habitus of assistantship to gatekeep against working class and disabled assistants. This integration maintains Hollywood’s current exploitative structure, predicated on whiteness, ability, masculinity, and middle-to-upper class social positions. Much like universities’ weed-out classes “are designed to demarcate students who are likely to do well in a given subject from those who are not” while “disproportionately hinder[ing] underrepresented groups,” across-the-line debilitation of assistants as entry-level workers weeds

out (aka gatekeepers against) those who are unlikely to do well in Hollywood's existing, exploitative organizational structure, thereby preserving the current hegemonic norm.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, important to highlight, the across-the-line nature of assistantship, with both its latent slow-grind debilitating nature *and* its inherently liminal state of being across – and therefore not “landed” above – works to further debilitate assistants as a group. Because they are constantly in a state of transition, striving to be promoted in a more stable position above-the-line, across-the-line as a state of employment is inherently classist and ableist because it deters opportunity for solidarity. If assistants are constantly put in a position of aiming for survival in their across-the-line state and striving for promotion to get across the line, rather than given the opportunity to make change in their position of assistantship, they are not given the space to organize and demand livable conditions. The state of being across-the-line maintains Hollywood's capitalistic hierarchy of upper-crust creatives and executives with an underclass of overworked assistants who are just focused on getting out of assistantship.

While I acknowledge that impairments create disabling experiences and that lack of economic capital is debilitating within industry, my critiques of Hollywood's institutional inaccessibility, rather than individuals. In other words, in my analyses I speak to individualized impairments and lack of economic capital, however this focus is merely to provide tangible examples of Hollywood's classist and ableist gatekeeping. Moreover, I contend that the line between appropriate “paying dues” and the role “paying dues” plays in gatekeeping becomes almost indistinguishable, thereby culturally justifying this historically rooted classist and ableist gatekeeping.

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<sup>18</sup> Dalmeet Singh Chawla, “Surviving Weed-Out Process May Be a State of Mind: [Science Desk],” *New York Times*, November 17, 2020, Late Edition (East Coast) edition, 2460940249, U.S. Major Dailies, <https://ezproxy2.library.colostate.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/surviving-weed-out-process-may-be-state-mind/docview/2460940249/se-2?accountid=10223>.

*A Classist and Ableist History Shapes Contemporary Hollywood*

While a complete history of Hollywood's labor movements and its relationship with disability is past the scope of this project, it becomes clear in a brief examination of these discourses that Hollywood has been a key player in fostering an ideology of ableism and class habitus. As Wilson details in an overview of Hollywood's classed history, in the 1930s while labor consciousness was expanding, cinema made marked efforts to contain this expansion by refocusing working class frustrations from labor exploitation onto gendered divisions and the decline of the nuclear heteronormative family.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, similar to Hollywood's post-civil rights response to its lack of racial representation, industry practices would "work to contain any radical intent through re-writes and re-shoots" of any radical sentiments that would inspire further class consciousness and resistance.<sup>20</sup> Hollywood responded to national resistance to exploitation by reflecting a watered down version of class resistance to appease audiences while making no organizational changes and instead pointed to gendered distributions of work as the culprit of class inequalities.

Similarly, Hollywood has taken the same tactic of containment in its approach to disability. While Hollywood's industrial history as it pertains to disability is less adequately documented than its history with class habitus, Hollywood has a robust and neoliberal past with disability in front of and behind the screen. The majority reports and academic analyses center around on-screen representations of disability – many of them noting the misrepresentation/plastic representation and the lack of disabled actors working as disabled characters – with only a brief mention at the lack of disabled workers in above- and below-the-

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<sup>19</sup> Galen James Wilson, "Screening Insurrection: The Containment of Working-Class Rebellion in New Deal Era Hollywood Cinema" (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2014), 8–9.

<sup>20</sup> Wilson, 7.

line positions.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, both academic press and popular press have endless examples of how disability has been inaccurately depicted on screen.

For example, as Kashani and Nocella highlight, while Dustin Hoffman's portrayal of an autistic man in *Rain Man* (1988) raised awareness of autism in the United States, its depiction and production was also riddled with various forms of ableism.<sup>22</sup> Pointedly, *Rain Man* received four Academy Awards, giving social (which turns into economic) capital to Dustin Hoffman (best actor), Barry Levinson (best director), Ronald Bass (best screenplay, screenplay), Barry Morrow (best screenplay, screenplay/story), and Mark Johnson (Best Picture) – all of whom are not autistic. All the folks reaping the economic, material benefits resulting from this critically acclaimed film are men who had no publicly known disabilities. This lack of behind-the-camera diversity yielded the resulting “cliched concept of ‘idiot-savant’ to sell a formulaic character-centered, coming-of-age road movie about brotherly love.”<sup>23</sup> Not only was this depiction inaccurate, but it inspired a widespread fundamental misunderstanding of autism by creating “an exotic character out of ... an autistic savant who has the uncanny ability to read cards at a Las Vegas casino, but is unable to function in society at large, and therefore has to be confined to a

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<sup>21</sup> Anne-Marie Callus, “The Cloak of Incompetence: Representations of People with Intellectual Disability in Film,” *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 13, no. 2 (2019): 177–94; Elizabeth Ellcessor and Bill Kirkpatrick, “Studying Disability for a Better Cinema and Media Studies,” *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 58, no. 4 (2019): 139–44; David Robb, “SAG-AFTRA Panelists Say ‘Disability Consistently Overlooked In Conversation About Diversity & Inclusion,’” *Deadline* (blog), April 16, 2021, <https://deadline.com/2021/04/sag-aftra-panel-disability-hollywood-actors-gains-1234735412/>; Jay Ruderman, “Hollywood Is (Finally) Beginning to Rewrite Its Script on Disability Inclusion (Guest Column),” *Variety* (blog), February 13, 2021, <https://variety.com/2021/tv/columns/hollywood-disability-inclusion-nbcuniversal-1234907440/>; Cara Buckley, “For the Disabled in Hollywood, Report Finds Hints of Progress,” *The New York Times*, February 5, 2020, sec. Arts, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/05/arts/television/disabled-hollywood.html>; Stacy L Smith, Marc Choueiti, and Katherine Pieper, “Inequality in 1,300 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race/Ethnicity, LGBTQ & Disability from 2007 to 2019,” USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, 2020, 42; Stacy L Smith et al., “Inclusion in Netflix Original U.S. Scripted Series & Films,” USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, February 2021, 20.

<sup>22</sup> Tony Kashani and Anthony J. Nocella, “Hollywood’s Cinema of Ableism: A Disability Studies Perspective on the Hollywood Industrial Complex,” in *Hollywood’s Exploited: Public Pedagogy, Corporate Movies, and Cultural Crisis*, ed. Benjamin Frymer et al. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2010), 105–14, [https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230117426\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230117426_7).

<sup>23</sup> Kashani and Nocella, 106.

residence for people with mental disabilities.”<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, through the representation of on-screen disability, mainstream opinion gives Hollywood a cultural gold star in its (feigned/inadequate) attempts at disabled diversity, equity and inclusion.

While Hollywood earns public support for its on-screen representations of disability, the industry itself *is* ableist and perpetuates many of the same forms of ableism that it critiques on-screen. In the following analysis, I discuss these hidden and, at times, invisible forms of ableism that assistants experience in their workplace experiences. I distinguish both hidden and invisible to highlight how these discourses occur both implicitly and obscurely, respectively. Part of my goal is to illustrate how both explicit and implicit forms of ableism (and classism) are still widely accepted within Hollywood’s organizational cultures. This acceptance of ableism is cyclically validated in and through cultural conversations around the overuse and abusive enforcement of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). These ableist pushbacks are all too common and work to villainize disabled folks for needed disability accommodations.

Hollywood’s history of classist and ableist discrimination play a role in contemporary representation as a 2019 report on the representation of mental health in film and TV illustrates that when mental illness was a part of the story line it was used as a point of disparagement (in 47% of the characters in film, 38% in television), humor (22% in film, 50% in television), and as something that must be concealed (15% in film, 12% in television).<sup>25</sup> Additionally, in an analysis of 1,300 popular films from 2007-2019, findings show that only 2.3% of speaking characters had a disability and only “22 percent of all characters with disabilities on network television are

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<sup>24</sup> Kashani and Nocella, 106.

<sup>25</sup> Stacy L Smith et al., “Mental Health Conditions in Film & TV,” USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, May 2019, 42.

portrayed authentically by an actor with the same disability.”<sup>26</sup> While accurate on-screen representation is no doubt important, as previous chapters have addressed in reference to race and gender, it is often used to placate broader calls for accurate portrayals of, for example, disabled representation.

As previous chapters have also illustrated, the lack of diversity in creative and executive positions often lead to flat or inaccurate representations of non-normative perspectives. Broadly speaking, in popular and academic press, there is very little addressing the organizational barriers for disabled creative and executive above-the-line individuals, despite the abundance of Americans with Disabilities (ADA) claims against entertainment and Hollywood industries.<sup>27</sup> Oftentimes, Hollywood’s DEI inquiries do not include inquiries about class and disability – the “Hollywood Diversity Report” on film and television from UCLA (which I heavily cite in the previous chapters) collect no data on classed backgrounds or disability status of creatives and executives, nor do they report the on-screen representation of characters or actors with reference to these positionalities.

Even in the reports mentioned above, the purpose of each being to give an accurate depiction of Hollywood’s gendered, racial, and disabled representation on both sides of the camera, the analysis of disability was strictly of on-screen representation while racial and gendered analyses consisted of both on-screen and above-the-line creatives. Finding statistical information about disability and class in above-the-line circles in Hollywood seems to be

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<sup>26</sup> Smith, Choueiti, and Pieper, “Inequality in 1,300 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race/Ethnicity, LGBTQ & Disability from 2007 to 2019.”

<sup>27</sup> Though there is not a cohesive list of ADA complaint against Hollywood, a list of ADA cases and complaints from 2006 to present shows that Hollywood and entertainment industries lack accessible accommodations for people with disabilities. For reference: “Enforcement Activities - Cases Listed Chronologically by Document Type.” Accessed April 17, 2022. [https://www.ada.gov/enforce\\_activities.htm](https://www.ada.gov/enforce_activities.htm).

currently unattainable, a condition that itself works to evidence why I refer to these populations as Hollywood misfits.

To find some published or unpublished data on above-the-line demographics in regard to class and disability, a representative from the 1in4 coalition, “an intersectional coalition of disabled creatives currently working in Hollywood focused on long-term institutional shifts to increase employment and authentic representation of disabled people,”<sup>28</sup> responded to my request for demographic information of disabled above-the-line creatives and executives:

Disability representation is much more behind than other marginalized groups. We've only been included in stats from around 2015, and the scope is very limited. [refers me to the Annenberg reports cited above] Unfortunately, I also do not know of any other resources for disabled workers above the line.

Considering the lack of data, I relatively safely assume that representation of working class and disabled workers is either abysmally low *or* the cultural fit expectation in Hollywood is naturalized as middle-to-upper class and able-bodyminded and therefore these workers experience enough cultural and economic precarity that “coming out” as a misfit is still an unsafe practice.

In addition to the lacking data on disabled workers in industry, there is also a lack of data collected on creatives’ and executives’ socioeconomic backgrounds. As stated above, one’s class shapes not only their material access to spaces, but also their way of seeing the world and therefore social access to belonging. In my conversations with assistants, it became clear that the habitus of Hollywood “fits” is exceedingly middle to upper class and able-bodyminded. And while public data on above-the-line workers do not report on class and disability status, #PayUpHollywood has been collecting this data on Hollywood assistants. The combination of

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<sup>28</sup> “About | 1IN4,” accessed November 11, 2021, <https://www.1in4coalition.org/about/>.

this demographic information on assistants and analyses of interview and public-facing advice and reporting on assistants illustrates a broader structure of gatekeeping that would prevent class and ability diversity in above-the-line positions, thereby preventing those voices from being heard in executive and creative positions within Hollywood. In what follows, I analyze the ways that lower class and disabled assistants are materially and socially positioned as misfits in Hollywood, fostering classist and ableist gatekeeping.

