The How-To Screenwriting Industry:
Reverse Encouragement, Gatekeeper Lore, and the Business of Professionalization

By

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the how-to screenwriting industry, which is the range of services and products created to profit from aspiring screenwriters. The industry is for many the most visible source of knowledge about what screenwriting is, what it can be, and who can participate. Moreover, the industry offers the most accessible, if not the most effective, paths to screenwriting careers for many aspirants. And yet, studies of the film industry have largely ignored the how-to screenwriting industry, alongside the range of how-to industries for other creative practices, because they exist on the apparent margins of industry. Putting those margins at the center of this dissertation, I argue that the how-to screenwriting industry is a significant instrument of power in the commercial film industry, one that serves primarily to mold nonprofessional screenwriters into more exploitable workers. Each chapter turns to a different set of participants in the how-to screenwriting industry in the United States over the last twenty years. Combining discourse analysis, textual analysis, historical analysis, and interviews, I examine screenwriting not as a profession nor an art form but as a popular practice whose boundaries, attributes, and place in the film industry are continually negotiated (and renegotiated) by screenwriting magazines (Chapter 1), for-profit degree programs (Chapter 2), blogs (Chapter 3), platforms (Chapter 4), and activist campaigns (Chapter 5), among others. Ultimately, I argue that the how-to screenwriting industry profits from its efforts to obscure systemic inequities in screenwriting, setting out to convince aspirants that its services are a reasonable downpayment for a fulfilling, if unlikely, career in a meritocratic industry that rewards the most malleable and persistent subjects. This dissertation interrogates the beliefs and practices promoted by the how-to screenwriting industry in an effort to carve out discursive space for screenwriting practices that resist or reimagine—not simply reproduce—media power.

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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation examines what I call *the how-to screenwriting industry*, which is the range of products and services created to profit from the aspirations of would-be screenwriters. For those invested in screenwriting as a practice, profession, or point of interest, the how-to screenwriting industry looms large. As of this writing in April 2023, a Google search for "screenwriting" yields more than 43 million results. Of the fifty-odd results that make up the first page, all but two link to products and services that offer aspiring screenwriters advice or a leg up into careers—always for a fee! Some link to script formatting software products, or to networking platforms, or to screenwriting classes and degree programs. Some link to consultants who sell aspirants feedback on their screenplays, or to YouTube channels and podcasts and blogs and magazines, or to costly networking events where aspirants can pitch their ideas to disinterested development workers. Together, these products and services dominate conversations online about screenwriting. They are the most visible source of knowledge for what screenwriting is, what it can be, and who can participate.

If you have no interest in screenwriting, you might be inclined to ask why any of this matters. I'll try to make the case that it does, but if it helps for the moment, substitute for screenwriting any creative practice that a person might pursue. More people than not make media, in many cases habitually and without payment: casual bloggers, social vloggers, tweeters without checkmarks, YouTubers without sponsors, notebook poets, armchair novelists, garage musicians, everyday make-up artists, after-work actors, and aspiring screenwriters among them. But, what it means to make media is not something that emerges organically from the sum of our creative practices. Martin L. Johnson (2019) illustrates this point in his study of local films made by and for Black communities in the 1930s. Johnson argues that "church films" made in Black

communities in the period were considerably more common than Hollywood movies made by or for or about Black people at the time. And Johnson concludes that, despite the overwhelming focus of scholarship on Hollywood's output, "the median film in 1935, in terms of what was produced, and perhaps also what was seen, was not a B Western, but a home movie, an educational film, or a local film" (p. 77). In other words, there is a marked imbalance between the types of media that are widely discussed (in scholarship, in media, and, partially as a result, in everyday conversation) and the types of media that are widely produced. That imbalance often reflects and reproduces the commercial interests of large-scale, industrial media production.

In our current moment (and arguably for as long as the film industry has existed at scale), the "median" screenplay is one that will never be made into a movie and is not widely read. Likely it languishes as a PDF in a folder on someone's personal hard drive.[1] I'd be hard-pressed to make a case that this median script is broadly significant on its own. But in the aggregate, the time and effort and meaning that people invest in their creative practices has immeasurable significance—immeasurable because it is impossible to measure the potential of alternative creative practices that aren't yet widely adopted. So, I am interested in the companies that profit from their efforts to steer the conscious of the public away from imagining screenwriting as it is widely practiced and toward imagining screenwriting as a source of profit for the shareholders and investors who finance the commercial film industry—toward screenwriting as a profession, one that molds itself to the needs of the companies that set out to dominate film culture. If this all seems too conspiratorial in tone to be sensible, one need only take a look at the ongoing Writers Guild of America (WGA) strike (in its fourth week as of this writing) to recognize that the people who own Hollywood are less interested in collaborating with writers than subduing them.

[1] Apologies if this seems like an attack on *you*!

Media institutions use their influence over the construction of reality to shape what it means to make media in ways that benefit them.

This dissertation argues that the how-to screenwriting industry is an instrument of power that, in pursuit of profit, molds aspiring screenwriters into a more exploitable workforce. The how-to screenwriting industry does this in several ways, which I explore in the chapters that follow, but one of the most persistent is the industry's insistence that Hollywood is a meritocracy that anyone can master with talent, the right work ethic, and the right tools—available for purchase, of course! In the process, how-to products and services typically refuse to acknowledge the persistent and systemic inequalities that structure screenwriting work and disprove the narrative that anyone can succeed. According to the most recent annual report conducted by UCLA on diversity in Hollywood, 87.6% of of the top theatrical releases in 2022 had no credited writers of color, a number that actually increased from 86.1% in 2019 (Ramón, Tran, and Hunt 2023). The report notes that writers of color "would have to more than triple their 2022 share to reach proportionate representation" in the United States (Ramón, Tran, and Hunt 2023, p. 39). While representation for women in American screenwriting has increased in recent years, 73% of the top films released in 2022 had no credited female writers, and representation for women would have to nearly double to achieve parity with men in screenwriting (Ramón, Tran, and Hunt 2023). Moreover, women were underrepresented in screenwriting across racial and ethnic groups, and for the top 89 American films released theatrically in 2022, only one woman of color was credited as a screenwriter.

Professional screenwriters are and have always been disproportionately white and male in the American film industry for reasons that have nothing to do with talent and everything to do with the racist and misogynist structure of professionalization in the film industry. A key issue in

hiring practices for screenwriters (and for media workers more broadly) is the fact conventional paths to professionalization in media industries are notoriously informal. To focus on gender disparities in Hollywood, informal hiring practices in media work often result in men being hired by men (Banks and Milestone 2011; Conor, Gill, and Taylor 2015; Wreyford 2018). Moreover, women tend to be segregated both horizontally and vertically in media industries, pushed into specific fields of work (Bielby 2009; Conor, Gill, and Taylor 2015; Hill 2016) and prevented from achieving positions of power (O'Brien 2019). Industry lore about what audiences want and which audiences are valuable often positions men as the most valuable consumers, devaluing women's perspectives (Bielby 2009; Wreyford 2018). Finally, overt forms of misogyny, including gendered harassment, discrimination, and stereotyping (Bielby 2009; Wreyford 2018; O'Brien 2019), are longstanding and ongoing problems in media industries. These are well-documented realities in scholarship in media work, but the how-to screenwriting industry has a much louder voice in widespread conversations about what screenwriting is and can be. While the clearest solutions for inequities in media work (unionization, the formation of alternative industries, stricter regulations for hiring practices in media work) all require collective action, the commercial how-to screenwriting industry appeals to consumers as individuals whose fates are contingent upon personal talent, willpower, and a healthy eagerness to invest in screenwriting products and services.

Another way to understand the significance of the how-to screenwriting industry is to point out that it is the dominant structure of intermediation between aspiring professional screenwriters and film development workers—the range of producers, agents, managers, assistants, and others who manage film projects on their path to getting made. Production companies do not, by and large, post job opportunities for would-be screenwriters; nor do they

typically accept unsolicited script submissions, mostly to avoid getting sued if they ever make something that features incidental similarities to a script sent their way (Hoyt 2011). Because hiring practices for screenwriters are so informal and so governed by homophily (who you know), paths to professionalization for aspirants are notoriously inaccessible. As will be a recurring theme in the chapters to follow, how-to screenwriting companies promote their services as means to formalize, standardize, and so render accessible paths to screenwriting work for the mass of aspirants who are otherwise excluded from consideration. And in many cases, how-to companies and services are genuinely invested in helping their customers find work. As such, they are worth critical attention as pipelines to screenwriting work, not simply as profiteering rackets.

Beyond its regular claims that Hollywood is fundamentally a meritocracy, the how-to screenwriting industry also sets out to mold aspirants into a more exploitable workforce by framing screenwriting as a creative practice that only matters or makes sense within the context of professional work in the commercial film industry. While a more utopian how-to screenwriting industry might welcome and even foster interest among screenwriters in noncommercial filmmaking, or decentralized film industries, or screenwriting as a form of personal expression or literature, commercial how-to companies generate profit more readily by framing their products and services as investments that can lead to lucrative careers in Hollywood for aspirants with the right stuff. The how-to screenwriting industry conceptually funnels screenwriting into a narrow band of acceptable paths—all of which lead to precarious careers in Hollywood or bust, reflecting but also reproducing a material flow of money into the commercial film industry and a migratory flow of aspirant workers to media capitals like Los Angeles and New York.

As the previous pages have no doubt made clear, this dissertation sets out to critique the how-to screenwriting industry, but this dissertation pairs the industry's reproduction of power with its potential to resist the same. The fact that the how-to screenwriting industry sells career advice to aspirants who in most cases will not go on to screenwriting careers has led scholars and other commentators to indict the industry as parasitic—a money-grubbing collection of scams preying on the hopes and dreams of "desperate" amateurs who don't know any better. While money-grubbing scams are certainly a part of the how-to screenwriting industry, schemers are commonplace in the film industry more broadly, from its apparent margins to its "legitimate" centers. Moreover, my experiences of the how-to screenwriting industry—as a customer, worker, and now researcher—have led me to believe that there are as many sincere career mentors in the how-to screenwriting industry—those who genuinely want to uplift aspirants—as there are in the broader film industry beyond. Framing the how-to screenwriting industry as a problematic attachment to the film industry neglects more complex realities: the fact that many how-to screenwriting workers are also workers in the "real" film industry; the fact that many how-to screenwriting *customers* are also media workers in other areas; and the fact that, as this dissertation will argue, the how-to screenwriting industry serves a critical function in the film industry as the space where how-to workers and the aspirants they conscript collaboratively construct the beliefs and norms of work that define screenwriting as a practice for those who are not (yet) professionalized in Hollywood.

Although there are how-to industries for practically any media practice that can be professionalized, this dissertation focuses on the how-to screenwriting industry for various reasons. On a practical and personal level, the how-to screenwriting industry is the one with which I'm the most familiar. I've been an off-and-on customer of the how-to screenwriting

industry since middle school, when my first encounters with screenwriting manuals and magazines (like *Creative Screenwriting*, analyzed in Chapter 1) convinced me that I might be destined for a rewarding career, if only I could learn the endlessly shifting and entangled ropes of screenwriting. I sought and earned a screenwriting degree from NYU (not unlike the degree programs analyzed in Chapter 2), and then moved to Los Angeles, where, among other pursuits, I sought a career in screenwriting. In these years, I didn't acknowledge the privileges that I experienced as a white male with a middle-class upbringing pursuing screenwriting.

In ways that seemed organic to me at the time, screenwriting felt like it was a culture that was made for me—and of course it was, in ways that were anything but organic: screenwriting products and services played to my experiences, refused to acknowledge inequities I hadn't confronted, and represented screenwriting broadly as a domain for people that looked like me. The examples of "perfect" screenplays used in screenwriting manuals were nearly always male-dominated stories and about white male protagonists by white male writers. And while that might seem like a minor point, it reflects a broader understanding among aspirants I encountered while a screenwriting student that screenplays about white men were most likely to succeed. The acclaimed heroes of the trade that I learned to idolize—Ernest Lehman, Paddy Chayefsky, Billy Wilder, William Goldman, Charlie Kaufman, and on and on—were almost without exception white men. And despite persistent inequalities in Hollywood, no how-to product or service ever encouraged me to think of the screenwriting profession as anything but a meritocracy that I could master through hard work and talent. I felt welcomed and encouraged to pursue screenwriting in ways that weren't so readily available for many others.

During my time in Los Angeles, I also became a worker in the how-to screenwriting industry. For more than two years, I worked as a coordinator for a longstanding screenwriting

website called InkTip, which shares many similar features to The Black List, the more prominent screenwriting platform analyzed in Chapter 4. For a fee, aspiring screenwriters could upload their screenplays to the InkTip site, where the scripts would then be made available to verified producers, who used the site for free. Through an intricate series of tags, producers could then search for scripts that matched their specific needs. At InkTip, I saw firsthand how participants in the how-to screenwriting industry are often sincere in their desire to help aspirants. Nearly all of the company's (eight or so) employees were aspiring screenwriters, and we had regular conversations about how to make the site more effective at getting work for its users. And the site did create work for some. But I also saw firsthand how, in our efforts to attract customers and stay afloat, we were promoting screenwriting as more accessible, more meritocratic, and more financially rewarding than it really is. Our first priority was maintaining the site's business, inevitably at a cost to the customer.

While my direct experience with the how-to screenwriting industry as a customer and worker motivated me to pursue this research, screenwriting is also an important aspirational practice for other reasons. Stories are the means by which we construct ourselves as individuals and communities. Progressing from where we are to somewhere better, for example, requires that we first tell a story about the world we want to create (Jenkins 2022). One way to understand the significance of screenwriting in all this is to point out that screenwriting, nearly from the origins of the commercial film industry, has been constructed as the proper means to envision movies that have not yet been made. One of the major appeals of screenwriting to consumers, beyond the fact that anyone with the means to write can participate, is that it gives its practitioners an apparently authoritative means to project their creative voices into the future of whichever film culture they inhabit. As a consequence, screenwriting is and always has been important as a

practice that either amplifies or erases voices (depending on who's welcomed into the practice and how the practice is framed) that try to steer film culture in new directions.

The How-To Media Industries

Participating in media industry studies and screenwriting studies, this dissertation contributes to the growing body of research that exposes the influence of media institutions on everyday beliefs and practices beyond media spectatorship. In particular, this dissertation speaks to scholarship that considers how media institutions influence the categories that people use to structure their communities into hierarchies. Media research on this subject has tended to focus on the roles that media texts, paratexts, and places play in constructing boundaries between and within media worlds and audiences. For example, Johnson (2019) examines how media industries reproduce constructed distinctions between generations of media consumers in ways that hierarchize consumers to the benefit of media industries, while Couldry (2000) considers how news media producers reproduce distinctions between "ordinary" people and the sorts of people who, for instance, appear on the news as protestors. At stake in this research is the ability for those outside the constructed boundaries of "media worlds" to acknowledge and exercise their power to make collective decisions about how categories like generation and "ordinariness" are structured by the beliefs and practices of their communities. Identifying the mechanisms of power that shape these categories is thus an important means to enable people to make more purposeful choices about the categories that structure their communities.

Neglected in this branch of media research have been range of how-to media industries—profit-driven structures of intermediation between nonprofessional media creators and media industry gatekeepers that sell nonprofessionals media production knowledge and industry access.

These how-to media industries include manufacturers, online distributors, and physical retailers for media production tools; educational institutions and resources that sell consumers media production knowledge; and media sharing and professionalization services. Although the motivations of participants in how-to media industries are complex, their dominant function is to channel the power of their consumers to shape media production culture, often by orienting media makers toward forms of production that benefit the shareholders and investors who bankroll the commercial media market: forms that concentrate and preserve industrial power, forms that feature conspicuous consumption, and forms that reify the normative perspectives of valued media consumers.

The how-to media industries often contribute to what scholars describe as the media *paraindustry*: the range of mediated contact zones between media workers, work worlds, and the public. The concept emerged when Caldwell (2013, 2014) sought to address a persistent problem for industry research: "What does it mean to critically theorize a media industry that critically theorizes itself?" (2014, p. 720). How could someone researching Hollywood, for example, paint an accurate portrait of the industry when film workers are notorious for mythologizing their work? Assigning a name to the mythologies that result, Caldwell argued that paraindustry poses as many opportunities as challenges for industry research—that scholars should forget trying to reach "some supposed inner sanctum" (p. 164) of industry, because visible contact zones between industrial work worlds "are actually more real than industry's mythological centers" (p. 164). Not despite but because of the spin that warps their narratives, paraindustry provides scholars with an opportunity to interpret how media workers and work worlds grapple for power. If every industry disclosure is skewed by self-interest, then the range of disclosures (particularly

in the aggregate) offers valuable insights into what industry workers want, what they worry about, and how they negotiate their roles in ever-shifting hierarchies.

Examinations of the screenwriting paraindustry tend to approach it in this light, as a reflection of what professional screenwriters want and fear and set out to change (Conor 2014; Bernardi and Hoxter 2017). As Bernardi and Hoxter (2017) write of screenwriting manuals and how-to products, "It is precisely because of the work they do in propagating and sustaining the realities and myths of the screenwriting profession that the paraindustry is worthy of critical attention, both as complex discourse and as primary evidence" (p. 6). As valuable as how-to products are for the study of the screenwriting profession, this dissertation argues that such products are also worth critical attention for another reason—as sites of paraindustrial negotiation between how-to vendors and nonprofessional screenwriters. In their efforts to use how-to products and services to peer behind the industrial curtain, research on the screenwriting paraindustry has uncovered valuable insights into screenwriting work but has also neglected to account for the primary function of how-to products and services—to serve and profit from the mass of consumers interested in pursuing screenwriting as a hobby or career.

Screenwriting manuals and the like are products of the how-to media industries, which sell professionalization tools and advice to media makers. Because the how-to media industries persistently theorize media work in their products and services, they certainly contribute to the broader paraindustry, but they're worth distinguishing because they have different values for research. Every worker in media industries, from overpaid executives to unpaid fans, can contribute to the paraindustry by visibly theorizing their work. When the creators of the NBC series *30 Rock* used the content of their show to comment on the conglomerate ownership of NBC, Caldwell (2014) noted this as a paradigmatic example of paraindustry at work, one that

can provide scholars with insights into the concerns and beliefs of television writers regarding conglomeration in media industries. But this example of industrial self-theorization cannot be said to participate in the how-to media industries. It is arguable that any industrial disclosure, from a leaked memo to a popular network series, teaches us something about how industries do and should work, and in this way that they all participate in a how-to industry (a paraindustry) of sorts. But, the crucial distinction here is that the creators of *30 Rock* did not use their series to sell and profit directly from the sale of professionalization tools and advice to consumers.

The how-to media industries, by contrast, are commercially dependent on the sale of professionalization tools and advice to consumers. As Chapters 3 and 4 explore in more detail, the perceived legitimacy of how-to media industry workers as experts thus comes with particular stakes in that their workers are dependent for their incomes on their appeal and legitimacy as screenwriting experts among aspiring professionals. How-to media industry workers are invested first and foremost in demonstrating and reproducing their authority as screenwriting experts. Moreover, the how-to media industries are, because of the commercial imperatives that define them, more directly dedicated to teaching consumers how to make and understand media than any other aspect of the broader paraindustry. As a result, they are both unusually accessible to everyday media makers and unusually influential in media production discourse beyond media industries. Finally, the how-to media industries cater to and are shaped by distinctive communities of consumers with beliefs and hierarchies of their own. Neglected in industry research that scours the paraindustry for its encoded meanings, consumers are as active in shaping how-to media industry products as their authors.

Alongside paraindustry, the how-to screenwriting industry builds conceptually on the convergence culture industry (Scott 2019), which incorporates the work of active audiences

(fans, in particular) into commercial media industries. In the process of commercializing and professionalizing fan activity, the convergence culture industry also sets out to standardize fan behavior in ways that reproduce misogyny within fan cultures and media work. Crucially for this project, Scott argues that misogynist fans and media industry professionals *collaboratively* construct fan communities and fan activity as normatively masculine and misogynist. When I first set out to write this dissertation, I conceived of the how-to screenwriting industry as a force that channeled the collective power of its consumers only in ways that reproduced dominant power structures in the commercial media industries. While I still feel that the commercial how-to screenwriting industry serves a broadly conservative function in media industries, my research has led me to examine the how-to screenwriting industry more carefully as a continually negotiated structure of intermediation that reflects the ambitions and beliefs of both industry and aspirants. Building on Scott's arguments about the role of fans in the convergence culture industry, I now believe that aspirants and the companies that serve them collaboratively manage popular screenwriting discourse according to their respective interests.

The how-to screenwriting industry is arguably closest conceptually to the writing advice industry explored in the field of book studies (Hilliard 2006; Masschelein and de Geest 2021)—the range of products and services that offer writing advice to aspiring and amateur writers. A recent edited collection on the writing advice industry (Masschelein and de Geest 2021) indicates both the breadth of the how-to media industries and the value of industry specificity in their study. Looking across the how-to media industries from screenwriting to book authorship, shared themes do emerge: the last century's efforts to blur paid work and "the Work" of writing for a sense of fulfillment (Kovach 2021); the influence of higher education programs on commercial writing conventions (McGurl 2009; Harnache 2021); and the efforts of how-to authors to frame

authorship as a form of personhood that must be achieved through practice (Grauby 2021). But, the long history of prose writing as a hobby (which extends back beyond its history as a profession) has had a significant impact on the role of prose writing advice for its consumers, such that the questions asked by scholars of the writing advice industry differ in significant ways from the questions that guide this dissertation.

First and foremost, scholarship on the writing advice industry has had little to say about the industry as an industry, focusing instead on particular advice texts or forms of writing advice. Because writing advice is often meant for hobbyists, not just aspiring professionals, studies of writing advice have variably focused on its (sometimes incidental) presence in memoirs (Kovach 2021), contemporary fiction (Collins 2021), interviews with authors (Roach 2021), and self-help literature (Peary 2021; Van Goidsenhoven and Masschelein 2021)—examples of literary advice that are not generally geared toward aspirants or focused on professionalization. By contrast, the how-to screenwriting industry emerged alongside the commercial film industry and has consistently geared its advice toward film industry aspirants. Moreover, studies of the writing advice industry have focused naturally on written advice: manuals, memoirs, novels, interviews, and other texts. While how-to texts are certainly a part of this dissertation, particularly in Chapters 1 and 3, I am equally if not more interested in commercialized spaces: higher education programs Chapter 2), professionalization platforms (Chapter 4), and social media sites (Chapter 5). Finally, this dissertation examines the nature of work in how-to media industries, not simply the texts and ideas that the industry produces.

That said, the recent emergence of scholarship on the writing advice industry speaks to the fact that the process by which screenwriting knowledge becomes commodified is one mirrored in other cultural practices. In this sense, there is nothing particularly special about

screenwriting. If the guiding question of this dissertation is how the how-to screenwriting industry influences what it means to *become a screenwriter*, similar research might address what it means to become an actor or a filmmaker or a musician—broadly, to become a creative person. To what lengths will people go to try to become the perfect creative professional—willing to weather any setback without complaint, adapt endlessly to the shifting needs of industry, and prioritize professional success above other forms of fulfillment? Precisely how are how-to services and products constructing that ideal? Who is privileged or deprivileged as a result? This dissertation, then, is less about screenwriting than it is about the role that professional knowledge creators have played in hierarchizing screenwriting's many participants.

A Brief History of The How-To Screenwriting Industry

While a thorough history of the how-to screenwriting industry would fill a book of its own (which I'd be happy to write someday!), it's worth taking a moment to set the stage for the twenty-first century industry that this dissertation examines. Its origins go back, arguably, beyond the history of film itself to the nineteenth century century when, with the arrival of the printing press and a commercial printing industry, fiction writing became an occupation as well as a craft (Masschelein 2021). Changes to copyright law in the United States in the late nineteenth century made it more possible for American authors to live off their work. By the end of the century, Masschelein writes, aspirants to this emerging career found themselves the objects of "a newly formed class of literary 'middlemen,' who mediated the aspiring author and the publishing industry—agents, editors, tutors, manuscript bureaus, and author societies" (p. 8). This early how-to industry for novelists, short story authors, and poets set the stage for the how-to screenwriting industry in the early twentieth century, which would capitalize on an already

thriving public interest in writing advice. Among the popular early screenwriting manuals, for example, was J. Berg Esenwein and Arthur Leeds's 1913 book *Writing the Photoplay,* which built on Esenwein's experience writing a manual for short story writing (1909).

Building on an existing writing advice business, Esenwein's manual also capitalized on a growing "scenario fever" among American moviegoers—a widespread public interest in film writing that emerged with and helped create the commercial film industry in the early twentieth century (Tieber 2012; Price 2013; Bailey 2014; Curran 2019). Liepa (2010) charts the rise and later decline of the American popular film writing movement in the silent film era, arguing that film writing "was born, if not conceived, in the public sphere" (p. 8). By this, Liepa means that amateur film writing "played a significant role in naturalizing a rationalized mode of production that had not developed organically, but rather was imposed 'from above' by an emerging oligarchically structured industry" (p. 9). As a burgeoning national film industry sought to achieve an economy of scale, Liepa argues, it relied for material on submissions solicited from the public in popular periodicals. It would then be for the studio system, having achieved an economy of scale, to erect barriers that would foreclose the continued participation of the amateur in writing commercial movies. Elsewhere, Liepa (2011) argues that the state played an important role in consolidating the power of studios to determine film authorship. In 1912, copyright protections were extended to motion pictures but not screenplays, which Liepa argues led to the collapse of the popular film writing movement in the era. It would not be until 1978, Liepa (2011) notes, when the 1976 Copyright Act came into effect, that unpublished materials like screenplays would receive more than common law protections against unauthorized usage.

With the rise of the studio system in the 1920s and 1930s, the popular film writing movement entered a relatively fallow period. Studios standardized hiring practices for

screenwriters, working primarily with writers under contract. With screenwriters emerging from already established professional communities of writers in theater and prose fiction, opportunities for amateurs to "break in" to Hollywood diminished, as did the services that promised to professionalize them. The how-to screenwriting industry didn't entirely vanish in this period—*The Screen Writer*, a periodical published by the Screen Writers' Guild, offered screenwriting advice to its readers from 1945 to 1948, for example—but these publications can be read as responding less to a thriving popular interest in screenwriting than to a need for unionizing screenwriters to establish their professional credentials. More research is needed on this period in amateur screenwriting history, as a relative lack of how-to screenwriting products doesn't necessarily indicate a lack of public interest. Still, it would not be until after the collapse of the studio system in the 1950s, when freelance screenwriting work returned as a new normal (Price 2013), that the how-to screenwriting industry would renew its visibility.

In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson announced from the Rose Garden that an American Film Institute (AFI) would be established to "bring together leading artists of the film industry, outstanding educators, and young men and women who wish to pursue the twentieth century's artform as their life's work" (King 2017). Linking filmmaking to the nation and to the commercial film industry, the AFI would also bind these concepts together for amateur filmmakers around the country through local workshops and organizations, high school clubs and higher education programs. Often sponsored by the AFI, filmmaking organizations and events created an emerging infrastructure for media education that framed filmmaking both as an industrial vocation and the essential cultural form of the twentieth century United States. Capitalizing on this emerging infrastructure, how-to screenwriting experts like Syd Field, Robert McKee, and John Truby would travel the country, promoting their connections to the industrial

centers of filmmaking (Los Angeles and New York) as signs of their authority to define what screenwriting should and should not be. Although the success of Field's influential manual *Screenwriting* surprised its publishers in 1979 (Segers n.d.), the popular interest which enabled its success had been building for more than a decade.

The 1980s brought with them the increasing role of computer technology in the how-to screenwriting industry. Opened in Los Angeles in 1982 as "The Writers' Computer Store," The Writers Store helped nudge the how-to screenwriting industry into the digital era, becoming a significant hub for aspiring screenwriters and a key distributor of screenwriting software and web services. Screenwriting software products made screenwriting accessible to a wider range of practitioners, from hobbyists to aspiring professionals. Software companies pitched their products as means for amateur screenwriters to focus on the creative aspects of screenwriting, leaving to the software everything that was "technical." As an advertisement for ScriptThing software claimed in 1999, "It does everything but write the script for you" (ScriptThing, 1999, p. 11). Included in this "everything but," however, was more than formatting: distinguishing between screenwriting and the technical work that makes screenplays possible, software companies positioned narrative structure, outlining, and writing workflows as elements of screenwriting that were universal and best left to software. Through advertisements and interfaces, screenwriting software companies thus constructed screenwriting as a cultural form defined by the organization of creative ideas within rigid structures. Software was not simply a means to format screenplays but additionally a means to organize thoughts in ways that would make them suitable for industrial needs.

Building on a legacy of screenwriters as downtrodden, unflappable wits, screenwriting experts and publications also promoted a typically masculine ideal for screenwriting consumers

through brash, young successes like Shane Black and Joe Esterhaz, whose widely publicized "million-dollar" script sales in 1980s inspired many would-be screenwriters to overlook the odds against turning professional. As Chapter 1 of this dissertation explores in more detail, the 1980s and 1990s ushered in what became known as the "spec boom" (Bernardi & Hoxter 2017)—an era when studio interest in original properties and a growing independent film sector seemed to promise quick riches for would-be screenwriters. As public interest grew in the 1990s and 2000s, popular screenwriting magazines like *Creative Screenwriting* (1994-2010) (see Chapter 1) emerged, alongside for-profit screenwriting schools like New York Film Academy and Los Angeles (Chapter 2). Bringing this history into the contemporary era, the final three chapters consider the role of user-generated content platforms like WordPress (Chapter 3), The Black List (Chapter 4), and Twitter (Chapter 5) in giving contemporary aspirants more of a voice in popular conversations about screenwriting.