### *Classist Gatekeeping*

As I have previously discussed, 94.3% of assistants in 2020 were considered “cost-burdened” by Los Angeles thresholds.<sup>29</sup> The Department of Housing and Urban defines cost-burdened families as those “who pay more than 30 percent of their income for housing” and “may have difficulty affording necessities such as food, clothing, transportation, and medical care.”<sup>30</sup> While assistants’ low pay can gatekeep at the outset, the physical and mental toll of prolonged financial insecurity, which contribute to insecurity of basic life necessities like housing, food, transportation, and any medical need, wears on assistants’ physical and mental wellbeing, as well as their ability to do their job well and produce creatively. As time goes on, that toll is not eased but only weighs heavier on those positioned in less socioeconomically privileged positions, thereby acting as a “weeding out” process. Indeed, this basic lack of security debilitates multiply marginalized assistants in their ability to survive in Hollywood. This is, by definition, an example of Puar’s debilitation that disallows solidarity formation in across-the-line Hollywood positions. The system is designed to wear people down and weed people out

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<sup>29</sup> #PayUpHollywood, “The 2020 Entertainment Support Staff Survey Results” (Los Angeles: #PayUpHollywood, February 1, 2021), 25.

<sup>30</sup> “Rental Burdens: Rethinking Affordability Measures,” HUD USER, accessed April 20, 2022, [https://www.huduser.gov/portal/pdredge/pdr\\_edge\\_featd\\_article\\_092214.html](https://www.huduser.gov/portal/pdredge/pdr_edge_featd_article_092214.html).



so that only the non-misfits remain and advance into above-the-line positions. Suffice to say, assistants' lack of financial security is, standalone, debilitating.

Moreover, assistants' guidebooks and job calls point to implied socioeconomic expectations of assistants in Hollywood, which work to gatekeep against working class assistants. One of these forms of implicit gatekeeping is in appearance expectations. Despite being grossly underpaid, assistants are expected to present their image in alignment with their supervisor's – while making only a fraction of their supervisor's income. The *Hollywood Assistants Handbook* has multiple chapters centering on how to save on money in an image focused industry. In the chapter “Rule #59: Pretty In Pink – Appear Clothes Rich Even if You're Cash Poor,” authors Hillary Stamm and Peter Nowalk narrate this exact dilemma:

We know that you're poor. So much so that you can't even afford the rent for your fleabag studio in Van Nuys without your parents' help. ... Bear with us. We're not saying you can't dress for cheap. You just can't let everyone else know it. Image controls everything, and first impressions last a lifetime.<sup>31</sup>

This chapter continues in the same, patronizing tone to give assistants advice on how to *look* like the image their employers expect, which ironically is impossible because of their low pay. Moreover, the patronizing tone aligns with industrial beliefs that minimize real economic precarity, and one's ability to sustain their own life based on this precarity.

Additionally, much like the attempts to regulate disabled people's “abuse” of ADA accommodations, the patronizing tone from the *Assistant Playbook* is expected when referring to assistants' material well-being. And while many superiors and even the creatives who wrote this handbook claim the right to “rib” assistants in this way because of their former across-the-line

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<sup>31</sup> Peter Nowalk and Hillary Stamm, *The Hollywood Assistants Handbook: 86 Rules for Aspiring Power Players* (Workman Publishing Company, 2008), 134, <https://books.google.com/books?id=YFGri4IDAikC>.

status, what is not recognized in this ribbing is that things like student loans and housing insecurity looked quite different when they were assistants than it does now and therefore the level of precarity assistants experience has deleterious effects on their mental and physical well-being. Today's across-the-line precarity looks much different than the precarity of years before. Likewise, the ability to organize, as groups have in the past, to open industry to more welcomed diversity is hindered even more so in today's assistants' strive to get across the line.

As a former agency assistant, Michael informed me, appearance during his time at agency was essential. Indeed, he clarified, “[Assessing the quality of clothing]’s a thing. It’s a way to weed people out too, ... if you show up to an interview and you’re not meeting their standards, you get dinged for that.” In this response, Michael illustrates how appearing middle- to upper-class in an agency interview is, itself, a form of classist gatekeeping. In that interview, both Michael and Leon, a former writer’s assistant, noted that they have relied on some familial financial support in their time, including support in purchasing suits. However, classist debilitation does not end at the interview stage, but rather extend into assistants’ job requirements. Assistants need access to a functioning, personal motor vehicle – as Los Angeles has notoriously terrible public transit infrastructure – for professional errands, potentially accompanied by their superiors who aren’t “going to want to be seen in ... my parents’ old, dinky 2005 Corolla,” as Michael noted. The pressure to conform to materialist expectations happens in indirect, shame-based expectations like these, and in direct forms of classist discrimination.

Because assistants are typically young people, who developed connections to industry in their undergraduate or graduate school experience, they enter with debt, familial wealth, and sometimes both. As many assistants shared in their interviews, the most plausible way of

surviving assistants' low wage in an expensive and materialist lifestyle context of Hollywood is through familial support. Having a middle to upper-class background or being in a social location wherein taking out loans is a possibility can go a long way in terms of materially sustaining one's survival in Hollywood. In my own survey, when I asked assistants how they would identify their familial socioeconomic status, ten percent identified as working class and twelve percent identified as lower middle class, with the remainder identifying as middle (40%), upper middle (33%), and upper class (5%). These class differences play a role in one's ability to survive on assistants' low pay and to pay back, for example, student loans. In #PayUpHollywood's survey, 56% of assistants reported not having student loans, which is surprising considering only 2.1% of respondents do not have a post-secondary education degree.

Considering that assistants are typically fresh out of four-year universities (78.4%) or graduate school (17.6%), they have likely not earned enough on their cost-burdened, assistant income for fifty-six percent of that population to have paid off their student loans *or* college education without external support. Therefore, likely these debt-free assistants are in that economic position because of familial support and/or wealth, which extends into their ability to take a low paying job without a need to consider a student loan repayment plan. Moreover, as job calls and interview responses indicate, a four-year degree is becoming a job requirement – even though a four-year degree is not needed to perform job duties of being assistant.<sup>32</sup> According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, the average annual cost of attending a four-year university was \$53,200 at private, non-profit institutions, \$35,100 at private, for-profit

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<sup>32</sup> Based on my thematic analysis of 56 job calls, the most frequently listed job duties were as follows: Calendaring/scheduling- 45%, Ability to effectively manage verbal and digital forms of communication- 38%, and ambiguous “administrative work” - 38%.

institutions, and \$25,500 at public institutions.<sup>33</sup> Access to entry, then, for assistants exists not at the moment of application, but rather classed gatekeeping in Hollywood begins at least four years prior when assistants begin their post-secondary education.

Moreover, as many assistants point out, it is not enough to simply go to a four-year university. Rather, many assistants highlight that attending institutions like UCLA or USC, both located near Hollywood, go a long way for establishing networks. As Michael notes:

I don't come from a place like USC or UCLA where those schools have such a huge alumni network and such a big source of people who've gone to those schools are now working in these places. ... The highest-level places that you could intern at, they don't post or internships online. ... So, ... in some places, it was hard to find contact info to begin with. You have to go on to this special [paid] service to get it. ... But to get an internship at a good place, you usually have to know somebody who works there.

In this, Michael highlights the connection between economic and social capital discussed in previous chapters. He highlights that assistants with the economic privilege who attend UCLA (annual cost is approximately \$37,129 for residents and \$68,155 for nonresidents) and USC (annual cost is approximately \$85,648) then have the social capital of the pre-established, robust alumni networks in Hollywood. Additionally, as Michael notes here, many assistants feel pressured to intern prior to their assistantship, which again privileges those with enough economic capital to sustain themselves through a no to low-paying internship. These internships, additionally, work to build networks and increase social capital for assistants.

Being well-connected is a way that assistants increase their social capital and are more desirable “commodities” to employers, who seek to expand their own social circles, thereby accumulating more social capital that they can later transform into creative output and fiscal

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<sup>33</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, “Price of Attending an Undergraduate Institution,” Condition of Education (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences., May 2021), <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cua>.

capital. However, networking is expensive, especially *for assistants* who are considered “cost-burdened.” Grabbing drinks, a commonplace form of networking within Hollywood, costs about ten to fifteen dollars per drink. While not all superiors *require* their assistants to network, their potential for success is heavily implied in the language of job calls. Again, these expectations work to weed out the industry misfits, thereby gatekeeping them from a diverse industrial makeup that both public and organizational calls push for.

In addition to these material forms of gatekeeping at or prior to entry into assistantship, classist gatekeeping persists once the position is obtained in both material and social ways. Often, additionally, the material and the social forms of classist gatekeeping overlap. For example, when I began this study in 2019, many assistants depended on their twenty hours of overtime pay from the contractually negotiated 60-hour minimums, a number constructed to mirror a week of production schedule on set. Because overtime pay was time and a half, with just 20 hours, they could significantly increase their pay enough to make rent or buy groceries, for example. However, when I returned in 2021 and began asking about 60-hour minimums, I was met with sincere confusion as 2021 assistants had not experienced the 60-hour minimums that was standard just two to three years prior.

An interview with veteran assistants Ava and Izzy, who have been working in assistantship for at least four years, made plain how this confusion happened. Namely, they explained that when higher ranking assistants were incorporated into IATSE local 871, the wage minimum for these positions increased. This increase and the grassroots efforts by #PayUpHollywood also resulted in wage minimums to increase for agency assistants, which somewhat rippled into other assistant positions mostly ideologically. In other words, because agency assistants got a wage minimum increase, the widespread chatter across Hollywood was

that all assistants were receiving a wage increase, even though supervisors buying into this idea did not, in fact, provide wage increases for their assistants. Simultaneously, with these increases and protections, studios suddenly experienced a sort of strategic amnesia.

Hollywood's structural ambiguity and social organization yielded a covert way to discursively decrease assistants' income by denying them sixty-hour minimums. As Ava and Izzy explain:

**Ava:** For the longest time, most assistants [were] ... generally working under a guaranteed 60 hours ... minimum wage was so low that you literally couldn't live off less than 60 hours per week because that included 20 hours of overtime. When they're paying you \$10 an hour, at least you got 20 hours of \$15 an hour but they build that in. They build their budgets based on 60s, at least they did for the longest time. After we unionized, although it started happening a little bit before, that was when our cap started popping up were all of a sudden, and [networks and studios] ... all of a sudden they came in and it's like, "We're giving everybody a raise but now you have to start putting down your actual hours." I was like, "No, definitely not doing that. Absolutely not." That's been the new thing that started happening is that, "Oh, you get a higher rate." Whatever guarantees ... that's what they're coming after next. ...

**Izzy:** Did you find in your early years that the studios would acknowledge the 60-hour?

**Ava:** Oh, god, yes. Absolutely. It was in contracts.

**Izzy:** My experience the last couple of years it's been that studios will not acknowledge.

**Ava:** No, they won't.

**Kiah:** They pretend that it was never a thing?

**Izzy:** Pretend that it was never a thing.

**Ava:** They pretend, yes. They're like, "We don't know what you're talking about," I'm like, "You're lying." It's like, "Oh, we never had that." I'm like, "Well that isn't true."

**Izzy:** Yes. They're trying to deny that it's a thing. In both the studio I worked at and an over-the-top streaming service I now am at I've been told to talk to my showrunner about it.

The structural ambiguity of assistants' protections and expectations are such that, with collective "strategic amnesia," misfit debilitation can easily reshape into alternatives even in the face of official protections and efforts toward equity.

In addition, this removal of access to material funds, this action also worked as a form of industrial gaslighting. I contend here that the simultaneous discourses of class consciousness and progress, *and* COVID-19's destabilization of the status quo opened the opportunity for a "new normal" that *further* exploits assistants. In this opening, Hollywood executives manipulated assistants into accepting the overtime cut because assistants either did not know of the previous 60-hour minimum (because of turnover during the pandemic) or they knew and were too worn down to fight back. This emotional and material manipulation inspires debilitation. Assistants, clearly, need pay to survive in Hollywood. However, the lack of stability in their expectations around pay also inspire the debilitation of emotional and mental well-being – explicitly connecting classist and ableist forms of gatekeeping.