Methods and Interventions

This dissertation brings screenwriting studies, media industry studies, and theories of media power into conversation through a critical discursive analysis of screenwriting as negotiated by how-to screenwriting services in the twenty-first century United States. As its name suggests, screenwriting studies is devoted to the study of screenwriting, which is a tricky place to start, since, as Maras (2009) argues, screenwriting is a difficult topic to pin down.[2] What it means to write a screenplay—or what can be called a "screenplay" in the first place—is something that varies from time to time and place to place. Maras offers a solution, however,

[2] Maras (2009) describes this as the "object problem" of screenwriting studies. Screenwriting, he writes, is "not an 'object' in any straightforward sense: it is a practice, and as such it draws on a set of processes, techniques and devices that get arranged differently at different times" (p. 11).

which is to set aside the "screenplay" as the defining object of the field and instead to examine screenwriting as a discourse. A discourse is a negotiation between people who, through their efforts to understand and frame and make use of some *thing*, determine the meaning of that thing and at the same time shape their relations with one another. So, discourse covers a lot of ground! Michel Foucault, the progenitor of the approach to discourse that animates this dissertation, used forms of discourse analysis to examine madness (1988), sexuality (1990), and the carceral system (1995). And the purpose of a discourse analysis is not to define its object—sexuality, for example—but instead to examine how the concept of sexuality emerged, evolved, and reproduced or resisted broader relations of power and culture between participants in a community in a particular period.

This dissertation intervenes in screenwriting studies through its focus on the discourse of screenwriting as negotiated by how-to screenwriting industry workers, specifically within the United States over the past twenty years. Occasionally, I look beyond the United States and beyond the twenty-first century, in large part to acknowledge that the boundaries between nations and periods of time are porous, but I've constrained the focus of my dissertation both for practical reasons (I'm an inhabitant of the United States in the twenty-first century) and to understand screenwriting properly as a discourse negotiated by a particular community in a particular time and place.[3] There is no shortage of screenwriting scholarship that considers screenwriting in the United States in the twenty-first century, but the field is marked by its near-exclusive focus on screenwriting as a discourse constructed by professional screenwriters and development workers (Maras 2009; MacDonald 2013; Conor 2014; Banks 2016; Bernardi and

[3] For similar reasons, this dissertation focuses on the how-to screenwriting industry specifically for film writers, not for television writers. While there is in practice significant overlap between film and television writing careers and practices, the contemporary how-to screenwriting industry in the United States typically constructs screenwriting for film as a distinctive practice.

Hoxter 2017; Wreyford 2018). Professional screenwriters are those whose screenplays are most likely to be produced and widely consumed, to be sure, but every professional screenwriter passed through a professionalization pipeline.

I encountered discourse analysis first through media industry studies, which examines media industries as continuously negotiated cultures—communities that produce meaning not only through media texts but also through the practices and beliefs that hierarchize them (Caldwell 2008; Havens, Lotz, and Tinic 2009; Mayer 2011; Johnson 2013; Conor 2014). Aspirants and how-to industries are typically marginal in media industry research, which focuses more on dynamics of power within and among production cultures or between industries and audiences. However, this dissertation argues that the how-to screenwriting industry participates in forms of meaning-making that are as significant to their communities as professional media production is to its work cultures. As Mayer (2011) argues of the digital era, "everyone is potentially a media producer, but most of us only recognize certain forms of media production as important" (p. 1). How-to media workers and their customers are no less worthy of critical attention, no less participants in media culture, than more visible media creators.

This dissertation participates methodologically in critical media industry studies (CMIS), which Havens, Lotz, and Tinic (2009) proposed as a means to blend the insights of political-economic research, ethnography, textual analysis, and reception studies. CMIS considers how institutions are shaped both by broad strategies (from the top down, so to speak) and by the tactics that people within institutions use to steer those strategies in different directions. A basic tenet of CMIS is that power is not only exercised by the powerful few but is instead negotiated and reproduced by participants at every level of media institutions and cultures. Just as audiences influence media industries from the 'outside' (Johnson 2014; Mayer 2014), so too do aspiring

media professionals play an important role in discourses of media production. At the heart of CMIS is a tension between the individual agency and institutional force that shapes production cultures. My research examines that same tension but transfers the focus of CMIS away from the industrial centers of media production toward less examined spaces where how-to media companies negotiate their role in media culture.

My efforts to examine screenwriting discourse critically and to acknowledge the role of nonprofessionals as well as media institutions in shaping media production discourse also bring the study of media power to bear on screenwriting studies. As a two-word phrase, media power could be usefully deployed to mean many different things, but here I use media power in reference to a specific scholarly conversation initiated by Couldry (2000), who described media power as "the concentration in media institutions of the symbolic power of 'constructing reality'" (p. 3). Couldry draws the concept of symbolic power from Bourdieu (1991), who argues that language does not confer authority so much as it symbolizes (and so manifests) authority. As Bourdieu writes, "the use of language, the manner as much as the substance of discourse, depends on the social position of the speaker, which governs the access he can have to the language of the institution, that is, to the official, orthodox and legitimate speech" (1991, p. 110). Although the means to make and widely distribute media has become more accessible in recent years, for example, authoritative voices in the how-to screenwriting industry remain those who are legitimized by their modes of address and their proximity to the commercial film industry at its most profitable centers.

As a result of their concentrated influence, the commercial media industries have considerable power to represent what is normal or abnormal, common sense or absurd, visible or invisible. Moreover, they tend to construct reality in ways that reproduce uneven power

structures for those who benefit from them. The purpose of media power research for Couldry (2000) is to denaturalize the "local patterns of belief and actions" (p. 5) that reproduce reality in inequitable ways. Subsequent scholars have disagreed with the particularities of Couldry's approach. Freedman (2014), for example, argues that Couldry is so focused on the local that he neglects "situations where power is most overwhelmingly concentrated: in operations of the state, the belly of the market and the transactions that take place in elite networks" (p. 146). Corner (2011) argues conversely that Couldry is too quick to dismiss the role that specific texts can play in constructing reality: "localised dynamics of form and interpretive practice still figure importantly within power flows" (p. 45). But these scholars agree that (1) the concentration of symbolic power within media industries is imbalanced, and (2) that those who lack symbolic power can nevertheless re-negotiate the realities they inhabit, particularly as collectives.[4]

Applied to screenwriting research, the study of media power, much like CMIS, reveals that nonprofessional screenwriters are not without power, even if they are not as visible as their professional counterparts. The greatest concentration of scholarship on nonprofessional screenwriting to date examines the "scenario fever" of the silent film era (Morey 2003; Liepa 2010; Liepa 2011; Bailey 2014; Lester 2018; Curran 2019). Scholarship on this period in screenwriting history tends to frame nonprofessional screenwriters as either resistant to or controlled by commercial media industries. In these historical narratives, amateur screenwriters in the silent film era had the potential to generate industry-resistant production cultures but instead came under the increasing control of media industries and the state, losing their agency the moment they stopped resisting industry. However, discourse is not simply an instrument of control wielded by those in power (i.e., a power *over* consumers); discourse is also a power to

[4] See Chapter 4 for a more detailed review of scholarship on media power.

construct reality influenced and negotiated at every level of society. This dissertation argues that nonprofessional screenwriters are not controlled by media industries so much as they are incentivized and hierarchized to serve industrial needs.

The concentration of power within media industries enables and is enabled by a broader concentration of power among nonprofessional media producers who are white, male, wealthy, and/or attuned to the intricate, industry-oriented taste cultures that are often framed as universal standards for cultural production in the United States. Perhaps nowhere are these taste cultures more theorized, more rigidly codified, or more clearly oriented toward industrial needs than in American screenwriting culture. Just as the how-to screenwriting industry has shaped screenwriting for its benefit, privileged consumers have reproduced those very elements of popular screenwriting culture that benefit them at the expense of others: in particular, the need for aspiring screenwriters to possess canonical knowledge of narrative theory, film history, contemporary screenwriting trends, and byzantine formatting rules; the need for aspiring screenwriters to feel a sense of potential belonging in professional production cultures; and the need for aspiring screenwriters to weather precarious working conditions for years on end.

Although screenwriting can stand in for various cultural forms widely embraced by nonprofessional media producers, it is exceptional in its persistent orientation toward media industry needs and so uniquely valuable as a case study for research into the ways that how-to industries and their customers reproduce media power.[5] Structures of power are too entrenched to be dismantled simply by acknowledging that they are not real; understanding more fully how structures of power are constructed as coherent draws out the places and moments where that

[5] In this context, reproduction is not the process by which firmly rooted structures of power are upheld over time but is rather the process by which continuously (re)made structures are discursively constructed as coherent (and even inevitable) over time and so rendered stable in effect.

construction might be turned in more just directions. Screenwriting is not the focus of this dissertation because it is "central" to the fight for equity in media work. Rather, screenwriting serves as a valuable case study for a more adequate understanding of the process by which full participation in cultural production is rendered the province of a privileged few.

To be specific, I analyze how-to screenwriting texts and promotional materials; archival materials; interviews with nonprofessional screenwriters and how-to screenwriting industry workers; screenwriting publications, YouTube channels, podcasts, and blogs; and public conversations on social networks, all in an effort to parse the motivations of the how-to screenwriting industry's participants in the construction of screenwriting as a creative practice in the contemporary United States. As Munir and Phillips (2005) describe in their study of amateur photography, which proved invaluable for my thinking in this dissertation, "discourse analysis endeavours to uncover the ways in which [the discourse being analyzed] was produced and is held in place" (p. 1667). In this dissertation, discourse analysis uncovers the ways in which the how-to screenwriting industry has "held in place" the belief that screenwriting is (and should be) a purely industrial form of writing best reserved for the worthy few who can mold themselves to the shifting needs of the commercial film industry. Pushing the discursive study of screenwriting in a more critical direction than previous studies, this dissertation considers how popular conceptions of screenwriting foreclose alternatives, privilege certain voices, and erase others.

The Structure of the Dissertation

Each chapter in this dissertation examines a different institution or prominent voice that contributes or speaks back to the contemporary how-to screenwriting industry in the United States. Beginning with popular screenwriting magazines and for-profit screenwriting schools in

my first two chapters, I first explore how professional screenwriters, commercial periodicals, and for-profit degree programs have used the how-to screenwriting industry to promote screenwriting as a pursuit that has cultural value only within the context of professional work in the film industry. I then turn in the second half of the dissertation to user-generated content platforms, arguing that many aspirants are now as active and persistent as how-to companies in policing how nonprofessionals discuss and participate in screenwriting. Finally, I identify an example of resistance to the how-to screenwriting industry, highlighting activist work that models more egalitarian structures of intermediation between aspirants and media industry decision makers. Throughout, I maintain a twinned concern with the strategies of how-to screenwriting companies and the tactics of how-to workers in their efforts to negotiate what screenwriting is and can be.

Starting with the 2000s in Chapter 1, I examine the screenwriting advice columns published between 2000 and 2010 in *Creative Screenwriting* (*CS*) magazine, which offered its readers advice and motivations for professionalizing in Hollywood. Through its advice columns, advertisements, interviews, and feature articles, the magazine portrayed screenwriting as a vital cultural practice within the United States. Connecting my research to scholarship on rhetorics of passion and resilience in contemporary work culture, I argue that the professional screenwriters who penned the advice columns in *CS* adopted a rhetoric I describe as *reverse encouragement*. Railing against Hollywood's declining interest in original stories, the advice columnists of *CS* in the 2000s portrayed screenwriting as a precarious, frustrating, and unlikely career that was nevertheless worth pursuing because professional screenwriters had an opportunity—a civic duty, even—to revitalize a declining film culture by telling (and selling) original stories. In the process, they framed screenwriting as an exclusive club which only the most resilient and passionate aspirants were worthy enough—"soulful" enough, in fact—to join.

In Chapter 2, I examine the recent history of for-profit screenwriting schools in the United States, including New York Film Academy (NYFA) and Los Angeles Film School (LAFS). Building on scholarship in higher education studies, this chapter sets out to understand the factors that enabled these for-profit screenwriting schools to emerge in the 1990s and expand dramatically in the 2010s. Drawing on publicly available data, I argue that these schools cater to nontraditional, lower-income, and international students who aspire to professional status in the film industry but cannot afford or cannot gain entry into more "elite" screenwriting programs like those offered at the University of Southern California and New York University. In addition, I analyze the promotional materials used by these schools to attract students, drawing out their regular emphasis on developing practical skills for their students and hands-on experience with filmmaking tools and techniques. Positioning themselves as pipelines to professionalization for their students, for-profit screenwriting schools reveal the extent to which even the most formal pipelines to screenwriting work are stratified and skewed by commercial imperatives.

Chapter 3 marks a shift toward the digital era in the how-to screenwriting industry and an increasing focus on the role of aspiring screenwriters in shaping the how-to screenwriting industry. In particular, the chapter uses the screenwriting blog Scriptshadow to define and argue for the significance of a particular form of industry lore that I call *gatekeeper lore*—the conventional knowledge among aspiring media professionals about what will best appeal to industry gatekeepers. When he created Scriptshadow in 2009, entrepreneur Carson Reeves had never worked professionally as either a screenwriter or a script reader, the typical prerequisites for how-to screenwriting experts. Instead, Reeves reviewed the hottest unproduced screenplays circulating in Hollywood and shared the screenplays with his readers without permission from their authors. Offering aspirants access to the newest screenplays, Reeves promoted them as vital

means for aspirants to understand what Hollywood decision makers want (or don't want) *right now*. Framing development workers as the most important audience for aspiring screenwriters, Reeves achieved success as a screenwriting expert by framing Hollywood as a system that anyone can master with tireless work and an understanding of the ever-shifting rules that govern quality in film development. In the process, Reeves encourages aspirants to mold themselves into shadowy representations of what industry decision makers want from moment to moment.

Chapter 4 examines the screenwriting platform The Black List, which is among the most legitimized how-to screenwriting services in use today. Analyzing the company's history, interface, promotional materials, and reception, I argue that The Black List has sought to formalize and standardize the professionalization process for aspiring and professional screenwriters alike as part of a broader entrepreneurial effort to digitalize film development writ large, assessing the value of unproduced film projects according to a universal standard. Embedded in the platform's affordances are the beliefs espoused by the experts examined in previous chapters: that screenwriting is (or at least can be) a meritocracy in which the worthiest few will rise to prominence, leaving behind only the untalented or unwilling. Building on and speaking back to scholarship on media power and screenwriting, I question the idea that an all-encompassing meritocracy is the most desirable model for screenwriting work, and I argue that the site's privileged users actively negotiate the The Black List's role in screenwriting culture.

Chapter 5, the final chapter, diverges from the previous four by examining the media activism of screenwriter Thuc Doan Nguyen, who does not work in the how-to screenwriting industry but rather critiques the industry through her campaigns. In her two most prominent activist campaigns, #TheBitchList and #StartWith8Hollywood, Nguyen has urged industry decision makers to purchase and produce more scripts about women and to hire more women of

color as screenwriters. I describe these campaigns as examples of *paraindustrial media activism*—a form of industrial self-theorizing designed to remedy injustice in media hierarchies. Analyzing the hashtag campaigns, their coverage in blogs, podcasts, and periodicals, and an interview with Nguyen, I bring the study of media activism and paraindustry into closer conversation, pushing industry scholars to acknowledge and seek out activist paraindustries. I argue that Nguyen demonstrates the potential for intermediaries between aspirants and gatekeepers to resist, not simply reproduce, the dominance of the latter.