In the previous chapter, I evidence how emotional workplace abuse (EWA) sustains a patriarchal Hollywood legacy. Considering the nature of interlocking oppression, EWA reappears here as a form of classist gatekeeping *and* debilitation. Hollywood classist gatekeeping manifests in the act of classist emotional workplace abuse. Multiple assistants told stories of both explicit and subtle forms of classist discrimination they experienced in the workplace. Lara, a former assistant in a management firm, explains that her boss would, in the same breath, tell her they could not pay her overtime while also calling her poor(-presenting) and telling her to wear make-up. Another Hollywood assistant, Hailey, explains why supervisors push their assistants to appear as though they fit is because supervisors *also* need to prove their place in an albeit less precarious position within a precarious, post-Fordist industry: "Well, your boss is going to tell you this regardless because you're an extension of your boss. If and when you get hired, your boss's reputation is based on your reputation. My boss has pretty much told me." This contextualization explains why supervisors enact emotional workplace abuse, and women at a

higher rate, because any appearance of non-upper-middle class, white, able-bodied misfit brings the fit of the supervisor into question in turn. And, as Hailey rightly points out, this expectation of fit within a precarious context perpetuates the status quo in favor of creatives and executives who continue to hold generational or classed power within Hollywood.

Lara and Hailey's experiences also illustrate how the supervisorial class experiences cognitive dissonance in their understanding of assistants' class position and their roles in fostering this position. It is, indeed, within Lara's supervisor's power to give her assistant a raise so that Lara might be able to dress and present in a manner deemed more acceptable by her supervisor. However, because her boss *perceives* her inability to approximate middle-upper class values as a social impairment, connecting the discourses of class and disability, her boss keeps Lara's pay at a rate she deems equitable with Lara's on-the-job performance. Additionally, her supervisor seems to either not understand her role in the classist system, and therefore perpetuates it unknowingly via offensive classist remarks to her assistant, *or* she is knowingly and openly discriminating against Lara for her classed position and even still perpetuating Hollywood's classist gatekeeping – or both. Nonetheless, it is imperative to understand how classism and ableism within Hollywood are contingent upon and perpetuate one another via debilitation.

### *Ableist Gatekeeping*

As explained above, Hollywood's classism and ableism are intimately connected both in the contemporary and historically. While much of the analysis above has focused on the classist roots of gatekeeping misfits out of Hollywood, the ideology of ableism also manifests in material and discursive forms of gatekeeping. Assistants' experiences of classist EWA illustrate one place where classism and disability intersect within Hollywood. Returning to Lara's experience, her



time in assistantship exemplifies how classist and ableist debilitation is baked into Hollywood gatekeeping. As a former assistant who left industry because of the emotional, mental, and physical distress she experienced, Lara highlights how the lack of basic healthcare and livable wages is compounded by these implicit shame-based class discrimination.

The lack of basic needs by way of financial and bodily security not only gatekeeps materially, but also works as a form of ableist gatekeeping via debilitation. Hailey illustrates how “the grind” takes its debilitating toll:

I'm just so frustrated with working as hard as I can, coming up with great work time and time again under intense pressure. The abuse has lessened a lot as I've climbed up, thank God! Because nobody can withstand that much abuse for so long, but I've been at this for five years and I'm still in the assistant class. So, that's it's not helpful and I'm burnt out as fuck. I'm very burnt out.

Hailey's above quote illustrates the way that classist and ableist debilitation work in tandem, and how coping mechanisms that assistants have culturally normalized do not accommodate for this debilitation. Hailey explains how her experiences of EWA have gotten better as she has been promoted up from lower to higher level assistantship positions. Then, to cope with the material lack and trauma, assistants pride themselves on withstanding abuse and economic precarity, particularly at studios, agencies, and production companies that are notorious for EWA, as it signals: I survived, produced good work, and lived to tell about my “assistant-PTSD.”

As Puar notes, the expansion of one's capacity, or imagined capacity, creates a constant cycle of debility: "This revaluing of excess is potent because, simply put, debility is profitable for capitalism. In neoliberal, biomedical, and biotechnical terms, the body is always debilitated in relation to its ever-expanding potentiality."<sup>34</sup> In other words, we are constantly being worn out in relation to what neoliberalism envisions a body is able and expected to do, which

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<sup>34</sup> Puar, *The Right to Maim : Debility, Capacity, Disability*, 13.

disproportionately disadvantages marginalized communities.<sup>35</sup> Puar notes that those in capitalist societies invest in their debilitation by investing in the idea of living up to one's imagined capacity, in lieu of actual material and social support. However, these coping mechanisms are simply a way to put a band aid on a bullet wound, as Hailey notes. Assistants, like many workers experiencing debilitation as a result of late-stage capitalism, not only invest in their own debilitation with the belief that if they just grind more, they will succeed. But also, this grind culture results in pride over one's debilitation. It is not just a bandaged bullet wound, but the bullet itself becomes a badge of honor that one proudly keeps beneath the flesh as it *continues* to infect and wear down the body. And the debilitation will only continue to burn out class and ability misfits within industry.

Moreover, this burnout accelerates when considering not only the lack of fiscal capital, but also the lack of accessible mental or medical healthcare. Assistants are not guaranteed healthcare coverage. Denying healthcare coverage is a gatekeeping tactic for both disabled people – who make up only an estimated 6.05% of assistants – and those at a lower socioeconomic status.<sup>36</sup> Approximately 30.6% of assistants reported they had to pay out of pocket for health insurance, and 27% of that group paid \$200/month for insurance.<sup>37</sup> Much like low pay is debilitating for multiple populations because of interlocking oppression, lack of or high-cost healthcare also prevents or obstructs lower class and disabled assistants' access to a sustainable existence in entry-level Hollywood. Without external financial support, assistants of lower socioeconomic status or with disabilities that need healthcare benefits must persist, but

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>36</sup> #PayUpHollywood, “The 2020 Entertainment Support Staff Survey Results.”

<sup>37</sup> #PayUpHollywood.

without necessary access to, both mental and physical healthcare to support them through the stress that their precarious vocations produce.

Lara explains how in addition to not being provided healthcare necessarily, it is also not uncommon for supervisors to shame or place responsibility on their assistants to keep their healthcare costs low:

**Lara:** Yes. One of the things that got me to take the job was that they said they would help pay for my health care up to \$150. I was desperate, what can you say. ... Then when my health care went up because they were paying me a little bit more. ... My boss complained to my face about how expensive my health care was for them.

**Kiah:** What? ... How are you supposed to respond to that? "Sorry, I need health care."

**Lara:** Yes. What is worse is because my healthcare price had gone up, I had dropped myself down to the lowest health care grade. I had gone from a silver PPO to a bronze HMO. I told her that and she still was like, "It's too expensive. Can you talk to your healthcare, see if we can lower the price?" Like, "Damn, what's going on?"

Here Lara illustrates one tactic in how supervisors in Hollywood who cannot find lawful loopholes in needing to provide healthcare to employees will put the burden of reducing one's basic, necessary expense on their *assistants*, who already experience copious amounts of insecurity and abuse, to cost employers less money.

In addition to this tactic, employers will also use what they claim to be "lawful loopholes" and blatantly disregard ADA requirements as forms of ableist gatekeeping. As the *New York Times* article on various ways Hollywood assistants are abused and mistreated spoke about, Andi, a former NBCUniversal assistant and Type 1 Diabetic, explained that "she had accepted the job, a 60-hour-a-week position that paid \$14.25 per hour, on the assumption that it would come with benefits" and "that federal law required Universal to offer health coverage within her first 90 days of employment."<sup>38</sup> When I later talked to Andi, she informed me that in

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<sup>38</sup> Rachel Abrams, "Hollywood Assistants Are Fed Up and No Longer Afraid to Say So," *New York Times*, January 10, 2020.

her attempts at obtaining insurance coverage before her backstock of insulin ran out, she was essentially given a “runaround”:

**Andi:** I went to my bosses and I asked them, ... there wasn't any start paperwork about health benefits. They were like, "Oh, I don't really know anything about the health benefits. Let me look into it though and see what I can find." Then a week or two went by and I came back to them ... really looking for these health benefits. ... They said, we were given this person's name and phone number at NBC and told that you should just call them.

Then I had to call NBC but of course, that phone number goes to just a phone line that says, “here are your options.” ... It's a loop is what it is, it's a loop. I ended up having to post on an assistants' group [forum] asking for help about how to get my health benefits through NBC Universal, if anybody else had dealt with it. That's when I found out that NBC Universal is very adamant about not giving first-season shows health benefits. I had another assistant, he reached out to me and said that he'd been working for years to try to change it. He and I teamed up and we called constantly. Then NBC tried to tell me, “oh no, if you want health benefits, it's through the payroll company.”

I called the payroll company and they said, “no, that's NBC Universal. It is not up to us what they offer you.” I had to go back and I had used parts of different laws and stuff that are in place for full-time workers to find [that because they have over 25 employees, they] have to offer me health benefits. ...

When I was being interviewed for *The New York Times* article ... that journalist, she went in and spoke with NBC Universal and asked for a comment. They were not super happy knowing that this information is now out there, that they're refusing to give a Type 1 diabetic health insurance because she's working on a first season show and I'm not the only person who's had this happen. I'm just apparently the first person to really stick it to them.

They had their lawyers or something come up with something and apparently there are some legal loophole where they can exclude [5%] of their employees from having health benefits. That's what they were claiming that they were using was that legal loophole where they didn't have to offer them because I was in that 5%.

**Kiah:** I wonder how many assistants are in that 5%.

**Andi:** I'm guessing it's a lot more than 5% that they are claiming. It wouldn't surprise me if you went through their records and found that it's a much higher percentage.

... It's really difficult too. At first, they were trying to tell me it was an hours thing and that I had to earn a certain number of hours. I was like, "Oh, I earned that in the first month because I'm working 60 hours a week." Then they had some excuse. Of course, I pushed back again because most people would have just given up pretty quickly. They are very difficult to deal with but I didn't and I pushed back again and told them, “no, what you're telling me is bullshit.” They were trying to say that, “oh, you're a contract

employee. The hours don't matter." I was like, "No, no, no, I'm full-time. Here's my proof of being a full-time employee."

Then they had to come back again with some other excuse of why they refused to offer health insurance, but they always have something. It's terrible because they're already paying you minimum wage, but you're working harder than anybody else on the team and you're doing more work than anybody else, you're getting paid the least, and then they're refusing to offer you even health benefits.

... especially when it comes to my health, if you're going to give me the runaround, I will run around, but you are going to have to deal with me until you just can't anymore. They will give up before I do.

I include the entirety of Andi's story here to illustrate how not only is the experience of not having healthcare a gatekeeping technique, wrapped up in a company's capitalist goal of saving money, but the months-long *fight* to get health coverage is a purposefully debilitating one. As Andi mentions above, she was not the first person to inquire about NBCUniversal's insurance practices, and thus implying that this is a regular practice that they implemented to dissuade workers from continued inquiry, and ultimately save them money.

Moreover, this ableist and classist discrimination at times also appears as flagrant disregard for ADA protections for disabled people – without legal loopholes. Indeed, Ava told me of that “there's not a lot of disabled people necessarily working in the industry.” When I inquired why, she told me about how a wheelchair user who was also an assistant once posted on an assistant forum about her experience of ableist discrimination when going to a job interview. After being give the address and looking it up to see the office was a second story office, the woman asked whether there was an elevator or another way to get to the second floor that was ADA compliant. In response, the company she was interviewing with canceled the interview because the office was not, in fact, ADA compliant. However, tangible structures and material forms of gatekeeping are not the only ways that Hollywood debilitates disabled workers. Indeed,

many social factors and organizational contexts also serve to debilitate disabled folks. One example of where this takes place is gatekeeping against neurodivergence.

### *Neurodivergent Gatekeeping*

To this point, this chapter has predominantly focused on material forms of classist and ableist gatekeeping. While these identifiers can be more discreet than, for example, race and gender, intellectual disabilities and neurodivergence often lack the visual cues that might be present with physical disabilities. By neurodivergence, I mean conditions like Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD), Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Tourette's Syndrome, etc., which are categorized as such because the cognitive functions of these "disorders" are "atypical" from normal cognitive functioning. To be clear, the umbrella of "neurodiversity" is not limited to these conditions listed above; some researchers and medical practitioners would include anxiety, depression, and panic disorders under the umbrella term of neurodiversity. While the term is broadly conceptualized, I use it in this analysis to refer specifically to neurodiversity of ADHD and ASD.