While I set out to write a dissertation that can be read accessibly by anyone with the time and interest, my hope is that this dissertation has particular value for aspiring screenwriters, screenwriting educators, and industry researchers. Screenwriting should be available as a creative practice to anyone and everyone who wants to propose their own contributions to the future of film culture. Not everyone interested in screenwriting will turn professional. In fact, that's an understatement. Very, very few people interested in screenwriting will turn professional, which is why I believe a screenwriting culture more dissociated from the commercial commercial how-to industry might enable its adherents to envision and ultimately enact more decentralized, geographically spread out, diverse, equitable, experimental, political, communal, therapeutic, and compelling futures for film. Disentangling our beliefs about what screenwriting can be from the beliefs promoted by the commercial how-to screenwriting industry is, as this dissertation sets out to do, an important first step on that path.

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CHAPTER 1

Reverse Encouragement in *Creative Screenwriting* Magazine

Early in 2002, *Creative Screenwriting* (*CS*) magazine released a special issue responding to the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Editor-in-chief Erik Bauer described the issue as an affirmation of America's delicate greatness and a call to action for American screenwriters: "President Bush has called upon the members of the entertainment industry to support the war on terrorism, and we must, if for no other reason than to defend the individual freedoms upon which our art relies" (2002, p. 2). Ten guest contributors, most of whom were working screenwriters, offered their thoughts on "how the events of Sept. 11th have affected the role of the writer in our industry and the larger community" (Creative Screenwriting 2002, p. 57). The contributors brought varied perspectives and motivations to their responses, but they were united by a conviction that screenwriting mattered—that it mattered specifically to Hollywood, which in turn mattered to the broader culture of the United States on the global stage. Speaking to a readership of aspiring professionals and hobbyists, these contributors invoked a nation of screenwriters with shared responsibilities: to keep writing and to keep trying to sell original screenplays.

I will return to this special issue later in the chapter, but I introduce it here because the issue took for its title a question that structured *CS* throughout its publishing run: "Why We Write." Between 1994 and 2010, *CS* offered its readers various answers to this question, most of which can be boiled down to one overriding ambition: to turn professional in the American film industry. Through its advice columns, advertisements for how-to screenwriting products, interviews with screenwriters, and feature articles on Hollywood films, the magazine promoted screenwriting as an important creative practice that mattered purely in the context of the commercial film industry. *CS* was certainly not alone in its efforts to associate screenwriting

exclusively with commercial filmmaking. For many, the association was (and remains) common sense. *CS* advice columnists were atypical, however, in their pessimism about screenwriting work. They insisted that screenwriting was a precarious, frustrating, unlikely career, one that was still worth pursuing because professional screenwriters had an opportunity—even a civic duty—to revitalize American film culture by telling (and selling) original stories.

When Bauer created *CS* in 1994, he conceived of the magazine as an academic journal that would publish research on screenwriting (Stempel 2014). Screenwriting historian Tom Stempel, who served on the editorial board for the magazine in these early years, described the range of submissions as "often bizarre" (p. 191): short stories and screenwriting advice alongside academic research. Sold on newsstands, the journal reached a circulation of 2200 copies per issue by the fall of 1995 (Stempel 2014). The journal expanded in 1997, featuring more photographs and more professional advice, shifting its focus away from academic research and toward how-to screenwriting content; by 1999, articles were no longer refereed (Stempel 2014). The magazine's circulation expanded, too, reaching 16,165 sales in 2002 (Stempel 2014). Alongside *Scr(i)pt* magazine, *CS* was arguably the most influential American screenwriting publication of the 2000s, featuring interviews with the most visible screenwriters in the American film industry and serving as a bustling marketplace for the range of products and services being marketed to aspiring professionals. Straddling the line between a trade publication and a how-to product, the magazine appealed both to aspiring and professional screenwriters, balancing industry news with career advice.

CS depended for its increased readership on a thriving amateur screenwriting culture. Moreover, many of the magazine's columnists profited directly from their readers as consultants and instructors. Columnist Ron Suppa advertised his services as a consultant for aspiring

screenwriters in the pages of *CS* (Ron Suppa 2002, p. 70). Columnist Michael Lent assembled several of his *CS* columns in *Breakfast with Sharks*, a successful guidebook for screenwriting professionalization that was advertised in the pages of *CS* ("Breakfast with Sharks" 2005, p. 18). Columnist Karl Iglesias advertised videotapes of his screenwriting seminars in the pages of *CS*. And columnist Jim Mercurio advertised his services as a consultant and coach in the pages of *CS* ("Jim Mercurio" 2001, p. 89). In general, the how-to screenwriting industry creates relatively stable work opportunities for professional screenwriters (Ashton and Conor 2013) and bolsters their reputations as experts (Conor 2013), but *CS* also provided its columnists with a forum—a uniquely spreadable forum prior to the widespread adoption of the Internet—where they could promote their own services right alongside the columns that demonstrated their expertise. Befitting that expertise, columnists encouraged their readers to pursue industrial screenwriting.

Rather than sugarcoat screenwriting work, however, *CS* columnists described screenwriting as a difficult and demoralizing career. Given the benefits of a thriving amateur screenwriting culture for *CS* columnists, it might seem more straightforward that they would obscure the long odds of success and instead pitch screenwriting (as it is often pitched) as an opportunity to strike it rich. In some ways, *CS* already supported this approach. In its short features and interviews and advertisements, *CS* reminded readers that, whatever the columnists might tell them, spec sales *were* happening. Every issue between January 2000 and March 2006 featured a summary of the spec scripts and pitches that had been sold since the last issue, replete with the (reportedly) extravagant paychecks offered to their writers. Cirile's "Agent's Hot Sheet" columns typically queried agents about precisely what types of scripts were selling. Following the restructuring of *CS* mid-2003, each issue featured a brief article in a series titled "Anatomy of a Spec Sale" describing how a recent spec sale had come about. And broadly, feature articles and

interviews highlighted the paths to success experienced by established and recently professionalized screenwriters. Indeed, casual readers flipping through the magazine could be forgiven for imagining that the spec script market was bullish.

And yet, *CS* columnists were being confronted with a series of dramatic industrial transformations that many screenwriters interpreted as disastrous for their careers: conglomeration, digitalization, and globalization. On the one hand, new opportunities for screenwriters to forge their own paths to professionalization were emerging: the expanding home video market, the rise of media markets on the Internet, and the diminishing costs of digital filmmaking. On the other hand, established production companies were making fewer films or shuttering their doors altogether. As a result, production companies were also buying fewer screenplays from fewer writers for shorter-term contracts. Most of the columnists writing for *CS* were working but not prominent screenwriters who made a living from their work but expressed continual anxiety about their ability to keep doing so. As Bauer (2000) wrote in a "Letter from the Editor," "Many of the writers of this magazine, no matter their relative success, are only one crisis of confidence away from that copy desk at a home newspaper in Cincinnati, if that job is still available" (p. 4). And columnist Michael Lent (2005) publicly grappled with his own increasing willingness to work for free to secure a paying job: "If I don't land this gig my wife and child will be subsiding on Blood Drive cookies and chlorinated water siphoned from our neighbor's sprinkler system" (p. 45). While these confessions were to some extent performative, they speak to the genuine precarity of industrial screenwriting work and reflect a genuine concern about shifts in Hollywood hiring practices in this period.

For these columnists, American screenwriting in the 2000s was undergoing a crisis—what columnist Ron Suppa bitterly described as the "post-writing era" (Suppa, 2000c, p. 24). As

the introduction to this dissertation briefly sketches out, freelance screenwriting work became the norm following the collapse of the Hollywood studio system in the 1950s (Price 2013). Where once professional screenwriters were most likely to do their work under a studio contract, freelancers were now more likely to write speculative screenplays and then pitch them to executives. By the end of the 1970s, these "spec scripts" had become a significant path to professionalization for screenwriters in Hollywood. Throughout the 1980s, a series of highly publicized, high-priced spec script sales contributed to what some have called the "spec boom" in Hollywood (Bernardi and Hoxter 2017). Buoyed by the emergent home video market, mini-major studios like Orion began making more films in the 1980s (Balio 1996), creating even more opportunities for screenwriters. The 1990s, however, saw the beginning of the bust. Under increasing conglomerate control, movie studios were making fewer films and focusing their attention on franchise-able intellectual properties that could be sold across media markets. As Bernardi and Hoxter (2017) argue of the mid-to-late 2000s, a number of factors would further diminish opportunities for working screenwriters: the collapse of the DVD market, the continued decrease in Hollywood's output, and a WGA strike in 2007-8 that would expand benefits for established screenwriters while sidelining aspiring and less established screenwriters.

By 2005, *CS* columnist Jim Cirile was conducting an autopsy on "The Death of the Spec Market" and looking for signs of hope in "this ravaged landscape, like a flower sprouting through cracked pavement" (2005, p. 36). The path to professionalization for new screenwriters was, as Cirile described it, a "shrinking bull's-eye" (2003, p. 30). Or, as talent agent Richard Arlook put it bluntly in an interview with *CS*, "The marketplace is shittier and smaller" (Cirile 2005, p. 36). Through their shared discontents about the spec market, *CS* columnists framed themselves as a distinctive class of screenwriters: working writers who were precarious enough

to be squeezed out of the film industry. “New writers may have to take what they can get,” columnist Ron Suppa wrote, “but too many Guild writers, professionals by definition, are also out of work. Most don’t have agents, don’t get invited to pitch, and their spec scripts, along with their careers, lie dormant” (2002d, p. 45). Similarly, columnist Jim Cirile wrote in 2005 that “[t]he spec and assignment markets have dried up substantially; working writers are being hit hard” (2005, p. 36). For *CS* columnists, spec scripts were “a writer’s lifeblood, both financially and mentally, because they signify the one time when the writer is in complete control” (Goldsmith 2004, p. 54). Spec scripts were the primary means by which screenwriters demonstrated their overlooked value to Hollywood decision makers, and thus their decline threatened something vital: the ability for an individual outsider (with the right knowledge, financial security, and tastes) to shape American film culture through screenwriting.

Reverse Encouragement

Insisting that screenwriting was intensely difficult, marked by long odds for a career and unreliable opportunities for day-to-day work, *CS* columnists also consistently used their columns to inspire would-be screenwriters to keep writing. In the process, *CS* columnists used a rhetorical strategy common to how-to industries (including and beyond screenwriting) that I describe as “reverse encouragement.” As a rhetoric, reverse encouragement continually reminds aspiring professionals that their paths to careers will be long and difficult, marked by frequent setbacks and opportunities to quit. Reverse encouragement insists that, while anyone *can* professionalize in theory, only those who commit themselves wholly to the demands of professionalization, refuse to give up, and mold themselves to the needs of the industry (as interpreted by the commercial how-to service offering advice) will actually achieve a career. In other words,

reverse encouragement acknowledges that, yes, most people will not achieve a career, but that *you* as an individual can do so if you listen carefully, remain patient, and perform endless labor on the faith that your chosen industry will ultimately reward your faith and perseverance—if you pay for the services that traffic in reverse encouragement, of course! Reverse encouragement can be found in different forms throughout contemporary work culture, but it's particularly common in advice columns, where the serialized format of the column or blog pushes how-to experts to more readily acknowledge the mundane, continual grind of aspirational work.

This chapter argues that how-to media experts use reverse encouragement to convince customers of their legitimacy. By refusing to sugarcoat the career prospects of aspirants, how-to experts instead coat their advice in a bitter but more convincing sense of world-weary practicality. This sense of practicality may be authentic, at some level—columnists writing in *CS* often seem to express genuine bitterness and fear about the state of American screenwriting work in the late 1990s and 2000s. However genuine its affective dimensions may be, reverse encouragement also serves a strategic purpose as a means to keep how-to customers invested in professionalization while also reassuring those customers that experts who adopt reverse encouragement are not the sorts of scammers who string their customers along for an easy buck. Because reverse encouragement insists at its core that anyone with the right qualities can overcome obstacles to achieving a screenwriting career, how-to screenwriting experts who adopt the rhetoric make implicit and sometimes explicit claims about the qualities that distinguish those who are "worthy" of becoming screenwriters from those who are not. Specifically, reverse encouragement frames screenwriting not as a career or a creative practice but as an exclusive community accessible only to those with an unwavering commitment to professionalization in the commercial film industry.

Take, for example, a blog post written by Terry Rossio for his screenwriting advice blog *Wordplayer*, which Rossio launched in 1997. Titled "Throw in the Towel," the post advised aspiring screenwriters to quit. Reflecting on his years of reading query letters and screenplays from aspirants, Rossio wrote to readers, "You simply cannot write to a professional level. And you probably never will. It's a safe bet to say that none of you will ever make a sale, anywhere, anytime; to think otherwise is just deluding yourselves" (Rossio, n.d.). For more than five-thousand words (a little less than half the length of this dissertation chapter, for those counting), Rossio continued urging his readers to give up, assuring individuals readers that, while they might think they're the exception to his request, they are very certainly not, because they are not talented enough, privileged enough, or ruthless enough to succeed in Hollywood. Acknowledging the misogyny, racism, and classism that govern hiring practices in Hollywood, Rossio insisted that his impacted readers would be happier if they simply gave up on their delusions about becoming screenwriters. Until, in the final paragraphs of the post, Rossio revealed that the "harsh truths" of the column had been expressed as part of a test of will for the reader—an act on Rossio's part. "I'm back folks," he reassured readers near the end of the column, "Terry here. The real me."

Describing the advice column as a catalog of "typical anxieties and doubts and fears writers have," Rossio advised readers who are discouraged that they "should be able to shrug off the negative thinking, and prove them wrong." Lumping writerly anxieties about talent in with structural inequities that present serious obstacles to professionalization for many aspirants, Rossio encourages readers to "shrug off" these concerns in ways that flatten the real differences between imposter syndrome and the systemic racism and misogyny that shape hiring practices the film industry. Rossio encourages aspirants to foster exceptional resilience if they hope to

succeed. And while this isn't terrible advice on its own, Rossio promotes individual resilience as the *primary* strategy for overcoming both inner doubts and systemic barriers to screenwriting work. Rossio concludes the advice column by writing that, if, after years of struggle, "you're the type to choose to not give up, you love movies that much, well, all I have to say is... Welcome to the club." Framing screenwriting as a "club," Rossio welcomes into the club only those readers whose passion for movies pushes them to pursue precarious labor in the film industry—in practical terms, by moving to Los Angeles and setting aside considerable time and money to gain traction in the film industry.

Rossio's blog post encapsulates reverse encouragement in its purposeful imbalance of harsh and inspiring "truths" (heavy on the former, light on the latter) but also in its insistence that only those willing (and even eager!) to suffer unjust hiring practices can join "the club," regardless of their professional status. Similar rhetoric can be found throughout the pages of *CS*, where columnists invited their readers to join a screenwriterly in-group by demonstrating their unwavering commitment to the craft of screenwriting, whatever obstacles lay in their way. In Chapter 4, I argue that aspiring screenwriters who embrace this rhetoric monitor how other aspirants describe their screenwriting practices and police how other aspirants use professionalization services. Branding customers as members of an exclusive club has clear commercial value for how-to screenwriting experts, but it also serves to hierarchize aspiring screenwriters, framing industry-obsessive aspirants broadly as superior to more informal or more industry-resistant screenwriters. In this chapter, I argue that reverse encouragement in the how-to media industries, while born out of a commercial need to motivate aspirants, serves ultimately to mark privileged aspirants as more worthy of participating in cultural production.

To make this case, I consider three related questions. How did *CS* columnists encourage their readers to keep writing screenplays despite diminishing opportunities for professional screenwriters in Hollywood? Who did these columnists embrace (and exclude) as members of the club that, for them, defined American screenwriting? And what role did they assign to screenwriting in the broader culture of the United States? To be specific, I analyze the magazine's advice columns between 2000 and 2010, reflecting on their reactions to shifts in the film industry and the broader culture. In the issues of *CS,* passionate claims about screenwriting's importance to American culture can be found side by side with advertisements depicting screenwriting as an entrepreneurial rat race.[6] Visible in the layout of *CS,* these tensions were also embodied in the magazine's columnists, who decried rank commercialism in screenwriting while at the same time selling their services to readers as private consultants in the magazine's side panels.

Theorizing Reverse Encouragement

As a rhetoric of professionalization, reverse encouragement builds on the discourses of passion that animate contemporary work culture. Passion has become so frequently cited as a virtue in contemporary work that it has taken on the qualities of "a commonsense social good" (Hong 2015, p. 191)—what Hong (2015) describes as "an emotional hegemony, an affective attitude toward work that is normative" (p. 191). McRobbie (2016) argues that "passionate work," while commonly cited as desirable, is "inherently individualistic and conservative" (p.

[6] As *CS* was a commercial product dependent on some sort of revenue for its continued circulation, its editors can hardly be criticized for including advertisements in the magazine. But, I mention the ads here and at a few other points in this chapter because they were a substantial part of the magazine, inescapable for anyone who flipped through its pages. Advertisers were regular contributors to *CS,* and they shaped the (contested, contradictory) meaning of the publication.

107), since it revolves around personal dreams in ways that resist organized labor. In her study of job-hunting guides, texts that contribute to what might be described broadly as a how-to professionalization industry, Hong (2015) argues that "the precarity of neoliberal capitalism is explained away as something that requires endurance from the individual" (p. 196)—with resilience becoming a key virtue in contemporary work. Resilience is a key feature of passionate work, and those who describe themselves as driven by passion in their work also describe themselves as willing to persevere despite setbacks and long odds (DePalma 2021, p. 136). As a result, workers motivated by passion may more readily tolerate precarity as a trade-off for doing what they love (McRobbie 2016).

Passion isn't an entirely problematic feature of work. DePalma (2021) uncovered that, alongside their willingness to work in tough conditions, waged workers who described themselves as passionate about their jobs also claimed to enjoy and find their work particularly meaningful. Bulut (2023) found that a shared commitment to "doing what you love" (DWYL) within video game work cultures fostered a strong sense of community. And yet, Bulut argued that the very same culture of passion served simultaneously to diminish workers' freedoms, normalizing toxic work cultures in the name of love (Bulut 2023). Moreover, workers in white-collar professions, in particular, feel pressure to perform and internalize passion as a safeguard against the increasing precarity of contemporary work (Rao and Neely 2019). Hence, passion as a rhetoric in work cultures can neither be dismissed out of hand nor taken at face value. As natural as the impulse to do what you love may be, the rhetoric of DWYL often makes precarity and inequity in work culture harder for workers to acknowledge and confront.

Precarity and inequity are even more difficult for aspirant workers in media industries to confront, since aspirant workers are not often acknowledged as participants in media industries,

either by media professionals or scholars. Their work contributes to media industries while being framed as external to them, a condition that renders media work invisible and therefore easier to exploit (Mayer 2011). Moreover, passion motivates their work in varied ways, since, as this dissertation argues broadly, aspiring media professionals are a complex, heterogeneous group. While some aspirants take on casual speculative work—or hope labor (Kuehn and Corrigan 2013)—with a vague hope that their creative work will develop into a career, other aspirants take on speculative work with a firmer expectation that their aspirational labor will pay off (Duffy 2017). Realistically, many aspirants vacillate between these conditions, pursuing careers more formally or casually as their situations allow. As informal participants in media industries, aspirants thus perform passionate work in different ways at different times, reconciling their desire to do what they love with concerns that careerism may corrupt their passions (Chia 2019).

As a rhetoric that demands passion from aspiring professionals, reverse encouragement insists that careerism and passion are properly understood as synonymous. Concerns that careerism may corrupt personal passions are dismissed as signs that aspirants simply aren't passionate at all. Because reverse encouragement insists that true believers—the most resilient, malleable workers—will be rewarded with careers, it traffics in what Berlant (2011) describes as "cruel optimism"—a situation that arises "when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (p. 1). In the context of aspiring screenwriting work, the concept is a useful one to describe the destructive force that reverse encouragement can have on aspirants who might otherwise resist and reform the commercial film industry from its margins. Chapter 5 of this dissertation, which examines the media activism of aspirant-turned-screenwriter Thuc Doan Nguyen, describes a potential model for forms of resistance to dominant industrial power structures that reverse encouragement condemns.

The how-to screenwriting habitually promotes professionalization, even when work opportunities for screenwriters are in decline. As far back as the 1910s, when the burgeoning studio system was beginning to formalize the hiring process for scenario writers, companies like the Palmer Photoplay Corporation were pitching screenwriting to their customers as a profitable practice (Morey 2003). As Morey notes of this period, a once-active freelance market for screenwriting had already collapsed by the mid-1910s. And yet, the Palmer Photoplay Corporation, which was founded in 1918, thrived well into the 1920s. Examining Palmer's marketing materials and publications, Morey argues that the company promoted screenwriting to its students as a means for "self-fashioning." Palmer's correspondence courses offered their students "mastery of the self, a way of getting one's daydreams under control and turned to profitable use" (p. 82). In the process, Morey argues, Palmer materials developed a complicated rhetoric that promoted screenwriting as both standardized and individual, subject to exacting formal constraints and yet a means for its adherents to commodify their individualities. The same refrains can be found in the advice columns of *Creative Screenwriting*.

However, there's no indication that Palmer's publications or marketing materials acknowledged the dwindled market for freelance screenwriting. As consistent as how-to screenwriting discourse seems to be, dominant discourses of media production are never truly stable; their apparent stability simply obscures (and depends on) the continual precarity of day-to-day workers in the how-to media industries. Working screenwriters on the margins of the film industry sell their services as consultants for extra income and professional capital. How-to screenwriting companies run on the day-to-day labor of employees who are often aspiring screenwriters themselves, hoping that their proximity to the film industry might lead to screenwriting work. Script readers work freelance for very little pay (or as interns, sometimes for

no pay at all) on the understanding that their work might lead to more lucrative careers in the film industry. These workers are highly motivated by self-interest to reaffirm the systems that promise to reward them, while their complaints and their doubts about media industries are typically obscured by work that renders them invisible as individuals. Meanwhile, their collective labor reassures aspiring screenwriters that professionalization is a rational process governed by experts and susceptible to mastery for those willing to take the time to learn its ins and outs.

The How: Motivating Aspirants

While Letters to the Editor were not a consistent feature in *CS*, appearing in only some issues and not others, those that were printed indicate that many readers embraced the magazine's reasons to go on writing. One reader wrote in to say that he had been "drawn to my first issue of *Creative Screenwriting* with the phrase 'Why We Write'" ("Sound Off" 2002a, p. 4). He added that, "[a]s a fledgling screenwriter (soon to burst onto the scene), I never felt I could truly explain to others how joyous and torturous my life is as a writer. I take great comfort in knowing at least one other person knows exactly what it's like" (p. 4). Taking solace in the experiences of both precarity and creative ambition described by *CS* contributors, the reader highlights the fact that the magazine's success with aspirational readers stemmed as much from its avowed outsider perspective as its access to the film industry. Responses to Suppa's "tossing in the towel" column—which condemned Hollywood's turn away from original stories—were similarly supportive: "Kudos to Ron Suppa for telling it like it is" ("Sound Off" 2002b, p. 4), one reader wrote. Dismayed at the state of American filmmaking, these readers embraced *CS* as a space where radically different futures for American screenwriting might be imagined.

To the extent that the magazine helped readers understand why *they* wrote, reader responses indicate that *CS* provided them with compelling reasons to pursue screenwriting. As one reader exclaimed in 2002, "every month you help keep the dream and hope alive!" ("Sound Off" 2002c, p. 4). Another wrote in to say, similarly, that, "every time I feel I want to quit and give up on screenwriting, I pull out an issue of *Creative Screenwriting* and instantly feel more hopeful" ("Sound Off" 2001, p. 4). For such readers, *CS* provided reasons to seek entry into Hollywood despite the declining opportunities for aspiring screenwriters and the declining working conditions for professional writers. Many issues of *CS* no doubt languished, unread, on coffee tables in the waiting rooms of production companies, but many others made their way into the hands of nonprofessional screenwriters around the United States. Whether or not the columns convinced most readers, *CS* was a prominent voice in their continual negotiations with media industries about the proper role of screenwriting in Hollywood and in everyday creative work. For those who took up the call that *CS* put forth issue after issue, screenwriting was more than a career: it was equally a community and a creative practice that gave its adherents the potential (however unlikely) to shape American culture through individual acts of personal expression.

Even as they railed against Hollywood, *CS* columnists represented the film industry as a system that could be mastered and was worth mastering. Columnist Michael Lent frequently depicted Hollywood as an industry with Darwinian rules for survival: "Up, down, dead or alive are all temporary conditions. The key is to survive. To them that do go the spoils of Hollywood" (Lent 2000b, p. 65). And yet, Lent was hesitant to portray screenwriting as a profession that would lead to fame and fortune. Rather, it was a job that, with considerable sacrifice and ingenuity, might be delicately maintained, a skillful identity built around shrewdness. As the quote above suggests, staying employed was the dream: "Stay alive no matter what occurs," Lent

wrote, “and opportunity will find you. It will find you” (Lent 2003, p. 29). For Lent, survival in Hollywood required entrepreneurial drive: “The resourceful screenwriter learns that when the door is closed, it’s time to go through the window or up the garbage disposal” (Lent 2000a, p. 26). As the quote above suggests, malleability was crucial for screenwriters: “you should do *everything* in your power to make your scripts look exactly as they should in accordance with industry standards” (Lent 2003, p. 29). Describing Hollywood as “brutal,” Lent suggested that “[f]ew people really fail in Hollywood. More often they simply get frustrated with the system and quit” (Lent 2003, p. 29). Pushing readers to secure their own futures and conform to the needs of the market, Lent most frequently advocated for readers to be individually self-sufficient.

Columnist Ron Suppa was even more likely than Lent to poke holes in the professional aspirations of his readers. “Outside of the very dicey independent film world,” Suppa wrote in 2002, “I’m wondering if there’s even a market for spec scripts any longer” (2002a, p. 30). In 2003, Suppa joked that “it’s easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for an aspiring screenwriter to get his spec script produced” (2003a, p. 24). “Comparing a spec sale by a new writer to winning the lottery,” Suppa wrote in 2004, “is not so far off the mark” (2004, p. 38). By 2005, Suppa was advising readers to adapt their screenplays into novels or plays with the hope that success in those markets might inspire interest from producers: “truth be told, the original screenplay is fast going the way of your great-grandmother’s corset” (2005a, p. 36). At the same time, Suppa insisted on the cultural value of screenwriting to American culture, and on the intrinsic rewards of screenwriting for those committed to it as a creative practice: “If you must be a writer because that’s who you are, then it won’t matter all that much [whether you succeed]. You write to please yourself first” (2003b, p. 25). Encouraging readers to set aside their professional aspirations and focus on the intrinsic rewards of writing screenplays, Suppa

suggested that writing for oneself would benefit screenwriters as a community and, in turn, the film industry.

Other contributors encouraged their readers to embrace more collective or unconventional forms of entrepreneurship, however. For instance, emerging distribution markets online and in direct-to-DVD film production promised new career opportunities and new power dynamics in Hollywood. Editor-in-chief Erik Bauer promoted the direct-to-DVD market as an emerging space for career advancement: "Hollywood has high walls, but there are gates. Instead of pushing you away, the Direct-to-DVD market actually welcomes your unsolicited scripts" (2004, p. 2). Columnist Nancy Hendrickson promoted the Internet as a new means for screenwriters to center themselves collectively in American filmmaking: "The digital revolution is here. And, like a political revolution, it's taking power away from the elite few and putting it into the hands of the people. It's blurring the line between amateur and professional and, more and more often, the line between screenwriter and producer" (Hendrickson 2000, p. 80). Similarly, agent Marty Bowen encouraged screenwriters to assert their (masculine) dominance over the Internet's emerging frontier: "There's going to be a power vacuum there, and writers need to get the *cajones* and step up, get empowered, produce their work, and take control of the process. Take control of your destiny" (Schiff 2000b, p. 28). Both Hendrickson and Bowen portray emerging film markets as opportunities for screenwriters collectively to "take control."

Columnists often compared workaday screenwriting work to sexual conquest and sex work as a way to emphasize the precarity of screenwriting work and the emotional labor required of screenwriters trying to appease industry gatekeepers. In these metaphors, screenwriters were alternately pursuers and pursued: "If they [industry decision makers] can't even see us," Suppa wrote of screenwriters, "how can we expect them to respect us in the mornings?" (2000a, p. 17).

In one of Lent's columns, the screenwriter Jon Cohen likened writing free drafts of screenplays to tolerating sexual assault: "My rule of thumb is, if they are nice producers fucking me in an aw shucks kinda way, I'll bend. If they're nasty (rarely, so far), then I drag my feet and make noises" (Lent 2000b, p. 65). Even advertisers felt an analogy between screenwriting work and sex work was worth making: screenplay promotion service ScriptPIMP solicited unrepresented writers with an advertisement asking aspirants, "Need a pimp?" (ScriptPIMP 2000, p. 11). Drawing out the need for screenwriters to be malleable, these contributors to *CS* promote their own street smarts and resilience while reminding readers that working screenwriters need to sell themselves—their willingness to work for free, to suit their work to industry needs—alongside their screenplays.

CS columnists varied in their efforts to keep readers invested in professional screenwriting. What united columnists, however, was their shared dismay about the spec market in Hollywood, and their shared insistence that aspiring screenwriters had the power to revitalize that market. Bauer (2001) invoked a community of creatives with the potential to shift American culture: "Ours is a revolutionary medium, and we need to have faith in our ability to push the envelope of 'acceptable' narrative." (2001e, p. 2). Suppa similarly encouraged readers to perceive the film industry as in need of inspiration: "if you're tired of hero-gets-the-girl epics or rehashing Gen-X angst, there's a whole happily-ignorant world out there that could do with some shaking up" (2005b, p. 37). Indeed, Suppa (2002b) laid some of the blame for the declining spec market at the feet of screenwriters, arguing that things were better "before screenwriters fully gave themselves over to being hacks—writing stories they were told to write, adapting stories that had already been written, rewriting their fellow writers, and then fighting them for the credit" (p. 30). Positioning screenwriters at the core of the filmmaking process, Lent encouraged

screenwriters to shift the culture of Hollywood through the sheer force of their "passion": passion is "the manna of inspiration from heaven—a currency passed from writer to producer to executive, then director and actor, down the line from key grip and best boy to editor, on to the promotions department and, ultimately, to the viewing audience" (Lent 2002b, p. 70). If original stories were on the decline in Hollywood, screenwriters would inspire audiences to return to theaters and inspire producers to recognize the value of the original screenplay.