In this chapter, I do not mean to collapse ADHD and ASD, as they are two distinct disabilities. However, ADHD and ASD have a high comorbidity rate – meaning that "studies show that between 30 and 50% of individuals with ASD manifest ADHD symptoms" and "estimates suggest two-thirds of individuals with ADHD show features of ASD."<sup>39</sup> Additionally, as Leitner explains, the conditions manifest similarly:

Both disorders often include difficulties in attention, communication with peers, impulsivity, and various degrees of restlessness or hyperactivity. ... Both disorders have

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<sup>39</sup> Yael Leitner, "The Co-Occurrence of Autism and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder in Children - What Do We Know?," *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 8 (April 29, 2014): 268–268, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2014.00268>.

a known genetic pre-disposition, with comorbidity within the same individual and across family members, and both syndromes cause significant behavioral, academic, emotional, and adaptive problems in school, at home, and elsewhere.<sup>40</sup>

In addition to these similarities, both conditions have sensory processing challenges leading to overstimulation, difficulties with motor and impulse control, atypical neural patterns, and sleep difficulties.<sup>41</sup> These similarities suggest that “two disorders may be a continuum and have a common origin.”<sup>42</sup> These similarities also permit a CDS analysis of both the social structures of Hollywood that disable NDs, and how the impairments themselves affect assistants with ADHD and/or ASD.

In this section, I focus my analysis on ADHD and ASD within the context of Hollywood assistantship for multiple reasons. First, I center my focus of neurodivergent assistant gatekeeping on ADHD and ASD because the position of assistantship, in its job responsibilities and description, is definitionally incompatible with the neurological impairments of these disabilities, as I explore below. These forms of gatekeeping are important to understand because they illustrate how the entry-level *position* itself actively gatekeeps neurodiversity from above-the-line decision-making and creative positions that determine the quality of on-screen neurodivergent representation. Moreover, illustrating the connection between class and ability, ADHD and ASD are more common disabilities integrated into the workforce via masking, despite still struggling to maintain gainful employment.<sup>43</sup> Hollywood is just one example of the

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<sup>40</sup> Leitner, 268.

<sup>41</sup> Janet K. Kern et al., “Are ASD and ADHD a Continuum? A Comparison of Pathophysiological Similarities Between the Disorders,” *Journal of Attention Disorders* 19, no. 9 (September 1, 2015): 805, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1087054712459886>.

<sup>42</sup> Kern et al., 805.

<sup>43</sup> Aparajita B. Kuriyan et al., “Young Adult Educational and Vocational Outcomes of Children Diagnosed with ADHD,” *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology* 41, no. 1 (January 1, 2013): 27–41, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10802-012-9658-z>.

resulting neoliberal discourse wherein neurotypical (non-neurodivergents) collect both social and economic capital because of their sub-par representations of on-screen neurodivergence.

In this final section of analysis, I argue that ADHD and ASD are largely incompatible with the current structure of breaking into Hollywood because the role of assistantship relies on metaphorical executive functions. The term executive functions (EFs), in reference to ASD and ADHD, are cognitive processes centered around mental control. Neurologically speaking, ADHD and ASD impairments are in part due to brain conditions that result in “maladjusted” executive functions, resulting in trouble with “working memory, prioritization, initiation, inhibition allowing to break out maladaptive habits, planning for future goals, decision making and risk evaluation, sequential processing of actions, and flexible adaptation.”<sup>44</sup> Simply put, NDs struggle with planning, completing mundane, detail-oriented tasks, tracking multiple projects simultaneously, regulating emotions, and reaction to stimuli, which often manifests in atypical behaviors to self-regulate.

However, metaphorically speaking, the role of assistants is to enact Hollywood’s “executive functions.” In my thematic analysis of 56 job calls collected in November 2021, as to be contemporaneous with my interview data collection, I collected 46 from *The Anonymous Production Assistant*, a popular online forum where employers post calls for assistants. The other 10 job calls were from an online, assistant-only forum, posted by other assistants. The number of calls were based on what I had access to as an outsider and what current assistants were willing/able to provide me. Moreover, I pulled from both employer-posted job calls and assistant-posted job calls to compare what is highlighted in each.

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<sup>44</sup> Shameem Fatima, “Executive Dysfunctions in Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder” (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 45–47, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-25077-5\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-25077-5_3).



In my thematic analysis, I selected four categories/themes to look for from which I determined my codes: Job requirements, Assistant descriptors, Prerequisites, and Work environment. I then determined in vivo codes from the job calls themselves. In other words, for job requirements, I coded the various requirements listed within job calls, including: Calendaring/scheduling, Planning Travel, Communication (e.g. Rolling Calls/Phone, Desk Coverage, Email), Expense Tracking, Providing/Taking Notes, Reading Scripts, Data entry, Errands, Grids and Lists tracking/Tracking Multiple Projects, Misc. Ambiguous Administrative work, Creative work (i.e. notes/suggestions, researching for scripts), Ambiguous personal duties, Maintain Knowledge of the Field, Anticipate Supervisor's Needs, Manage Crises, Manage Social Media, and Manage Interns. Under the category of Assistant descriptors, the in vivo codes I developed were as follows: Self-motivated/driven, Detail Oriented, Energetic, Problem Solver, Quick/efficient/has a sense of urgency, Interest in DEI, Quick Learner, Organized/Good at Prioritizing, "High Level" (ambiguous)/high achiever, Creative, Has People Skills, Passionate, Team Player, and Positive. Next, for the prerequisites category, the in vivo codes I created are as follows: has Agency/Management experience, 1-2 years of experience, 3+ years of experience, 5+ years of experience, a bachelor's degree. Lastly, in the category of work environment, the in vivo codes that emerged were: Collaborative and caring, Focused on mentorship and option for growth, and Fast-paced. The amount of data I extracted from this analysis is well past the scope of this essay, and broadly informs my understanding of the position. However, in what follows, I focus specifically on the ways that the position and its responsibilities are represented within these job calls.

As determined by my thematic analysis of assistant job calls, assistants oversee the industry's calendaring/scheduling; travel arrangements; rolling calls; facilitating, managing, and

documenting communication via phone and email for supervisors; keeping expense reports; data entry; running office errands; desk coverage; and managing and prioritizing logistics of supervisor's projects. I metaphorically refer to these job duties as *Hollywood's executive functions*, as opposed to EFs to distinguish from the neurological meaning of "executive function," to highlight how if Hollywood industry were understood as a "brain," assistants would be its executive functions.

Put plainly, neurodivergents struggle in the position of assistantship because their role in Hollywood industry, that of enacting *Hollywood's executive functions*, is dependent on a neurotypical EF brain structure. Therefore, some neurodivergent folks are gatekeep at the job description. The paradox of this incompatibility is that, once promoted to above-the-line positions from assistantship, the central tasks of Hollywood's executive functions are no longer part of one's job description and neurodivergents would theoretically thrive in Hollywood's above-the-line contexts.

While assistantship might be incompatible or debilitating for NDs, *Hollywood* and its vocational conditions might be ideal for NDs. Once promoted into above-the-line positions, need to skillfully use one's EFs reduce *significantly*, as former assistants no longer serve as Hollywood's executive functions. Additionally, promotion removes ableist barriers of finances and access to healthcare, significantly decreasing ableist and neurodivergent debilitation. Moreover, NDs are thrive in positions that they are interested in; indeed, when in vocations of great interest to them, NDs do experience issues with EF like they might in strictly clerical positions.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Arielle K Lasky et al., "ADHD in Context: Young Adults' Reports of the Impact of Occupational Environment on the Manifestation of ADHD," *Social Science & Medicine* (1982) 161 (2016): 165, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2016.06.003>.

Research also evidences that due to NDs' neurological predispositions, once in above-the-line positions, they would do well in Hollywood culture and meeting the demands it requires of them. For example, NDs' cognitive structure allows for "flexible thinking," or ability to "multitask" and store large amounts of information. Working on creative endeavors with many moving pieces, as above-the-line workers typically are, harmonizes with NDs' "flexible thinking."<sup>46</sup> In addition to flexible thinking, NDs have honed pattern recognition capacities, which extends into innate understandings of how systems work, can be built, and how to manage crises within these systems.<sup>47</sup> In addition to creative proclivities, NDs also do well in "situations that are particularly motivating fast-paced, challenging, [and] novel."<sup>48</sup> These situations are positively stimulating for NDs, resulting in exponentially increased productivity levels that can surpass that of a neurotypical person.<sup>49</sup> Hollywood's stories, processes, efficiency and structures would benefit from the inclusion of NDs in above-the-line positions.

Moreover, ND people are not in short supply; *finding* ND people interested in above-the-line work is not a struggle. ADHD and ASD are relatively common with the most recent demographic information consisting of 4.4 percent of U.S. adults reporting to have ADHD (in a 2003 report) and 2.3 percent of adults reporting to have ASD (in a 2018 report).<sup>50</sup> While these values seem rather low, Maureen Durkin's anthropological work as an epidemiologist

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<sup>46</sup> Elizabeth Ekman, "Strengths and Weaknesses of the Cognitive Profiles of Autism and ADHD from a Cognitive Behavioral Perspective: Treatment, Prevention and the Understanding of the Comorbidity" (2019).

<sup>47</sup> Ekman.

<sup>48</sup> Lasky et al., "ADHD in Context: Young Adults' Reports of the Impact of Occupational Environment on the Manifestation of ADHD," 165–67.

<sup>49</sup> Brandon K Ashinoff and Ahmad Abu-Akel, "Hyperfocality: The Forgotten Frontier of Attention," *Psychological Research* 85, no. 1 (February 2021): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00426-019-01245-8>.

<sup>50</sup> Matthew J. Maenner, "Prevalence and Characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorder Among Children Aged 8 Years — Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network, 11 Sites, United States, 2018," *MMWR. Surveillance Summaries* 70 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.ss7011a1>; Ronald C. Kessler et al., "The Prevalence and Correlates of Adult ADHD in the United States: Results from the National Comorbidity Survey Replication," *The American Journal of Psychiatry* 163, no. 4 (April 2006): 716–23, <https://doi.org/10.1176/ajp.2006.163.4.716>.

specializing in developmental disabilities predicts that the recent upward trend in diagnoses will continue as the diagnostic criteria continues to account for the impacts of varying intersections of identities.<sup>51</sup> However, the condition of neurodivergence as a heterogeneous one, is also a very common one. The likelihood of employing or working with someone who has ADHD and/or ASD in or outside of Hollywood is relatively high. A lack of accommodations and understanding of these neurodivergences yields not only gatekeeping in Hollywood, but also misrepresentation in the on-screen mainstream.

Despite this prevalence, I also selected ADHD and ASD as the disabilities of focus here because of their continued representation on-screen (mis)representation, which I attribute, in part, to the ways (listed above) that NDs are gatekept out of above-the-line positions. ADHD and ASD are often centered in storylines about developmental disabilities, which, as evidenced in the *Rain Man* example and statistical evidence above, commonly are inaccurate and/or disparaging representations. Some popular portrayals of these ADHD and ASD tropes in TV and film include: Dory from *Finding Nemo* (2003), Barney Stinson from *How I Met your Mother* (2005-2013), and Bart Simpson from *The Simpsons* (1989- ); and Tina Belcher from *Bob's Burgers* (2011- ), Sherlock Holmes from *Sherlock* (2010- ), Sheldon Cooper from *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-2019), respectively. These character archetypes occur so frequently that, in addition to the “Neurodivergence is Supernatural” trope page, ASD and ADHD both have their own write-ups on TV Tropes’ wiki: Attention Deficit... Ooh, Shiny!, Hollywood Autism, and - implicitly -

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<sup>51</sup> Maureen S. Durkin, “Increasing Prevalence of Developmental Disabilities Among Children in the US: A Sign of Progress?,” *Pediatrics* 144, no. 4 (October 1, 2019): e20192005, <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2019-2005>; Maureen S. Durkin et al., “Autism Spectrum Disorder Among US Children (2002–2010): Socioeconomic, Racial, and Ethnic Disparities,” *American Journal of Public Health* 107, no. 11 (November 1, 2017): 1818–26, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2017.304032>.

Insufferable Genius.<sup>52</sup> These cliched representations by definition lack nuance, which relatedly connects to the third and final reason for my focus on them.