The "Why," The "We," and the Right

Contributors to *CS* reflected on the role of screenwriting in American creative culture throughout the run of the magazine, but never were they more direct with their opinions than in their responses to the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001. Although some contributors offered their thoughts on the role of screenwriting in a post-9/11 United States in the January/February 2002 issue of the magazine, *CS* released a special March/April issue titled *Why We Write*, featuring ten contributions from screenwriters who, in a "special section," offered their thoughts on "how the events of Sept. 11th have affected the role of the writer in our industry and the larger community" (Creative Screenwriting 2002, p. 57). While some contributors took the opportunity simply to reflect on what had happened, to share their anxieties, anger, and grief, others offered advice about how American screenwriters should respond to the terrorist attacks and what screenwriting should now mean to American culture abroad.

The issue featured cover art of a woman who is presumably Lady Liberty waving a billowing American flag. Throughout the issue, contributors represented screenwriting as a nation-building tool. The title of the issue, a reference to the *Why We Fight* (1942-1945) series of films commissioned by the U.S. government to support the country's involvement in WWII,

accomplishes multiple things at once: (1) it encourages readers to perceive themselves not simply as aspirational writers but also as members of an active community, (2) it represents the nascent War on Terror as an urgent military effort on par with American resistance to the Axis powers during WWII, and (3) it positions the screenwriting community as a crucial workforce in that war. In his "Letter from the Editor," quoted in this chapter's introduction, Bauer made the issue's implicit call to action explicit. While the contributors to the issue differed on how American screenwriters should respond to 9/11, they agreed on one thing: screenwriting is a calling—not just a career—and its commercial value to Hollywood ultimately paled in comparison with its cultural value to the United States.

Financial concerns lingered, as always, alongside the cultural commentary. In his regular "Agent's Hot Sheet" column for the January/February issue, Jim Cirile foregrounded the commercial anxieties of post-9/11 Hollywood, with the concerns of screenwriters front and center: "in the wake of September 11th, what exactly is selling?" (2002, p. 36). The producers and agents Cirile queried were, as always, uncertain. Similarly, before Lent turned to the "soul" of American film in his own column, he described a "new world order of uncertainty" post-9/11 in which filmmakers were unsure about "what constitutes good taste and consumer tolerance for various genres and material" (2002a, p. 78). And of course, columns in both issues appeared alongside the usual advertisements, promotional articles, and industry-oriented features. The *Why We Write* issue prominently featured interviews with screenwriting auteurs Shane Black and Charlie Kaufman, while the January/February issue highlighted the best scripts of 2001, as selected by the *CS* staff. And yet, most contributors took their columns as opportunities to foreground their cultural ambitions for screenwriting as a creative practice.

A recurring thread in these responses positioned screenwriters as the crucial decision makers in Hollywood's development process, creative professionals whose sensibilities determined the content that Hollywood would produce. Bauer and contributor Robert Greiner both encouraged screenwriters to avoid stereotypes and create nuanced portraits of the world around them. In his brief "Letter from the Editor" for the *Why We Write* issue, Bauer offered *Black Hawk Down* (2001) and *Three Kings* (1999) as examples of films that engaged American military efforts and showed how "a complex political situation can be rendered in dramatic terms" (Bauer 2002, p. 2). Bauer urged screenwriters to perceive themselves not simply as hustlers or hobbyists but as participants in "a noble cause" (p. 2). Greiner (2002) urged writers to avoid perpetuating negative stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims, criticizing films like *Rules of Engagement* (2000) and *The Siege* (1998) that had, in Greiner's opinion, dehumanized Arabs and Muslims by keeping them at a rhetorical distance and so failing to represent them as human beings with rich inner lives. Setting aside the broader cultural and industrial forces that led to stereotypical representations of Arabs and Muslims in film, Greiner emphasized what screenwriters can do to portray Arabs and Muslims in a complicated, human way.

Other contributors emphasized the role that American screenwriters played in shaping representations of the United States abroad. Both Catherine Clinch and Michael Lent criticized screenwriters for their role in creating films that offended audiences around the world. Clinch, who would become a regular contributor to *CS* the following year, called on screenwriters to resist writing exploitative material, suggesting that the violent and sexual films produced in the US and distributed around the world had contributed to extremism: "we have presented the world with an endless barrage of images to support the premises that are currently being promulgated by fanatical extremists—the notion that America is built upon a cycle of depravity and

corruption and only the bad survive" (2002, p. 63). She took particular aim at the direct-to-video market, which she suggested represents "the bottom of the barrel of our creative potential" (p. 62) while also being widely distributed overseas. Implicit in Clinch's column is the belief that decentralized, small-scale commercial filmmakers threatened the creative integrity represented by larger-scale, centralized filmmaking in Hollywood. Not just anyone, in other words, was worthy of representing American culture through film on the world stage.

In his feature article for the January/February issue, Lent similarly condemned the "cartoonish violence" of many movies and video games produced in the US: "Are these really the images of our society we want to beam around the planet and into the cosmos?" (2002a, p. 80). Lent was even more explicit than Clinch about placing the responsibility for shifting American culture on the shoulders of screenwriters. Midway through his article, Lent asks directly, "What, if any, responsibility do we in the industry bear for the events in September?" (2002a, p. 80). Claiming that, "in the farthest reaches of the planet, movies serve as emissaries of American culture," Lent found American cultural exports lacking and laid much of the blame at the feet of American screenwriters: "If screenplays are the souls of films, all too often writers have willingly written soulless product" (p. 80). Within Lent's criticisms are interrelated assumptions: (1) that film is the dominant means by which the US makes an impression on the world, and (2) that screenwriters are the dominant creative voices in film. He concludes with a wish that "perhaps screenwriters will use this difficult time to soul-search and then lead the way by creating works that truly speak to the human condition, works that provoke thought and discourse *and* entertain" (p. 81). Posing the spec script as potentially prototypical rather than increasingly ancillary in Hollywood, Lent speaks to a readership of screenwriters whose

contributions to American film culture are entirely within their power and at the same time marginal to industrial filmmaking.

As with Clinch's column, there is a sense in Lent's response to 9/11 that the proper role of Hollywood is not simply to make money for its investors but, more importantly, to filter the varied sensibilities of the American creative workforce down to those that best represent the broader culture of the United States—writers who are not "soulless." To the extent that Lent also positions Hollywood as a brutal but fair meritocracy throughout his columns, his claims here suggest that Hollywood, when working properly, serves to distinguish those individuals who are worthy of contributing to American culture from those who are not. The particular importance of screenwriting as a practice, in this view, is that it enables *select* individuals—writers who work with the requisite soulfulness—to democratically direct American culture through film. Those who cannot master the intricate and ever-shifting trends in American screenwriting, who cannot afford to pack up and move to Los Angeles and work precarious jobs for the faint hope of a career, are also those who prove themselves unworthy of full participation in the production of popular media.

For Clinch, moreover, the splintering of Hollywood into minor cinemas like the direct-to-video market threatens to collapse the taste-making function of Hollywood into rank profiteering, with contributors from the "bottom of the barrel" writing whatever they can to make a buck. In other words, if careerism in screenwriting is a necessary means to ensure that the right voices rise to prominence in American screenwriting, there are nevertheless good and bad ways to pursue a screenwriting career. The further one moves from the established centers of media production, Clinch seems to say, the more likely one is to find bad forms of careerism in screenwriting, where screenwriters are doing whatever they can to attract audiences. Part of my

purpose in this chapter is to suggest that the careerism promoted by the how-to screenwriting industry serves a cultural and political function, not just an economic one. Influential voices in the American how-to media industries are not simply profiting from their customers but also working hard to rationalize media industries structured by privilege for the broader culture of media production in the United States.

Expanding on what it means to write with soul, other respondents emphasized the degree to which screenwriting should, in the wake of 9/11, be understood as a calling as well as a career. Reflecting on his personal response to the attacks, screenwriter Dean L. Morini described a kind of conversion narrative in which, having grappled with his own insignificance (and with the inevitability of his work being lost to time), he realized that screenwriting is best embraced as a means for personal expression rather than profit or notoriety: "I truly felt that having the story published or the movie finally made is my favorite part. Getting the message out, having my voice heard. I know now that's bullshit. I know now that what I am doing right this second, this very blissful moment, is what it means to be a writer and to be immortal, because this act is perfect" (2002, p. 61). The spiritual undertones with which Morini describes screenwriting as a practice are echoed in other contributions, including Lent and his emphasis on the "soul" of American film. In his concluding statements, Lent implicates screenwriters as crucial actors in a broader cultural effort to bring art back to "film's trinity mission of entertainment, commerce and art" (Lent 2002a, p. 81). In their simultaneous centrality to American creative exports and their resistance to industrial pressures, screenwriters are represented here as less akin to entrepreneurs and closer to crusaders or disciples in a holy war for the soul of the nation.

In his regular "Busine$$ of Screenwriting" column for the special post-9/11 issue, Suppa similarly wrote that "[a] writer is not something you strive to be—it is something you are." He

added, “If you too must write (or explode!), if you are nothing if you are not a writer, if you would do it for free, then we are brothers” (2002a, p. 30). Suppa expresses the conviction that screenwriting is a vocation, and a masculine one. He goes on to condemn what he calls “the talented hack—the writer whose heart and soul is not consumed with the power of dreams… I regard that writer as a menace to society and I hold him in contempt of mankind” (p. 30). Building on Lent’s claims that screenwriters have a moral obligation to write from the heart (or from the soul, as the case may be), Suppa represents the precarity of screenwriting not as a reason to avoid the profession but as a test that weeds out those who are not worthy—not personally committed enough to screenwriting as an identity—to wield the cultural power of screenwriting as a creative practice. It is worth noting here that Suppa’s column, while included in the *Why We Write* special issue, is a reprint of a column that had previously been published in *CS*. Its discourses of passion, while repurposed, reflect cultural assumptions about screenwriting that Suppa, Lent, and others consistently embedded into their contributions to *CS*.

CS columnists measured the health of American film culture against the health of the spec script market. While they resisted the dominant powers in Hollywood, their resistance was conservative, a nostalgic yearning for the halcyon days of the “spec boom” era. “Gone are the hallowed days of the early ‘90s,” one *CS* contributor mused in 2005, “when every new issue of *Variety* hailed another million-dollar *Ticking Man*” (Wharton 2005, p. 56). Suppa regularly waxed nostalgic for “an industry that used to be run (back in the dinosaur age for most of us) by businessmen with some commitment to the art and a respect for the artists who were their stock in trade” (2000b, p. 20). Similarly, talent agent Bruce Kaufman told *CS* in its first issue of 2000 that his “New Year’s resolution for Hollywood would be for the studios to trust the instincts of directors and writers, like in the great days of United Artists, when they actually let creative

people make movies" (Schiff 2000a, p. 21). What separated Hollywood in the early 2000s from Hollywood in the past, according to *CS* contributors, was not a shifting industrial macrostructure but, more precisely, a new generation of executives and screenwriters too focused on the financial value of film to recognize its cultural value.

In their efforts to bring back the glory days of the spec boom, however, *CS* columnists often overlooked the misogyny and racism that had long structured (and continued to structure) screenwriting in Hollywood. It would be inaccurate to suggest that *CS* appealed only a white male readership, as the magazine was a contested space of competing voices and viewpoints, but the assumed masculinity of screenwriting in some of the magazine's columns exacerbated the publication's efforts to encourage readers to simply ignore systemic inequities in screenwriting. Reflecting on the burnout and ageism experienced by older screenwriters in the early 2000s, Suppa (2002c) described the career travails of an anonymized middle-aged writer friend. Laying the blame for the writer's troubles at the feet of his younger, female agent, Suppa described her as "a perky young thing, who only fourteen months previous and fresh out of college was office assistant to his former, now retired, agent" (p. 33). According to Suppa, when the anonymous writer called his agent to ask about professional opportunities, she told him to accept that he'd lost his relevance, "and then," Suppa adds, "the rude, nasty bitch hung up on him" (p. 33). Associating her dismissiveness with her youth and her femininity, Suppa simultaneously implies that the agent achieved her status because of her looks and that her inexperience contributes to the downtrodden status of aging screenwriters in Hollywood.

While columnists questioned those aspects of the film industry that had hurt working screenwriters, they often left untouched those aspects that marginalized women and screenwriters of color. That said, some columnists used *CS* to question systemic inequities in the

film industry. Nancy Hendrickson used her column to interview and highlight the widespread discrimination experienced by women writers and by writers of color (Hendrickson 2001). In 2003, she wrote a feature article encouraging women aspiring screenwriters to resist the pressure to write for a male audience. Rejecting the claims of industry professional she interviewed that women were less interested in screenwriting, she called for academic research into gender disparities in screenwriting and urged women to work collectively in the industry: "A change is in order—not just in the attitudes of men, but in the attitudes of women too. For, no matter how many studios, networks, or unions are presided over by women, we will never achieve true parity as long as we believe our struggle is about succeeding in 'a man's word' or competing on a man's terms" (Hendrickson 2003, p. 68). Contributor Steve Ryfle penned a similar feature in 2004 titled "Where Are All the Black Screenwriters?" Interviewing Black industry professionals, Ryfle cited and echoed their calls for "mentoring programs, training, and ultimately access to working situations" (p. 71) for Black screenwriters in Hollywood.

My argument is not that advice columnists writing *CS* conceived of screenwriting consciously as a white, male space. But, their analyses of the diminishing spec market reflected a perception that Hollywood was experiencing a provisional crisis in the 2000s rather than a series of ongoing structural crises that had fostered systemic inequities in Hollywood. As Conor (2014) notes of screenwriting broadly, "the spectres of inequality and lack of diversity haunt the professional and have done so since its earliest days" (p. 101). In her careful study of gender inequalities in screenwriting in the UK, Wreyford (2018) argues that women continue to be underrepresented in screenwriting in part because informal hiring practices result in men hiring other men but also because persistent discourses of meritocracy in film industries mask systemic inequities. In their longing for a bygone era in which new screenwriters might get a foot in the

door simply by writing a 'good script,' *CS* contributors also longed for a return to an era which was unproblematic specifically for white men, even if it had never truly been equitable.

Indeed, the desires of *CS* contributors to form a *more* meritocratic and egalitarian hiring process for screenwriters represented a conservative approach to industrial reform in which gender-, race-, and class-based inequalities are "unspeakable" (Gill, 2014). Noting the widespread discourse of meritocracy across media industries, Gill argues that, for contemporary media workers, "the repudiation of any kind of inequality or unfairness itself becomes a key part of the labouring subjectivity required" (p. 523) to survive in media industries. In the early 2000s, Gill (2002) argued as well that discourses of individualism and egalitarianism in media work were (and still are) masking persistent gender inequalities in media industries, including pay disparities and disproportionate numbers of men. For *CS* columnists, whatever other problems Hollywood may have had, revitalizing the spec script market would remain the top priority. Recognizing that *CS* reflected the professional anxieties, ambitions, and beliefs of a distinctive class of working screenwriters foregrounds the extent to which the magazine's popularity in the broader screenwriting community projected masculinity and whiteness as well as entrepreneurial zeal onto amateur filmmakers in the United States.

If *CS* contributors had looked for revolutionary potential in the spec script at the turn of the millennium in order to revitalize the market for original screenplays in Hollywood, 9/11 brought out their shared convictions that the crisis in American screenwriting was also a crisis in American culture. Positioning the film industry at the center of cultural production in the United States, the screenwriters and columnists who contributed to the "Why We Write" issue described screenwriters as the crucial, unacknowledged voices in American culture. At their most extreme, contributors even suggested that the failure of Hollywood to produce original, artistically

motivated films—its failure to recognize the value of screenwriters—had contributed to the fundamentalist rage of the terrorists who had carried out the 9/11 attacks. What shone throughout the responses to 9/11 in *CS*, however, was the shared conviction of contributors that the spec script was a significant cultural form that transcended its dwindling financial value to Hollywood. By enabling select writers—writers with the requisite knowledge of industry standards, the necessary commitment to industry work, and the "soul" to write politically nuanced screenplays—the spec script market served as a Darwinian filter distinguishing between those worthy and unworthy of contributing to American culture through film.

Conclusion

Although I disagree with much of what the columnists in *CS* wrote, or at least the terms of the debate they waged against an increasingly conglomerated film industry, I do believe that they were addressing important questions—not about who's worthy of screenwriting, but about why we write. Why *do* we write? What *should* we try (or not try) to contribute to the cultures we inhabit? These questions are easily dismissed as naïve or pretentious, but they're questions I struggle with as a writer and instructor every week. And I'm not alone. The how-to industry appeals to so many aspirants and has been such a ubiquitous part of the film industry going back to its origins not simply because it sells visions of upward mobility to starry-eyed amateurs but because it often sets out to answer impossible questions that people can't help but ask. When I was first developing an interest in screenwriting, magazines like *CS* were among the most accessible, apparently authoritative sources for answers. I recognize the feelings of renewed inspiration that the magazine's readers expressed in their letters to the editor, and I can't easily dismiss those feelings in retrospect. As this dissertation argues broadly, the how-to screenwriting

companies are problematic not simply because they promise more than they can provide—this is a feature of work in the cultural industries broadly—but because they represent sincere and influential efforts to govern cultural production beyond professional media work.

Waged workers in an industry built around deriving profit from aspiring professionals, the screenwriters who wrote advice columns for *CS* channeled their frustrations and convictions about professional screenwriting into words of reverse encouragement. They reassured readers (and maybe themselves) that screenwriting work, while frustrating and worsening in many respects, was also a vital job. They weren't wrong, of course. But in their efforts to rationalize the very systems that rendered their livelihoods more precarious, the columnists constructed an ideal screenwriter whose unwavering commitment to the work and the commercial film industry made them worthy of contributing to film culture. In their columns, screenwriting became an exclusive community of creatives charged with representing American culture to the world. The question of which aspirants are worthy of screenwriting cuts to the heart of this dissertation and the stakes of examining the how-to screenwriting industry, because it speaks to larger questions about who can claim the right to participate in cultural production. To describe some aspirants as having more or less soulfulness in their writing is not so far off from describing some aspirants (and not others) as possessing souls at all—as being full persons worthy of a voice in the circulation of stories that shape and reshape our communities.

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CHAPTER 2

For-Profit Screenwriting Schools and the Stratified Pre-Industry

On a summer day in 1999, a group of people leapt from the roof of the towering RCA building on Sunset Boulevard. A professional stunt team hired to commemorate the launch of the for-profit Los Angeles Film School (LAFS) with an impressive freefall, the jumpers embodied the combination of risk-taking and craft that LAFS would encourage in its students. Lending his Hollywood pedigree to the event, director Oliver Stone cut the ribbon at the groundbreaking ceremony, where he likened the stunt performers to the school's prospective students: Hollywood is, he said, "a terrible business to get into, and more fail than succeed" (Variety Staff 1999); even so, he added, "there's always a lunatic ready to jump off a building to get into it." Speaking to trade journalists at the event, the school's managing partner Thom Mount promoted LAFS as a space where students could professionalize into the film industry with relative efficiency: "We're the only one-year professional craft school in the area" (Variety Staff 1999). For aspiring screenwriters who couldn't afford a four-year degree, LAFS presented a cheaper, faster alternative: a more accessible way to take the leap into professionalization.

Close by in Burbank, the Los Angeles branch of the for-profit New York Film Academy (NYFA) made similar overtures to prospective students. Founded in New York in 1992 by film and theater producer Jerry Sherlock, NYFA had since expanded to the west coast, where it offered students "an alternative to a formal film school" (New York Film Academy 1998). Contrasting its offerings with those of more elite institutions like New York University (NYU) and the University of Southern California (USC), NYFA's promotional materials, like those of LAFS, emphasized the school's accessibility and flexibility: "For many students, a four year program is both impractical and economically unfeasible" (New York Film Academy 1998).

Offering multi-week workshops of varying lengths and costs, NYFA would enable its students to pick up the basics of screenwriting and film production at a fraction of the cost. And yet, over the next two decades and change, both NYFA and LAFS would expand, increasing their costs along the way. Today, NYFA and LAFS are home to arguably the two most prominent for-profit screenwriting degree programs in the United States, and they are devoted less to making screenwriting accessible than to making it profitable for their shareholders.

Through short-term workshops and accelerated degree programs in the United States, NYFA and LAFS continue promoting their services to students who want to study screenwriting without the expense and precarity of a four-year degree. But, they also appeal directly to international students who perceive cultural capital in acquiring a filmmaking degree from an American institution. With campuses in various countries, including Abu Dhabi, Nigeria, and Dubai, NYFA in particular has established itself as an institution that brings American filmmaking and screenwriting techniques and infrastructure to other countries, generating revenue from state-sponsored efforts to improve the position of other nations on the global film market. If at their launch NYFA and LAFS could earnestly promote themselves as institutions devoted to underserved aspirants within the United States, today these schools serve an increasingly global body of students. As I argue in this chapter, NYFA and LAFS reflect and reproduce the stratification of pipelines to screenwriting work in the United States.

For-profit screenwriting schools are likely not the first how-to screenwriting services that come to mind for most. Certainly, screenwriting manuals and software products are more commonly discussed. But, I'm including a study of for-profit screenwriting degree programs in this dissertation for a few reasons: first, while schools like LAFS and NYFA promote their programs as unusually affordable, their degree programs are anything but cheap. As I discuss in

more detail in the pages to follow, students seeking to earn a bachelor's degree from either institution today will end up spending tens of thousands of dollars for the privilege. As a result, the stakes of pursuing a screenwriting degree at LAFS or NYFA are considerably higher than stakes of investing in a manual or formatting software. If you care nothing about screenwriting, it might seem foolhardy to fork over $60,000 for a B.S. degree in Writing for Film & TV from an institution like LAFS. But the amount of time and money that aspiring screenwriters spend on their aspirations is a testament to the significant role that the how-to screenwriting industry plays as the only accessible path for many to a highly sought-after career.

Second, as a graduate student pursuing a doctorate and teaching media production courses along the way, starting with for-profit screenwriting schools enables to me to foreground the role that higher education plays in the industry I'm setting out to critique. I've studied screenwriting at "elite" institutions like NYU and USC, I've taught screenwriting here at UW-Madison, and I've discussed paths to professionalization in the film industry with my students. While UW-Madison is a non-profit institution—and I argue in this chapter that the distinction between non-profit and for-profit degree programs *is* worth making—both non-profit and for-profit academic institutions are (to varying degrees) commercialized sources of credentials for work in the media industries. Moreover, marking distinctions between more or less commercialized corners of the how-to screenwriting industry does not change the fact that they are interconnected. LAFS and NYFA both promoted their services as accessible precisely because screenwriting degree programs at non-profit academic institutions are often inaccessible to students who lack the social or financial capital to attend them.

As Cottom (2017) argues, most nonprofit colleges and universities are structured around the assumption that students who pass through their degree programs are coming straight from

high school and seeking credentials that will help them start their careers. As a result, "traditional institutions understand the labor market as a partner in absorbing job-training demand from nontraditional student groups" (Cottom 2017, p. 14). Nontraditional students—students who embark on degree programs later in life than the year after graduating high school—are too often left out of consideration by nonprofit institutions, which leaves nontraditional students at the mercy of market forces (Cottom 2017). Many aspiring screenwriters, particularly nontraditional students who are already working full time, have dependents, or are made to feel unwelcome by schools that prioritize traditional students, either cannot afford to attend screenwriting degree programs at nonprofit institutions or cannot justify the risk of investing in a four-year degree in pursuit of a notoriously uncertain career. All of which is to say that the commercial how-to screenwriting industry is enabled, reproduced, and made necessary by longstanding structures of exclusion in more legitimated paths to professionalization in screenwriting education.

Drawing on publicly available enrollment data and financial information, as well as promotional materials created by various for-profit and non-profit film schools, this chapter analyzes the institutional histories of LAFS and NYFA, in part to compare and contrast these institutions with the nonprofit degree programs they market themselves against. LAFS and NYFA should be understood first and foremost as profit-making institutions created to take advantage of regulations that freed up federal funds for FPCUs in the 1990s. Examining the promotional materials of LAFS and NYFA and their appeals to particular groups of students, I then reflect on how this profit motive led LAFS and NYFA to frame media professionalization as an intensive process that is also broadly accessible and even pleasurable for those willing to take the leap. Charting its considerable growth over the last twenty years, I then argue that NYFA in particular has expanded its focus to include and even prioritize international students

and a global network of branch schools. Finally, I reflect on the extent to which nonprofit screenwriting degree programs engage in similar practices, despite their heightened reputation among screenwriting professionals and aspirants.

Film School Studies

In media industry scholarship, studies of film schools have framed them as what Banks (2019) describes as "pre-industry programs," in that they are typically attended as pathways to professional work in the film industry. Most students who attend such programs, Banks argues, "already have an idea of who they are and who they want to be" (p. 77)—i.e., professional screenwriters and filmmakers in training. Examining the experiences of film school students at a prominent film school in LA, Mehta (2017) similarly describes film schools as industry-facing institutions. Analyzing the practice of "hustling" among film students, Mehta argues that they learn to perceive "hustling as industrial rather than merely curricular or pedagogical work that postures them for careers in the film/TV industries" (p. 30). Both Mehta (2017) and Banks (2019) reveal that film students expect their studies to directly reflect their career aspirations in the commercial media industries. Building on this insight, Banks (2019) sees critical potential in film schools as spaces where educators can "experiment, iterate, and develop new systems to tackle the problems of bias… that current media industries cannot" (p. 86). In other words, as pre-industry spaces, film schools are also spaces where scholars can directly shape media industries.

While I agree with Banks on this point, the purpose of this chapter and of this dissertation as a whole is to argue that the how-to screenwriting industry is not simply a means to examine or manipulate Hollywood from its apparent margins. I am just as interested in aspirants who never

'make it' as I am in those whose pipelines lead to careers. And I am arguing that pre-industrial spaces like screenwriting schools or, later in this dissertation, screenwriting platforms and publications are worth studying not simply as appendages to the film industry but as spaces that are no less central to the reproduction of media power within those industries than an executive's office or a writer's room. In other words, while how-to media industries are positioned and experienced as "pre-industrial," this label belies the fact that they are also simply "industrial." Workers in the pre-industry may not be paid for their work—typically, they *pay* to achieve a sense of proximity to the "real" media industries. But, as how-to consumers, they work both for themselves as individuals and for the media industries, since the pre-industry exists to mold aspirants into workers who better serve industry's needs.

If I seem to be blaming aspirants for creating the conditions that keep them outside the gates of the media industries, that's not the argument I'm trying to make. My position as a doctoral candidate currently on the academic job market has some bearing here, as I am myself an aspiring professional who has devoted considerable time and money to undergo a highly structured process of professionalization. So, I am well aware of the stakes of professionalization and the extent to which pre-industrial pipelines can create lasting benefits for those who go through them. Throughout this dissertation, my purpose is not to criticize aspirants for wanting careers. My purpose is instead to interrogate how career pipelines are made—the process by which norms of professionalization are constructed, rerouted by the commercial needs of the companies that profit from them, and ultimately used to rationalize and reproduce structures of power that are unjust. To be more specific, this dissertation examines norms of professionalization as they are reproduced and commercially sold to aspiring screenwriters by the how-to screenwriting industry.

Returning to film schools, for example, both Mehta (2017) and Banks (2019) value film schools (rightly) for the insights they can provide into professional media work even before it happens—as the beliefs and habits of careers media workers are beginning to take on a definite shape. While studies of film schools are sparse, most examine their subjects as production cultures that train (or hinder) aspirant filmmakers on their paths to carers. Reflecting on their own experiences as faculty members in the Film Division at Northwestern University, Citron and Seiter (1981) exposed the misogyny that structured and continues to structure (Proctor, Branch and Kristjansson-Nelson 2011; Banks 2019) film schools in the United States—their reliance on male-dominated canons, their investment in patriarchal myths of creativity, and their failure to address gendered narratives about who can and should operate technology, among other factors. González (2021) exposes the whiteness that additionally structures film schools, questioning the value of the advice commonly given to minoritized students to focus on "telling their story," despite the realities of a job market "in which job insecurity and discrimination remain the norm" (p. 47). Cumulatively, these studies demonstrate that racism and misogyny structure spaces for media professionalization, just as they structure professional media work.

Like many other scholars who have examined film schools as production communities (Citron and Seiter 1981; Henderson 1990; Miller 2013; González 2021), both Mehta (2017) and Banks (2019) focus their attention on non-profit schools. Less studied are for-profit film schools like LAFS and NYFA. And yet, this chapter argues, for-profit film schools, particularly when examined in relation to their nonprofit counterparts, are revealing as spaces that reflect and reproduce the stratification of aspiring media work. Aspiring media professionals are sometimes unfairly glossed as an undifferentiated mass of speculative workers battering at the gates of the dominant commercial media industries. Answering Ashton and Conor's (2013) call for

screenwriting scholars to examine how screenwriting is taught, not simply practiced, this chapter sets out to more carefully map the borderlands between aspirants and professionals, revealing hierarchies and segregations among aspirants that can't help but ripple outward into both professional work communities and nonprofessional communities of media production beyond.

The particular boundary mapped in this chapter is the one between non-profit and for-profit screenwriting schools. This distinction is in essence regulatory but also carries with it complex historical and cultural narratives. The primary regulatory difference between for-profit schools and non-profit schools is their governance under the tax code: "Non-profit colleges and universities are exempt from taxation," Bañuelos (2016) explains, "because their earnings do not go toward paying private shareholders, carrying on propaganda, or attempting to influence legislation" (p. 5). Because for-profit colleges and universities (FPCUs) can't receive federal grant money and typically lack a donor base, their primary source of revenue comes directly from their students in the form of tuition (Bañuelos 2016). As a result, FPCUs often promote themselves as more directly responsive to student interests than nonprofit colleges and universities in ways that shape their curricula, their promotional strategies, and their perception in the broader culture (Bañuelos 2016). LAFS and NYFA are no exception: in their promotional materials, they promote themselves as highly practical paths to professionalization where students who cannot afford to attend more elite screenwriting programs can learn practical professional screenwriting skills in close proximity to the film industry.