Of the characters listed above, there is nothing *inherently* harmful or discriminatory about them. However, when put together in a collective to formulate a broad understanding of ADHD and/or ASD, they paint a monolithic and incomplete portrait. Indeed, all these mainstream representations listed above, save for Dory who is, in fact, a *fish*, characterize ASD and ADHD through stereotypes of how these impairments manifest in young, white boys. Because the diagnostic criteria focused originally on how ND appears in young white boys, its manifestation in women and BIPOC folks is not well represented. Moreover, in each of these examples, neurodivergence is used as a punchline or a quirky thing that a character does, and broader society (endearingly) puts up with.

Let's take, for example, the character Dory from *Finding Nemo*. Despite being voiced by Ellen DeGeneres, the character Dory demonstrates the stereotypical expression of young, white, masculine forms of ADHD. She has poor working memory skills, she is impulsive, she blurts out most thoughts without filter, she is hyperactive and jumps from topic to topic, and she stims – “a neurodivergent coping mechanism that works to regulate both over and under stimulation of emotions and sensory input.”<sup>53</sup> Dory is an ADHD stereotype incarnate. Moreover, it is not without remark that the representation of ADHD comes through a fish – animals known to have short attention and memory spans.

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<sup>52</sup> “Neurodiversity Is Supernatural,” TV Tropes, accessed April 30, 2022, <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/NeurodiversityIsSupernatural>; “Hollywood Autism,” TV Tropes, accessed April 30, 2022, <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/HollywoodAutism>; “Insufferable Genius,” TV Tropes, accessed April 30, 2022, <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/InsufferableGenius>; “Attention Deficit... Ooh, Shiny!,” TV Tropes, accessed April 30, 2022, <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/AttentionDeficitOohShiny>.

<sup>53</sup> Elizabeth S. Parks and Kiah E. Bennett, “A Transcription System for Nonverbal Listening Behavior,” *International Journal of Listening* ahead-of-print, no. ahead-of-print (2022): 12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10904018.2022.2063868>.

Moreover, Dory exists largely alone within the story of *Finding Nemo*. Her social isolation suggests that her disability is incompatible with broader social structures and cultural expectations. A positive representation of ADHD, instead, might have mapped Dory's "gender" onto her expression of ADHD. Dory would have, as a grown fish, learned the gendered ND expectation of masking, or blending, as to not make the neurotypicals around her uncomfortable. Instead, she would have internalized that discomfort, resulting in stress-induced physical and mental impairments – as is the case with many BIPOC or non-masculine ADHDers.<sup>54</sup> Nonetheless, this image of a blue fish with social anxiety and self-worth issues is less tempting as a character pitch than a happy Blue Hippo Tang with a catchy verbal stim of "P. Sherman 42, Wallaby Way, Sydney."

However, these representations have wider reaching consequences. They paint an incomplete and at times inaccurate image of neurodivergence, which ASDers and ADHDers feel the need to later disprove and educate on, complete with the emotional labor within both disapproval and education. These representations result in, for example, experiences like the one I had last weekend where an acquaintance innocuously posed the question, "does your dog have ADHD?" To be clear, I am not a veterinarian, and I do not know the biomedical answer to this question. However, despite my neurodivergent urge to give a complete answer as to why that question is flawed for a multitude of reasons, I realized that I do not think that the asker was looking for an answer at all. Indeed, my disability was simply used as a funny thought experiment to query the characteristics of canines, rather than an at-times debilitating experience of navigating vocational and social expectations.

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<sup>54</sup> Kessler et al., "The Prevalence and Correlates of Adult ADHD in the United States"; L. A. Adler et al., "Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder in Adult Patients with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): Is ADHD a Vulnerability Factor?," *Journal of Attention Disorders* 8, no. 1 (August 1, 2004): 11–16, <https://doi.org/10.1177/108705470400800102>.

Returning to Hollywood social, cultural, and organizational practices of neurodivergent gatekeeping, as just demonstrated, my position as neurodivergent informs my analyses. I provide perspective to more subtle ways that organizational ableism discreetly gatekeeps. For example, in my study, only one of my interviewees openly named themselves as neurodivergent (specifically, dyslexic, which is closely related to ADHD and ASD), despite ADHD and ASD being prevalent forms of neurodivergent disabilities in the workplace.<sup>55</sup> I hypothesize two reasons for this disparity: NDs had already been gatekept out of Hollywood and therefore the population was not there to speak to, or internalized ableism or desire to mask or hide one's disability for fear of being discovered as a misfit. Indeed, the desire to mask and "blend" is not a practice done in vain for NDs, as explored below. However, as this dissertation as exemplified, approximating the white, masculine, middle-to-upper class, *able-bodyminded ideal* is a necessary for "non-normative" assistants aspiring to fit above-the-line. Therefore, I provide my experiences and perspective to supplement and serve as an "insider" perspective on ways assistants like me might be gatekept out of above-the-line positions.

A primary way Hollywood gatekeeps against NDs is through the lack of adequate health insurance or access to behavioral and emotional therapies as supports. Like Andi's experience of being denied health insurance to support her Diabetes treatment, NDs also experience debilitation as a result of healthcare denial. However, rather than the debilitation originating in a clearly physical form, ND debilitation – resulting from inaccessible insurance and therapies – manifests mentally and emotionally. For example, if an ND was given the same runaround that Andi experienced in a hypothetical pursuit of access to health insurance, affordable doctor's visits to get access to their controlled substance, which regulates their brain's ability to complete

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<sup>55</sup> Kuriyan et al., "Young Adult Educational and Vocational Outcomes of Children Diagnosed with ADHD."

EFs with ease, they would struggle at the outset. I know this because, within academia, I have experienced the same thing.

While the specifics of the context differs, I provide my experience as a graduate teaching *assistant* to illustrate how inaccessible healthcare is mentally and emotionally debilitating for NDs, evident in the prevalence of NDs' C-PTSD.<sup>56</sup> C-PTSD is a form of post-traumatic stress disorder that manifests not because of a single traumatic event, but rather as a result of repeated trauma that fosters debilitation, as Puar defines it. As a result of being a misfit in a world/organization/(sub-)culture by and for neurotypicals, each experience of ableism exists on a debilitating continuum of C-PTSD. However, again, I point to systemic ableism as the *culprit* of this C-PTSD; NDs simply try to survive in organizations and structures that functionally and ideologically work to disable and debilitate them.

When finishing my master's thesis, just after turning twenty-six years old and therefore switching from my parentally provided health insurance, a clerical error resulted in me not having access to health insurance. Because the medication I take to support my brain's EFs is a stimulant, it is a controlled substance – a drug or other substance that is tightly controlled by the government because it may be abused or cause addiction – I must visit a prescribing physician every three months for a renewed prescription. To avoid the out-of-pocket costs of a doctor's visit and filled prescriptions (for me, out of pocket costs for prescriptions would be \$630/month), I was on the phone (often on hold) for five hours, three days in a row – without medication to help regulate my decision-making, planning, and reaction to stimuli (like stressful, confounding news). This runaround *alone* was a challenge for my brain's EFs. Within Hollywood

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<sup>56</sup> Adler et al., "Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder in Adult Patients with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): Is ADHD a Vulnerability Factor?"



assistantship, where your time is not your own and you are on-call 24/7, the compounding factors would make sorting out insurance issues nearly impossible.

In addition to the runaround itself being challenging for ND's EFs, being without medication to help regulate these EFs expands out into the rest of one's life. Therefore, things as quotidian as cooking a meal, an activity that requires precise EFing (i.e., in the ability to remember multiple steps at once, plan both in the production of the meal and in the planning preparation of buying and readying needed ingredients), can be frustrating and mentally taxing for NDs. An ND assistant would have to keep on top of not only their own everyday planning needs, but also potentially that of their boss(es)', making getting through the day, task by task, a debilitating process in and of itself. In addition to these continuous, everyday frustrations, there is the combined frustration of struggling to complete required tasks for work.

Continuing with my experience as a graduate teaching assistant as allegorical for being an assistant without medication to support EFs, the process of sitting down at my computer and working on my master's thesis or grading student's final papers was incredibly challenging. These experiences might be akin to a writer's assistant copyediting notes or script changes for the next day's meeting. In addition to these tasks, much like my experience grading, writer's assistants often spend their evenings writing new script ideas so that when a pitch opportunity presents itself, they are ready. However, in the same way I struggled writing my thesis, a writer's assistant might struggle to find the motivation to write a script.

This challenge is not due to mis-prioritizing or laziness – ableist ascriptions that often lodged at and subsequently internalized by NDs. Rather, focusing on the mundane task at hand without pharmaceutical or other therapeutic support is, for NDs, an emotionally painful and mentally strenuous experience. An ND can fully appreciate and understand the importance of

completing a task, like sending an email or writing a paper, but still because of their challenges with EFs, the inability or strained ability to initiate the task results in immense cognitive stress, a *heaping load of self-judgment and anxiety* about impending deadlines, and social fears of being (seen as) irresponsible vis-a-vis internalized ableism.

I present these examples to criticize the ableist expectations and system, not the “inability” of NDs. In other words, my anti-ableist critique is systemic, not individualized. Indeed, it is the ableist system, with its expectations and beliefs that pushing yourself harder *will* result in success, that fosters feelings of inadequacy within NDs. Internalizing the idea that “I am lazy because I can’t complete this task” is not an innate process for NDs, but rather one that social conditioning instills within them. The system itself is ableist. Disabled people internalize the cultural ableism in which they exist, which obfuscates *system’s flaws* by placing blame on the disabled worker. This process is one that debilitates and leads to “neurodivergent burnout.”

My experience of writing my thesis without access to medication led to faster neurodivergent burnout, similar to how ND assistants might feel when *being* Hollywood’s executive functions. I define neurodivergent burnout with the primary characteristics of “chronic exhaustion, loss of skills, and reduced tolerance to stimulus.”<sup>57</sup> This burnout occurs as the result of life stressors, which add to the cumulative cognitive load NDs carry, and an inaccessibility to supports or accommodations to find relief from this load.<sup>58</sup> Neurodivergent burnout is definitionally a form of debilitation that affects NDs. Just as debilitation is defined by the constant experience of being pushed past one’s capacity, neurodivergent burnout is the result of

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<sup>57</sup> Dora M. Raymaker et al., “‘Having All of Your Internal Resources Exhausted Beyond Measure and Being Left with No Clean-Up Crew’: Defining Autistic Burnout,” *Autism in Adulthood*, June 10, 2020, 133, <https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2019.0079>.

<sup>58</sup> Raymaker et al., “‘Having All of Your Internal Resources Exhausted Beyond Measure and Being Left with No Clean-Up Crew.’”

perpetually pushing past one's capacity to survive, maintain employment, and care for oneself in a neurotypical organization/educational system/world. Neurodivergent burnout often results in negative impacts on ND's health, capacity for independent living, and mental health.<sup>59</sup>

Additionally, neurodivergent burnout is a cyclically debilitating experience that, without relief in context or accommodations, gatekeeps ND assistants from promotion out of their roles as Hollywood's executive functions.

Another key contributor to neurodivergent burnout, which serves as a form of Hollywood gatekeeping, is the neurodivergent experience of masking.<sup>60</sup> Masking is a neurodivergent practice of “mimicking neurotypical nonverbal behaviors while suppressing neurodivergent nonverbals in the effort to ‘fit in’ and ‘blend in’ to neurotypical, societal expectations of behavior.”<sup>61</sup> TikToker, @disabled\_ariana, a former Hollywood assistant who now works in Hollywood production and academia, describes her experience of masking as akin to going to an interview where you:

were ... hyper aware of your every movement – what your face looks like, exactly what you said – and you were just constantly second guessing and trying to rephrase everything you say to be better and match the expectations of the room. You are second guessing your outfit because it was unclear what the expectations [of what you were supposed to wear] were. You're really aware of how firm your handshake is, and that you're making purposeful eye contact, and that you are talking clearly and directly to

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<sup>59</sup> Raymaker et al.

<sup>60</sup> Raymaker et al.

<sup>61</sup> Parks and Bennett, “A Transcription System for Nonverbal Listening Behavior,” 12.

someone. And at the end of the day you're exhausted because you were ON the entire day. Except, that's your life.<sup>62</sup>

Because NDs can struggle reading social cues and understanding social expectations *while* experiencing the results of a lifetime C-PTSD knowing that their unmasked behavior (e.g., avoiding eye contact or stimming) is “wrong.” Therefore, ND assistants, whose jobs rely heavily on communicating and interfacing to enact Hollywood’s executive functions, are masking not only to survive, but to perform well vocationally. ND assistants' jobs, in part, depend on their ability to mask on behalf of their boss to make clients, coworkers, collaborations, etc. feel comfortable, which results in the debilitating experience of neurodivergent burnout.

Relatedly, miscommunications happen often for NDs because of unclear cultural expectations *and* how NDs process communication. Hollywood above-the-line organizations typically function as high context, meaning the meaning within the group’s “insider” communication is largely implied because insiders know what to do and what to think from years of interaction with other insiders.<sup>63</sup> Outsiders or newcomers typically struggle in low context organizational cultures because they don’t have the cultivated knowledge to understand the implied meanings of communication. As many assistants mentioned, there is very little by way of explicit training for their positions – including training on tasks and responsibilities *and* training on an organization’s cultural expectations/value. Because NDs can struggle with reading implicit social cues, neurodivergent burnout also results from the additional cognitive load of trying to understand what they *should* interpret as important in a high context environment.

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<sup>62</sup> @disabled\_ariana, *What Masking Feels Like*, TikTok recording (TikTok, 2021), <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZTdqaXG8/>.

<sup>63</sup> Norhayati Zakaria, “Edward Hall: High-Context versus Low-Context Intercultural Communication” (CRC Press, 2017), 59–66, <https://doi.org/10.1201/9781315372976-15>.

Briefly, as a reminder, each of these stressors amplify neurodivergent burnout's debilitation *without reprieve*. In their study on neurodivergent burnout, Raymaker et al. highlight that NDs “also discussed a lack of empathy from neurotypical people and described acceptance and social support, time off/reduced expectations, and ... unmasking as associated in their experiences with recovery.”<sup>64</sup> ND assistants experience this neurodivergent burnout without possibility of rest or feelings of social support to lessen their cognitive load and recover, in order to re-engage. In this way, neurodivergent burnout because of Hollywood's organizational expectations –compounded by lacking healthcare or pay to accommodate NDs' needs – results in more rapid debilitation, and therefore one form of neurodivergent gatekeeping.

However, neurodivergent gatekeeping also extends past healthcare and neurodivergent burnout. Neurodivergent gatekeeping also takes form in both implicit and explicit forms of organizational and interpersonal ableism. As a form of implicit organizational ableism, NDs experience missed opportunities or misunderstandings because of their need for explicit communication within a high context organizational culture. Although her experience happens within a below-the-line context, @Disabled\_ariana explains how the need for explicit training can be confounded for ND assistants, or workers in Hollywood, in general:

I worked on the first season of a low budget show and then was asked to come back and work on the second season. I was asked if I wanted to be a producer on the new season, and I said yes. And then I was asked if they could borrow my camera equipment, and I said ‘for a small fee.’ I was then told that I could no longer be a producer if I wanted a fee for my equipment. Then [coworkers] stopped referring me for further work. [cut scene]

So, the way I just told the story was the way I experienced it. I was brand new to the film

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<sup>64</sup> Raymaker et al., ““Having All of Your Internal Resources Exhausted Beyond Measure and Being Left with No Clean-Up Crew,”” 133, 138–39.

industry at this point, and I didn't understand that by them asking me to be a producer and giving me the higher title, they wanted to use my equipment for free. *No one explicitly stated that.* ... I was supposed to intuit all of this from being around the industry. This is what miscommunication and misunderstanding can look like in autism. Here, Ariana exemplifies how slight misunderstandings as a result of lacking accommodations (clearly communicated expectations) for her disability resulted in not only a lost promotion, but also garnered her a negative reputation as "not a team player," lessening the number of future opportunities for work. This mismatch of interpretation is another common way that NDs are gatekept out of high context organizational cultures like Hollywood.

In addition to implicit forms like the one described above, neurodivergent gatekeeping also manifests in overt interpersonal ableism. Returning to an example from my chapter on EWA as a sexist form of gatekeeping, it also exemplifies the interlocking oppressions of ableism and sexism. Hailey's experience of verbal abuse at a boutique agency exemplifies this connection, to recall:

I remember the first couple weeks that I was getting it [verbal abuse] really bad from one of my bosses. ... I was being regularly humiliated in front of literally everyone at the company, so, obviously everyone knew. It would be like, "*What are you thinking? How could you think this way?*" Basically to implicate: "*you're stupid,*" whatever. The CEO pulled me aside and was like ... "You just got to understand. You gotta be the whipping boy. This is how this industry works. You can't cry. *They'll know that you're weak.*"

There are multiple forms of both interpersonal and organizational ableism presented. To begin, Hailey's boss enacts explicit interpersonal ableism when asking her, "How could you think this way?" To ask her this question as an implication of her stupidity makes clear that alternative ways of thinking is *wrong*.

Additionally, the fact that Hailey is not/does not explicitly identify as ND, because neurodivergent disability can be invisible and many NDs often mask their disability, *does not matter* here. Her supervisor would make ableist statements regardless of who his assistant was or what positionalities they hold. He is ableist against neurodivergence, and – via his wielding of neurodivergence as a quality that can be used to demean someone – he actively gatekeeps against neurodivergence by reifying how neurodivergence does not *fit* and is wrong within Hollywood’s context. In short, he uses “stupidity” to distinguish who is included and who is excluded; people who do not think in a way he deems appropriate are misfit and gatekept out.

However, Hailey’s experience above exemplifies an insidious form of organizational ableism and neurodivergent gatekeeping. Namely, implied above and echoed by many assistants I interviewed is the belief that Hollywood is not for the weak. Within Hollywood specifically and the United States broadly, the rhetorical rejection of “weakness” acts as a culturally accepted form of ableism. Definitionally speaking, the condition of “weakness” is one of lack. Indeed, the dictionary definition of weak – (adj.) “not strong; liable to yield, break, or collapse under pressure or strain; fragile; frail” or “lacking in bodily strength or healthy vigor, as from age or sickness; feeble; infirm” – is implied within the dictionary definition of disability – (n.) “lack of adequate power, strength, or physical or mental ability; incapacity.”<sup>65</sup> Nonetheless, “weak” and “weakness” stand in as an obscure way to discipline that ideal ways of being are *not* akin to disabled.

Weakness is rhetorically used as ableist disciplining of identity and/or belonging. For example, much like boys are disciplined not to cry or show emotional weakness, (women)

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<sup>65</sup> “Definition of Weak | Dictionary.Com,” [www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com), accessed May 1, 2022, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/weak>; “Definition of Disability | Dictionary.Com,” [www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com), accessed May 1, 2022, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/disability>.

assistants are told not to cry to show weakness in a masculine position. In both of these examples of cultural sexism, sexism is, in part, defined via ableism, because no matter one's positionality, *nobody* wants to be *weak* (read: disabled). The undesirability of weakness implies that the antithesis of one's desired state (for example, masculine or assistant, respectively) is a state of disability. To be in Hollywood, one must not have weakness, and therefore one must be completely able-bodyminded.

Returning to Hailey's above experience, the CEO pulls her aside to tell her that "this is just the way industry is." She cannot appear weak, disabled, feeble minded, or neurodivergent because these ways of being are misfit within Hollywood. Moreover, "weakness" as a misfit condition is not only definitionally ableist, but also ambiguous and therefore can be used against assistants as (ableist) justification for gatekeeping indiscriminately, which maintains discourses of neurodivergent gatekeeping with ease.

This practice, along with the multiple listed above, much like I highlight in the chapters on race and gender, works counter to broader U.S. calls and organizational initiatives dedicated to disability DEI in above-the-line positions. Moreover, to develop more accurate representations of on-screen neurodivergence, ND executives and creatives must be promoted from assistantship (Hollywood's executive functions) into above-the-line positions. The above has evidenced how NDs are *not* a great fit to be Hollywood's executive functions and are therefore gatekept out of above-the-line positions, especially when organizations do not provide adequate healthcare so NDs have access to supports and accommodations. A typical response to NDs misfit into Hollywood's entry-level position might sound something like "not all people (NDs) are equipped and fit for each vocational field (Hollywood)." However, this is simply inaccurate.



Neurodivergent gatekeeping serves to merely keep disabled folks out of above-the-line positions, despite evidence that ND's above-the-line inclusion would be largely beneficial. These tactics of gatekeeping are not in place to guard against unmatched skill. Rather, they simply function to maintain Hollywood's ableist cultural beliefs. Ultimately, to attain neurodivergent equity within Hollywood, and therefore create a Hollywood where creatives and executives accurately represent disability on-screen, the position of assistant and/or the process of promotion into above-the-line positions must be reconceptualized.

### *Conclusion*

In this chapter, focusing on understudied positionalities in Hollywood culture, I evidenced both the material and social forms of classist and ableist debilitation, which gatekeep against working class and disabled Hollywood misfits. There is much conversation, both inside Hollywood and mainstream U.S. discussion, around the need to diversify characters, for accurate representations of marginalized positionalities, and for marginalized populations to access both the social and economic capital that comes with being an above-the-line worker. However, important to note here, is that the "misfit" nature of Hollywood is socially constructed. Not only is it socially constructed, but it is fiscally beneficial to Hollywood. In other words, to provide access and inclusion to working class and disabled assistants, the cultural standard of pay must be high enough that a grown adult could support themselves on what they are making as an assistant without external (familial) financial support. Additionally, with disabilities, not only would pay need to increase, but the cultural value of efficiency would need to take a backseat to inclusion. Indeed, as explained above, capitalistic profit depends on one's capacity and ability to produce. If this belief remains in place, disability will time and again be rendered as a misfit in Hollywood.

Moreover, a cultural shift for inclusion would have broad reaching impacts – allowing assistants, and workers broadly, to feel safe “coming out” as poor or disabled. Indeed, I suggest here that one reason that the current gatekeeping against lower class and disabled folks remains is that Hollywood is inherently ableist and classist, and to survive, assistants do not feel like they have a privilege or agency to state what their needed accommodations are. Therefore, these misfit assistants simply bear through the added debilitation, burning them out faster. For example, Ava is one of the few assistants to open up with me about her experiences of implicit ableism within the workplace:

I am a little dyslexic. It's not horrible, but it's definitely a real thing.... it's really hard for me to see where I've made mistakes, and if I have spelled a word wrong and it's all that stuff. ... if you are a person who can't spell, [the] people who can, do not get it. They just think you're an idiot. Which is like, "I'm not an idiot, I'm absolutely not the idiot. I just can't spell very well." My whole life has been that problem of people just assuming that I am dumb. ...

On that thriller-drama I worked on [as a writer's assistant], they did a thing where my notes were projected to the room because Oliver's (the showrunner) a psychopath. It did actually make sense, but it was horrible. [chuckles]

Here, Ava illustrates how a deep insecurity of hers, which is rooted in her disability, was quite literally put on display as she had her live notetaking projected in front of the entire writer's room to follow along with her. This act is not, in and of itself, a debilitating or gatekeeping one. However, even for those who do not feel safe unmasking their disability or class status, the repeated nature of these yields debilitating effects that gatekeep misfits out of Hollywood.

Experiences like Ava's are *incredibly* common for misfits who feel they must hide their “mis-” to fit. Additionally, because Ava felt she was unable to speak up, like many assistants in their disempowered position, she experiences the exponentially increasing rate of debilitation described in my above analysis on neurodivergent gatekeeping. The lack of cultural understanding of classism and ableism – compounded by an organizational culture that is classist

and ableist – gatekeeps against misfits, or openly discriminates against working class and disabled assistants, without the bat of an eye. And many Hollywood insiders have a vested interest in maintaining organizational classism and ableism, evidenced in repeated invalidation of misfits.

This invalidating disposition towards misfit debilitation manifests in the tone and way managers and some “old guard” support staff meet assistants’ demands for living wages and healthcare. In other words, most managers and folks working in above-the-line positions reify Hollywood’s rigid hierarchy with a justification that they all survived and are better for their time “paying dues” as an assistant. As former assistant and media industry studies scholar, Erin Hill elucidates, in response to a 2009 pay raise for agency assistants, “the anger of the commenters was surprising because it was expressed most frequently and most vehemently in *support* of management. Commenters applauded the architects of the pay cut while admonishing assistants that were ‘not coal miner,’ and telling them to ‘sack the fuck up and deal with it,’ to ‘grow up!’ because ‘this is the business, always has been and always will be--it’s called paying your dues by working long hours, taking it up the ass, and not getting paid.’”<sup>66</sup> These commenters illustrate the ideological strength this mismanagement and exploitation holds. Instead of 2009 Hollywood workers getting mad at the *obvious* debilitation assistants experience in their day-to-day lives trying to survive in industry, these comments show that workers instead got mad at the *assistants* for daring to speak out and up about the abuses they suffer.

Assistants’ lack of access to mentorship and apprenticeship slows their promotion time and forces them to stay in precarious assistantship positions longer, as their mental and physical health suffer under professional and financial distress. Although approximately twenty-six

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<sup>66</sup> Hill, *Never Done*, 213-214.

percent of the U.S. population are disabled individuals, only six percent of Hollywood assistants identify as disabled.<sup>67</sup> Both material lack and cultural discourses yield classist and ableist debilitation that hierarchically keeps lower class and disabled assistants out of above-the-line positions as forms of gatekeeping that debilitate assistants. This gatekeeping ultimately shapes representation of difference that appears on screen, wherein a report of On-Screen disability shows that only 3.5% of television's regular characters were disabled, "with very few of those being authentic."<sup>68</sup> These misrepresentations, mistreatments, and lack of training exist in a fractured, profit-driven, post-Fordist industry.

Hollywood's lack of leadership training and development within a rigid hierarchy yields a cyclical, yet evolving process of promotion. Assistants will either have excellent mentors with leadership skills to train and promote, fostering an apprenticeship relationship that shapes assistants' later managerial disposition; alternatively, they have supervisors who view them as minions, rather than future media workers, yielding debilitation and exit from industry or prolonged time in assistantship, with each experience informing their later managerial practices, until they achieve promotion. In any case, the experiences assistants have with their managers discursively and intentionally inform their own leadership disposition, *and* a general industrial disposition towards assistants that minimizes and invalidates their legitimate concerns over surviving in Hollywood.

Ultimately, Hollywood profits from the *appearance* of inclusion, via on-screen representations of disability and class, *and* by gatekeeping these misfit identities out; indeed, holistic access and inclusion of working class and disabled assistants would mean that Hollywood organizations would provide fiscal, social, and vocational accommodations – each of

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<sup>67</sup> #PayUpHollywood, "The 2020 Entertainment Support Staff Survey Results."

<sup>68</sup> Megan Townsend and Raina Deerwater, "WHERE WE ARE ON TV 2020 – 2021" (GLAAD, 2021).

which reducing Hollywood's exploitative profit – to attain equity. Above I have suggested some ways a shift for equity and inclusion might begin. However, implicit in these suggestions is a much larger argument, Hollywood's capitalist motivation is at odds with diversity, equity, and inclusion of not only disabled and working-class folks, but other multiply marginalized persons. If we want creative freedom and accurate representation, assistantship must be geared towards training, support, and other accommodations that is incompatible with a purely profit-driven, capitalistic goal.

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### *Conclusion: Paying Dues to and Affecting Change in Cultural Institutions*

In the process of doing this research and writing this dissertation, I was repeatedly asked two questions. First, in response to hearing me describe my research, “civilians” (aka people not working in Hollywood) would ask me, “Why do assistants put up with this [low pay, lack of healthcare, emotional abuse, writ large debilitation]?” While I understand the sentiment behind this question, I would like to alter it slightly to state: why does Hollywood put assistants through this? In short: because they can. As this dissertation as illustrated, the regulatory checks and balances to ensure equity, equal opportunity, and stable workplace relations, simply do not exist at the level of assistantship. Moreover, there is no force, group of people, or policy regulation that sets standards for assistant pay or treatment. This lack of regulation is only one way Hollywood executives and creatives have the reach to foster assistant debilitation.

In addition to the lack of regulation, assistant positions are in low supply while being in high demand. As many assistants also noted in their interviews, there is a *surplus* of young, Hollywood hopefuls champing at the bit to have one of these prized assistant roles. Though there are not numbers to prove this claim, the described discourses of assistants quitting or getting fired, and then my interviewees taking their places without warning or training at the very least instills within them the sense that it is *painfully* easy to replace them; indeed, once they “move on to greener pastures” there is a younger, fresher potential-assistant just waiting to fill their vacant desk. As mentioned previously in this dissertation, the fluidity of assistantship is part of the across-the-line nature of these positions, which hinder the opportunity for solidarity and organizing to create real, lasting change.

The high-demand quality of being an assistant makes a salient connection to part of the original question: why do assistants put up with mistreatment? The implication in this question is

not to shame or blame assistants as the victims of debilitation. However, there is merit in understanding how assistants justify remaining in a precarious and debilitating position despite every interviewee admitting they have considered quitting and leaving industry. Justifications are inherently individualized and personal. However, there are two predominant reasons: they are paying dues and they want to effect change. I will return to the desire to affect change. However, first, the cultural mythology of paying dues is a central justification for assistants wanting to transcend from their across-the-line positions into their above-the-line aspirations.

### *Paying Dues as Industrial Justification*

Hollywood industrial mythologies exist to organize subcultures and to educate newcomers of “a hundred years of accumulated industrial wisdom.”<sup>1</sup> Industrial mythologies and storytelling functions as a way to craft cultural hegemony within Hollywood.<sup>2</sup> Broadly speaking, social mythologies are “used by groups to contextualize and define everyday situations” and further “perform a vital social function by providing a narrative structure that has the power to bind otherwise independent beings into more or less coherent collectives capable of joint actions.”<sup>3</sup> Further, mythologies illustrate a group’s values; interrogating a group’s mythologies demystifies that group’s guiding principles, how they define themselves, and “what sorts of futures develop from them.”<sup>4</sup> Mythologies are a way for a group member to make sense of their experiences; group members are able to locate their experience in the mythological narratives that assert that “things have always been this way, are destined to unfold according to a

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<sup>1</sup> Erin Hill, *Never Done: A History of Women’s Work in Media Production* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 177.

<sup>2</sup> John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Culture : Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television*, Console-Ing Passions (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Aaron Robert Duggan, “A Fictive Reality: The Social Construction of Mythologies and the Mythologizing of Social Interactions” (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2014), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Duggan, 1–2, 6.

particular plan, or, because of circumstances beyond alteration, can be no other way than they are now.”<sup>5</sup> In this way, mythologies function to foster organizational culture; an assistant makes sense of their experience through the narrative of the myth, which, in turn, reifies the validity of the organization’s cultural expectations.<sup>6</sup>

In Hollywood’s organizational culture, mythologies are a wealth of justificatory narratives to aid in understanding individual choices, industrial wisdom, and production practices.<sup>7</sup> In addition, industrial mythologies are “codified and dispersed as fact through its creative products, and by and to its members.”<sup>8</sup> They give meaning and continuity to the fractured, twenty-first-century, post-Fordist production processes and cultures. Therefore, these mythologies help to “contain and control the contributions of low-status workers—like the assistants in question—to the work of writers, producers, directors, agents, and executives.”<sup>9</sup> Looking at the role of assistants, Hill explains how industrial mythologies perpetuate work hierarchies and industrial discourses with historical roots:

Such mythology ... disguises the fact that assistants are absolutely essential to the industry, and do affect it creatively, just as they did fifty years ago when they were more commonly labeled secretaries and their role was understood as women’s work.<sup>10</sup>

Hill continues to propose that the concept of paying dues is “the sector’s over-arching mythology.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Duggan, 3–4, 9.

<sup>6</sup> Duggan, 12.

<sup>7</sup> Hill, *Never Done*, 177.

<sup>8</sup> Hill, 214.

<sup>9</sup> Hill, 214.

<sup>10</sup> Hill, 214.

<sup>11</sup> Hill, 214.

I expanded on Hill's work by interrogating the paying dues mythology as legitimizing gatekeeping. Within Hollywood's across-the-line subculture, paying dues is used to legitimize social, structural, and discursive forms of oppression and abuse through the belief that to "make it" and promote into the highly desired creative and executive Hollywood positions these assistants are aiming for, they need to bear through the various forms of oppression to "earn" their place above-the-line. Specifically, the myth of paying dues manifests in assistants' experiences, self-definition, and how this foundational myth affects whose stories are told because only those who can "hack it" rise through the ranks of industry. However, before understanding these relationships, the concept of what it means to "pay your dues" must first be clarified.

Traditionally, paying dues has been understood as the monetary contributions made for membership to a club, organization, or for entrance or to remain in good standing with a group.<sup>12</sup> However, this definition has expanded and evolved past the point of monetary payment; as Ford and Newstrom theorize, "dues" now can indicate one or more of the following: (1) possessing minimum qualifications for access to position, (2) better-than-satisfactory performance on a job or task, (3) staying in one's current position or with a company for an appropriate amount of time, (4) "doing the prerequisite 'grunt' tasks or having the necessary experiences that show a willingness to 'get one's hands dirty' without substantial complaint, (5) showing respect to the "elders," including "sitting at their knees," and (6) showing respect to the group in attempts to "fit in" and not perform an assumption of superiority.<sup>13</sup> In their expansion of these aspects, Ford and Newstrom synthesize that a judgment on "paying dues" includes many disparate aspects

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<sup>12</sup> Robert Ford and John Newstrom, "Dues-Paying: Managing the Costs of Recognition," *Business Horizons* 42, no. 4 (1999): 14.

<sup>13</sup> Ford and Newstrom, 15.



including skill, time, quality of work, humility and social acceptance. The sum of these aspects then become “the total ‘cost’ the group believes an individual should ‘pay’ for the privileges of full acceptance and continuing membership in it” thereby meeting collective expectations of deservedness.<sup>14</sup>

Nonetheless, these expectations are inherently subjective and ambiguous. As Ford and Newstrom term, paying dues is a “perceptual phenomenon” that is usually performed from multiple subjective positionalities.<sup>15</sup> It is specific to each respective situation and the dues paid in one position do not necessarily roll into the next institutionally.<sup>16</sup> In Hollywood’s post-Fordist, twenty-first century construction, the concept of “paying dues” is an important mythology in creative and executive positions and promotional trajectories. However, the practice of paying dues as a “perceptual phenomenon” is directly dependent on broad industrial needs, a supervisor’s expectations and assessments, and the assistant’s positionality in relation to whether or not they are deemed to “belong” in Hollywood. When I ask assistants what “paying dues” means, the responses differ vastly. Some respond that it means to do grunt work for entry level positions, while others provide a bit more context as to the various forms of labor they endure to “make it.” However, it is clear in all the responses from assistants, “paying dues” functions as a gatekeeping mythology that siphons out the “weak” – or those at a gendered, classed, racial, and ability-based “disadvantage” – who fail to prove they can “hack it.”

There are endless ways that the belief in “paying dues” justifies not only forms of gatekeeping, but also inspires debilitation. For example, the justification behind assistants’ low pay (a form of both gatekeeping and debilitation) and 24/7 on-call expectations (a form of

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<sup>14</sup> Ford and Newstrom, 15; Mark J Martinko et al., “Dues Paying: A Theoretical Explication and Conceptual Model,” *Journal of Management* 30, no. 1 (2004): 52.

<sup>15</sup> Ford and Newstrom, “Dues-Paying: Managing the Costs of Recognition,” 15.

<sup>16</sup> Ford and Newstrom, 16.

debilitation) is that assistants must “pay their dues” before having the luxury of maintaining a normal schedule or, eventually, crafting their own schedules in above-the-line positions. Additionally, assistants are also expected to pay emotional dues as unofficial job requirements cloaked in verbiage like “anticipate supervisor’s needs,” have “thick skin” and be able to keep up with our fast-paced work environment.” However, these phrases are simply pseudonyms signaling expectations of emotional labor and emotional workplace abuse (EWA) as part of the paying dues process. Workplace emotional labor is a sort of emotion management, or strategic form of communication, in which the worker must “induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others.”<sup>17</sup> This induction or suppression refers both to their own emotional state and their superior’s emotional state they attempt to productively manipulate.<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, assistants must be aware and in control of their own emotional suppression as they diffuse the boss’s emotional bomb and “pay their dues.”

To be clear, I posit that, because Hollywood’s post-Fordist organizational structure is fractured, “paying dues” mythology is a *constant* that justifies the forms of gatekeeping this dissertation has addressed: the material conditions to work and live as an assistant, experiences of emotional workplace abuse (EWA), and along the same racist, sexist, and ableist lines implied in broader American cultural beliefs. The belief in the “paying dues” mythology, because of its lack of clear definition and inherent subjectivity, justifies individual enactments of oppression and discrimination against assistants.

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<sup>17</sup> Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart : Commercialization of Human Feeling*, *The Managed Heart : Commercialization of Human Feeling*, (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 1983), 7.

<sup>18</sup> Laura Grindstaff, *The Money Shot : Trash, Class, and the Making of TV Talk Shows*, *The Money Shot : Trash, Class, and the Making of TV Talk Shows* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 129-141; David Hesmondhalgh, *The Cultural Industries*, *The Cultural Industries*, Fourth edition., YBP Print DDA (London: Sage Publications Ltd., 2011), 110; Hill, *Never Done*, 130.

These forms of gatekeeping sustain after entry and into the working conditions of assistants and are legitimized as just part of an assistant's paying dues process. Indeed, the "paying dues" mythology implies within it the neoliberal trope of "it gets better" – because, of course, as the cultural belief resonates: if assistants *just grinded* a bit harder, they could be promoted out of their conditions. Returning to Puar's idea of debilitation, paying dues is a debilitating practice. Akin to Puar's examination of the LGBTQ "it gets better" *campaign*, paying dues within industry, with its messages of "keep going" and "you have to keep grinding" refocuses multifarious forms of oppression and discrimination from a (sub)cultural issue to one that the oppressed neoliberally need to take on and deal with individually.<sup>19</sup>

Assistants, as subjects to neoliberal capitalism, struggle to resist their debilitation because they are constantly grinding to survive within and pay their dues to the very structure that catalyzes their debilitation. Debility is context and subject dependent, and I argue that in the *context* of development, pre-production, early stages of production, and representation, debility manifests in assistants' material working conditions and job expectations. Moreover, it works to both justify forms of gatekeeping and *as* a form of gatekeeping by weeding out those who are "too weak" for the fast-paced, debilitating, traumatizing, and insecurity entertainment industries. However, assistants continue to grind and strive because of the power latent in above-the-line positions.

#### *Assistants' Aspirations for Future Change*

A constant response assistants had to "what has kept you working in these conditions?" was the dream of "making it" and getting promoted into above-the-line creative and executive positions. However, many assistants don't persevere simply to see their names on a marquee.

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<sup>19</sup> Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Maim : Debility, Capacity, Disability*, Anima (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 8–10.

They do it so that they can change these racist, ableist, sexist, classist practices, representations, and lack of opportunities from within industry. Billie named that she wants to be the Shonda Rhimes of sci-fi (in other words, a BIWOC showrunner). Olivia, Noah, Hailey, Leon, and Izzy all aspire to be writers of various types, to write diversity, difference, and nuance into the characters and storylines audiences consume. And even those assistants who no longer work in Hollywood have moved into creative fields to continue their pursuits of crafting dynamic and nuanced storylines from diverse perspectives. Assistants explicitly named the power above-the-line positions have vis-a-vis shaping hegemony, shifting consciousness, and writing diverse, nuanced versions of human existence. Moreover, as this dissertation has exemplified, those in above-the-line positions have immense power for cultural change not only in the stories they create, but in the organizational culture they foster. Inclusion of diverse voices can effect not only what stories appear on big and small screens, but what voices are welcomed and encouraged in the behind-the-scenes, above-the-line decision-making processes – something assistants also name as changes they wish to actualize once above-the-line.

Assistants' awareness of above-the-line power is somewhat ironic when contrasted with the second commonly asked question I received while doing this research. Namely, assistants would frequently ask me, "why are you researching assistants?" As this dissertation has evidenced, there are plenty of reasons to research assistants – not the least of which being that Hollywood's industrial processes would come to a screeching halt without assistants' work. However, before reviewing this dissertation's more nuanced reasons, I want to pause on the contrast between the two most commonly asked questions I received: civilian's question "why do assistants put up with that?" while assistants ask "why do you care?" I highlight this contrast because it illustrates that another way assistants have learned to "put up with this" is by

internalizing it as necessary. The paying dues mythology catalyzes this internalization process. To achieve and get promoted through to above-the-line, decision-making positions, assistants must pay their dues of hustling, experiencing abuse, etc.

Moreover, this mass-internalization acts as a form of indoctrination so that any critique of the current structure receives an indelicate onslaught of backlash by Hollywood insiders who are invested in keeping the current structure – the one that they promoted through – as it is.<sup>20</sup> However, as Erin Hill archival work demonstrates, this internalized expectation of debilitation via paying dues by “suffering-for-entrée is by no means the way it ‘always has been.’ In fact, for the first sixty-plus years of the entertainment industry, this model didn’t exist.”<sup>21</sup> As men were included into this position, assistantship became the entry-level position for above-the-line promotion. In this evolution, however, insiders sustained Hollywood’s racist, sexist, ableist, classist cultural beliefs and repackaged discrimination *into* assistantship at the demand of policy and consumer publics.

These forms of discrimination, much like paying dues, also run the risk of being a form of indoctrination. In other words, as assistants rise through the ranks and move across the line, not only do they begin to justify paying dues, but the mistreatment of othered people also becomes justified as they adopt Hollywood’s organizational hegemony, as is evidenced in some of the interview data above. Therefore, I am cautious in the claims I make for change as a limitation of this study comes in my inability to determine where and when Hollywood’s cultural influence allows for promotion across the line. Future research could focus on researching how marginalized assistants are promoted and their proximity to the Hollywood organizational norm through the promotion process.

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<sup>20</sup> Hill, *Never Done*, 215.

<sup>21</sup> Hill, *Never Done*, 215.

Indeed, as central as assistants are to this dissertation, so is the way power is wielded within this position. In other words, returning to my central thesis, the position of assistantship works to gatekeep against potential executives and creatives who don't fit into its white, masculine, middle- to upper-class, able-bodied organizational culture. However, as this dissertation demonstrates, there is an inherent clash between contemporary calls for diversity within industry and on-screen, and the ways this diversity is gatekept out at the level of assistantship. The challenges, forms of oppression and discrimination, in addition to the moving images that audiences consume from Hollywood are all opportunities where assistants I interviewed named wanting to effect change and social progress. Many assistants understand how difference is gatekept out of above-the-line positions. They persevere and pay their dues to "make it" and change not only the narratives that come from Hollywood, but also the narratives and mythologies. As each chapter shows, calls for on-screen and behind-the-scenes diversity, equity, and inclusion is confounded in the position of assistant.

### *Chapter Summaries*

Beginning with chapter one, I demonstrate how Hollywood's racist history maintains in gatekeeping BIPOC assistants out of above-the-line positions. Specifically, Hollywood's whiteness yields the cultural belief of white-as-elite that, when actionized, gatekeeps out BIPOC assistants via tokenization and unbankability. In chapter two, I focus on how Hollywood's patriarchal origins sustain in the feminized position of assistantship, thereby gatekeeping feminine assistants out of "masculine" above-the-line positions. Moreover, in this chapter, I evidence how the women who have been let through the gate and are now executives and creatives are now the gatekeepers via the continuum of emotional labor to EWA. Lastly, in chapter three, I evidence how above-the-line gatekeepers render working class and disabled

assistants as “misfits” both socially and materially. Through the lack of fiscal supports and health benefits, misfit gatekeeping exists not only at entry, but sustains through lack of fiscally funded social capital and both physically and vocationally inaccessible expectations.

### *Continuing to Interrogate Cultural Institutions*

As this dissertation concludes, the final “why” question I posed in the introduction chapter still lingers: why does this matter? In addition to the cultural influence above-the-line workers have, and the mass exploitation and discrimination taking place within a cultural institution, and the ways across-the-line expectations debilitate and gatekeep against difference, Hollywood is not alone in these discourses.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, gatekeeping against difference is by no means exclusive to Hollywood. Therefore, I close this dissertation by directing our collective attention to other cultural institutions that enact racist, sexist, ableist, and classist gatekeeping.

Namely, academia and Hollywood hold many parallels, down to the language we use and the roles we play. Indeed, much like Hollywood, in academia we also have teaching and research *assistants*. The moniker of assistant also carries with it the “paying dues” ideology through promotion in academia from graduate assistant to assistant professors, non-tenured professors and researchers who desire the job security that comes with tenure continue to *grind* and push past capacity in their service work, desire to avoid the perish result of publish-or-perish paradox, network, and create connections and collaborations, and be (ideally) equity-oriented educators.

Additionally, academia *also* enacts racist, sexist, classist, and ableist gatekeeping. Racist and sexist gatekeeping are latent in the cultural expectations of whiteness and masculinity in academia, much like these expectations exist in Hollywood. Classist gatekeeping in U.S.

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<sup>22</sup> Melissa Sgroi, “‘I Should at Least Be given a Chance to Try’: The Experience of Media Workers with Disabilities in the United States during Postsecondary Education and Early Career,” *Disability & Society* 31, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 64–83, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2015.1127213>.

academia has already been suggested in this dissertation as a gate to entry in *Hollywood*. As mentioned, the average annual cost of attendance at a four-year institution is \$35,331.<sup>23</sup> Access to typically necessary student loans is another gatekeeping factor along intersecting axes of identity. However, forms of ableism and ableist gatekeeping are both covert and overt in academia, despite the widespread cultural pushes to make scholarship and higher education accessible.

The institutionalization of disability within academia limits the definition and supports that a disabled student might need a predetermined “list” of what they might need.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, this says nothing about the social stigma that goes along with being a disabled person, needing to enact the additional labor of going and getting the potentially unhelpful accommodation, simply to prove your belonging and worth in a social system that is not designed for you.

Additionally, a critical disability studies (CDS) understanding of academia would have to interrogate the white, abled ideologies that undergird policies, practices, and procedures within this social structure. Ben-Moshe addresses how Black students are rendered “disruptive” in class when in fact this is typically a “misdiagnosis” of a learning disability or intellectual disability at a rate of approximately one in four.<sup>25</sup> Interrogating the historical connection between ability and race concludes that, in fact, the structures and social discourse within education are predicated on

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<sup>23</sup> Melanie Hanson, “Average Cost of College & Tuition,” Education Data Initiative, March 29, 2022, <https://educationdata.org/average-cost-of-college>.

<sup>24</sup> Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “Feminist Disability Studies,” *Signs* 30, no. 2 (2005): 1557–87, <https://doi.org/10.1086/423352>; Sgroi, “‘I Should at Least Be given a Chance to Try’: The Experience of Media Workers with Disabilities in the United States during Postsecondary Education and Early Career.”

<sup>25</sup> Liat Ben-Moshe, “Disabling Incarceration: Connecting Disability to Divergent Confinements in the USA,” *Critical Sociology* 39, no. 3 (2013): 385–403, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920511430864>.



white society and cultures and ways of being.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, Black students, rather than given the opportunity to receive some of the accommodations to provide academic support listed above (however useful they may be), are punished and often physically removed from the classroom. Additionally, a CDS approach extends this analysis to show, much like Ben-Moshe shows, that this ideology of ableism extends into further institutions, for example in the school to prison pipeline *or*, as this dissertation has demonstrated, into Hollywood.

In short, to dive into the various ways that *many* cultural mainstream institutions gatekeep against difference to maintain their organizational whiteness, masculinity, able-bodymindedness, and middle-to-upper class values (in addition to other normative positionalities) is another dissertation in and of itself. This feat is exactly what I suggest; we as academics need to examine not only how institutions gatekeep against difference, but the far-reaching results this gatekeeping enacts on a mainstream, hegemonic level.

Therefore, I conclude this dissertation by highlighting that, while *absolutely necessary*, current widespread institutional change in the name of diversity, equity, and inclusion *must* contend with the implicit ways that institutions and organizations reify organizational whiteness, patriarchy, ableism, capitalism, and other power-latent discourses that exclude difference.

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<sup>26</sup> Davis Lennard, *The Disability Studies Reader, The Disability Studies Reader*, 5th edition (New York: Routledge, 2016); Therí A. Pickens, *Black Madness : : Mad Blackness*, YBP Print DDA (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019); Ben-Moshe, “Disabling Incarceration: Connecting Disability to Divergent Confinements in the USA.”

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