The regulatory differences between for-profit and nonprofit institutions further foster institutions with different core goals. While both for-profit and nonprofit institutions need to generate revenue in order to survive and thrive in the commercial marketplace, for-profit institutions are fundamentally driven by an impulse to expand their profits as much as possible

whenever possible, even in circumstances where doing so might diminish the educational value of their services or reproduce systemic inequities in higher education. As Bañuelos (2016) notes, one way to distinguish between for-profit and nonprofit institutions is to ask whether anyone not involved in the daily functioning of a school can profit from it; if yes, then the institution is for-profit. And this fact tugs for-profit institutions toward easy money, regardless of the cost to students or prospective students. As Cottom (2018) argues, beyond their legal differences, "for-profit colleges are distinct from traditional non-profit colleges in that their long-term viability depends upon acute, sustained socioeconomic inequalities" (p. 21). Without students who both (a) cannot afford traditional degree programs and (b) need degrees to achieve upward mobility, for-profit colleges would not be as prevalent as they are now. As I explain in the following pages, NYFA and LAFS were founded first and foremost as profitable investments, and both schools have in the decades since their founding pursued continual and profitable expansion.

Easy Money

According to the NYFA website, film and television producer Jerry Sherlock founded the school because he'd been encouraged to do so "by his friends who wanted to send their children to film school but found the prices too costly" ("About Us" n.d.). Baked into the school's origin story is the idea that NYFA emerged out of a commonsense need for more reasonably priced paths into filmmaking careers. As the introduction to this chapter explored, LAFS was similarly founded on the promise that it would enable students who couldn't afford four-year degrees to gain a practical education in filmmaking in only a year. However, these promises speak more to the consumers NYFA and LAFS have sought to cultivate—nontraditional students who cannot afford or cannot gain entry into more elite screenwriting degree programs—than to the driving

motivations behind their founding. Examining the institutional history of NYFA and LAFS reveals that they were both founded in the 1990s specifically to take advantage of shifts in federal regulations that made for-profit schools more secure investments in that period.

Throughout its history, the market for FPCUs has been (unintentionally) sustained by federal regulation in the United States (Angulo 2016; Bañuelos 2016; Cottom 2017). FPCUs have a long history, but their role in American higher education expanded considerably in the postwar era, when soldiers returning from the war sought reintegration into the workforce (Angulo 2016). In the five years after the passing of the 1944 GI Bill, which enabled millions of veterans to attend college, the number of FPCUs in the United States more than tripled as entrepreneurs raced to exploit the influx of federal funding for higher education (Angulo 2016). Angulo (2016) speculates that FPCUs in the United States were so dependent on federal funding in this period that they would have largely died out once the GI Bill expired had it not been for the passage of the Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA). As with the GI Bill, the HEA was not written with FPCUs in mind. Rather, President Johnson sought to make community colleges and nonprofit colleges and universities more accessible by implementing new programs for scholarships, grants, and loans. Most significantly for FPCUs, the 1972 reauthorization of the HEA enabled proprietary schools to access the funds freed up by the bill. Between 1974 and 1986, FPCUs went from consuming 1.4% of all student aid to consuming 36% (Angulo 2016). By the 1990s, when LAFS and NYFA emerged, students who needed to take out loans from the government to attend college had become a valued financial resource for FPCUs. Still today, FPCUs earn roughly three-quarters of their revenue from federal student aid (Kirui 2020).

Despite the fact that FPCUs were wracked by scandals and congressional hearings in the 1990s, the number of FPCUs nearly tripled in the same period, with FPCU enrollment increasing

by 59% between 1989 and 1999, an expansion that Angulo (2016) credits to the financialization of the American economy wrought by Reaganomics. Heavy lobbying enabled the reauthorization of the HEA in 1992, promising easy money for private equity firms looking for investments (Angulo 2016). Both NYFA and LAFS were founded within the decade. While it remains unclear precisely who financed the schools at their launch and for how much money, both schools have clear ties to the world of finance. NYFA's board of directors includes a mix of twelve filmmakers, administrators, and investors, including Oscar Bleetstein, who formerly worked in high-level positions at Credit Suisse and Merrill Lynch ("Board of Directors" n.d.). And NYFA's current president Jean Sherlock (Jerry Sherlock's son) was formerly an investment banker for Salomon Brothers ("Board of Directors" n.d.). LAFS's founders include venture capitalists Paul Kessler and Bud MaLette, whom *LA Weekly* described as the "Warren Buffett of Canada" (Cullum 2000). Launched in a period when FPCUs were afforded a promising revenue stream by the HEA, LAFS and NYFA both emerged to exploit federal funding for students.

And they certainly have, growing more and more profitable in the process. In the past decade alone, NYFA's annual revenue has nearly doubled, from $43 million 2010 (U.S. Department of Education 2010a) to $81 million in 2019, with nearly all of that revenue coming from tuition (U.S. Department of Education 2019a). A significant chunk of NYFA's increased revenue in 2019—more than $14 million—came in the form of scholarship and fellowship money, with most of that money coming from institutional grants (U.S. Department of Education 2019a). Put simply, a significant portion of the capital that flows through NYFA and ultimately to its private investors has come from students who are taking out loans to pay for their education—more and more students with each passing year. Enrollment at NYFA more than doubled in the 2010s from 598 full-time undergraduate students in 2011 to 1312 students in

2019-2020 (U.S. Department of Education 2011a; 2020a). In the same period, however, graduation rates worsened. NYFA reported an overall graduate rate of 80% in 2012, the earliest year for which graduation rates are available, but that number had dropped to 69% by 2019 (U.S. Department of Education 2012a; 2019b). The numbers for LAFS are even worse (for the students, at least). In the same period examined above (2010-2019), LAFS tripled is annual revenue, from $31.9 million to $95 million (U.S. Department of Education 2011b; 2020b). A significant portion of that revenue, $22.7 million in 2019, would come in the form of scholarships and fellowships, including $20.2 million in Pell grants. At the same time, LAFS reported a substantial decrease in graduation rates, dropping from a graduation rate of 78% in 2010 to 55% in 2019 (U.S. Department of Education 2012b; 2019c). As LAFS and NYFA have expanded, fewer students have graduated.

Table 1. Revenue, Enrollment, and Graduation Rate for Los Angeles Film School (LAFS), New York Film Academy (NYFA), the University of Southern California (USC), and New York University (NYU), 2010 and 2019.

School	Revenue in 2010-11	Revenue in 2019-20	Enrollment in 2010-11[a]	Enrollment in 2019-20[a]	Graduation Rate in 2010[b]	Graduation Rate in 2019[b]
LAFS	$32MM	$95MM	2,083	5,151	78%	55%
NYFA	$43MM	$81MM	___ [c]	1,312	___ [d]	69%
USC	$3,939MM	$5,767MM	16,688	19,622	89%	92%
NYU	$3,737MM	$7,245MM	20,281	25,872	86%	85%

Source: U.S. Department of Education 2023

[a] Full-time undergraduate fall enrollment.

[b] Overall graduation rate as of August 31.

[c] NYFA first reported its fall enrollment in 2011, when the enrollment was 598.

[d] NYFA first reported its graduation rate in 2012, when the rate was 80%.

It's worth taking a moment to emphasize that non-profit institutions are distinct not only in their governance but also because non-profits, as their name suggests, are not driven first and foremost by profit in the same way as FPCUs. Enrollment at elite screenwriting schools like NYU and USC increased in the 2010s but significantly less than the enrollment at NYFA and LAFS. NYFA's enrollment for full-time undergraduates increased by 415% between 2010 and 2019; LAFS's increased by 247% in the same period (U.S. Department of Education 2019d). Meanwhile, enrollment at NYU and USC increased by 27% and 19%, respectively (U.S. Department of Education 2010b; 2010c; 2019e; 2019f). Moreover, even as NYU and USC increased their enrollment numbers and their revenue, their graduation rates held steady. While graduation rates at both NYFA and LAFS dropped between 2012 and 2019, USC improved its graduation rate from 90% to 92% and NYU maintained an overall graduation rate of 85% (U.S. Department of Education 2010b; 2010c; 2019g; 2019h). Throughout this dissertation, I maintain a focus on the role that commercial imperatives—the drive to continually expand profits—play in structuring the means by which aspiring screenwriters are professionalized into the film industry. And it is in this context that the founding of NYFA and LAFS must be understood. Both schools brought established film professionals (Jerry Sherlock for NYFA and former PGA head Thom Mount for LAFS) and venture capitalists together to take advantage of new regulations that made for-profit film schools financially viable.

Continual Expansion

Enabled by new regulations governing the flow of federal funds, LAFS and NYFA both appealed at first to consumer groups that had historically been underserved by the market for higher education: nontraditional students and students who could not afford to enroll in school

full-time. Eschewing degree programs, both schools at first folded their screenwriting curricula into workshops that were designed to give their students practical skills in various aspects of filmmaking: to the extent that these programs were created to provide their students with career training, their broad scope belies the understanding that their students are learning to work in the film industry, likely in below-the-line positions, not shoot to the top of the creative hierarchy. Indeed, NYFA and LAFS initially marketed themselves in opposition to degree programs, encouraging prospective students to regard screenwriting as one of many practical skills that, with the training, could create well-rounded filmmakers in a matter of weeks rather than years. Eventually, however, both LAFS and NYFA recognized the greater potential for profit in degree programs, and they expanded their offerings to include dedicated screenwriting degrees.

In 1999, when LAFS was getting ready for its launch, NYFA had already been offering students filmmaking workshops of varying lengths and costs for several years, including four-week and eight-week immersion courses, both of which cost around $5000 (“Workshops,” 1999). While these workshops weren’t exactly cheap, they were certainly more affordable than full-time degrees. Pitched at aspirants “with little or no experience making films” (“Eight Week Workshop” 1999), these workshops gave their students opportunities to learn the entire filmmaking process: writing, directing, and editing their own short films while also assisting the other students on their projects. For students with day jobs or other obligations, NYFA also offered a night-class version of their eight-week immersion filmmaking course. Broadly speaking, the workshops gave folks who wanted access to film equipment or rudimentary training a chance to do so in their free time.

But, NYFA quickly recognized that courses dedicated specifically to screenwriting would be relatively cheap to run and in demand among prospective students. While NYFA had been

incorporating screenwriting instruction into its workshops going back to its founding in 1992, the school arguably became a full participant in the how-to screenwriting industry in 1999, when it began offering an intensive, six-week screenwriting workshop in the summers. Soon, NYFA expanded its offerings beyond short-term workshops. Starting with a one-year filmmaking program in 2000 ("One Year Program" 2001), NYFA would eventually offer a 1-year screenwriting program in 2005. Tuition would be $9000 per semester ("Screenwriting Workshop" 2005), nearly quadrupling the cost of completing one of the school's short-term workshops. While these programs were still being pitched at folks who couldn't afford to pursue a four-year degree, the dramatic cost increase of NYFA's 1-year programs made them investments of a different order.

In 2006, NYFA began offering accredited degrees, opening the school up to federal funding through fellowships and student loans. As with its 1-year programs, NYFA first offered an MFA in filmmaking ("Master of Fine Arts in Filmmaking" 2005), but by the following year, the school began offering a dedicated MFA degree in screenwriting, with a tuition of $10,000 per semester ("Master of Fine Arts Screenwriting" 2007). Describing its MFA as a "two-year conservatory-based graduate program," the NYFA website claimed that the program would "challenge, inspire, and prepare candidates for professional work in the motion picture industry" ("Master of Fine Arts Screenwriting" 2007). With its degree programs, NYFA clearly sought to cultivate a different set of consumers than those who had signed up for eight-week night workshops in filmmaking or six-week summer courses in screenwriting. As an accredited institution, NYFA became an institution that promised its students, both implicitly and explicitly, pathways to careers, not simply practical skills.

Much like NYFA, LAFS began as a school that profited by offering students efficient, affordable workshops in practical filmmaking skills. Seeking to thread the needle between the degree programs offered at nonprofit film schools and the multi-week workshops offered at schools like NYFA, LAFS promoted its one-year screenwriting program as a middle-ground alternative not offered elsewhere. For its first decade, LAFS offered aspiring filmmakers only an "Immersion Filmmaking Certificate Program." But much like NYFA, in a bid to improve its prestige (and so increase profits) as a higher learning institution, LAFS would transition into offering longer-terms degree programs alongside its shorter-term workshops. In July of 2008, LAFS began offering students an Associate of Science Degree in Film, which replaced the one-year certificate program ("LA Film School" 2010). LAFS also began offering AS degrees in Game Production, Computer Animation, and Recording Arts, expanding its focus as a media production school.

In anticipation of the new revenue stream these degree programs would provide, LAFS expanded its campus in 2008 "by adding 100,000 square feet of studios, labs, classrooms, and administrative support facilities" ("LA Film School" 2010). As early as 2015, LAFS began offering online degrees in Digital Filmmaking, Music Production, Graphic Design, and Entertainment Business: digital degrees pitched to "the go-getter who doesn't have time for the traditional path" ("Digital Filmmaking Online" 2015). While screenwriting was a part of the curriculum for production students for many years, it would not be until late 2019 that LAFS began offering students a dedicated B.S. degree in Writing for Film & TV—a degree that would be offered exclusively online. Over a period of nine semesters, students would pay roughly $60,000 for a B.S. degree in Writing for Film & TV ("Tuition" 2020).

Today, the screenwriting programs offered at NYFA and LAFS are marked by an unusual degree of flexibility. In addition to offering a Master of Fine Arts, Bachelor of Fine Arts, Associate of Fine Arts in Screenwriting, NYFA continues to offer students a 1-year program, as well as 4-week, 8-week, 12-week, and 15-week workshops online and in-person. NYFA promotes these varied workshops and degree-programs to students according to their "commitment" to screenwriting. The MFA, BFA, and AFA are promoted to students "who wish to make a commitment to the craft of screenwriting," while the 1-year program is available to students who are "unsure about committing to a degree program" ("Screenwriting School" n.d.). Workshops, finally, are promoted for their ease of access: "an excellent choice for those who cannot attend the Academy for a full year but who want to explore the craft" ("Screenwriting School," n.d.). By providing degree programs and workshops of varying lengths and costs, NYFA ensures that any student, regardless of their finances and ambition, can find a product at the school that suits their needs and resources.

To sketch the current costs of attending NYFA, the 4-week and 15-week online screenwriting courses both cost $2000, packing in or stretching out the same material over different time periods to suit students with different schedules ("Tuition" n.d.). In-person courses cost a bit more. An 8-week in-person screenwriting course currently offered in Los Angeles, costs somewhere between $3500 and $5000 depending on the course and when students enroll ("Tuition" n.d.). On the other hand, NYFA's BFA in Screenwriting takes three years to complete, with the current tuition amounting to $13,495 per semester ("Tuition" n.d.). Costly as this is, NYFA promotes its degree programs as more efficient and (relatively) affordable paths to screenwriting careers. The NYFA website points out, for instance, that, by completing a

Screenwriting BFA in three rather than four years, “students save time and one year of expenses” (“Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) Degree in Screenwriting” n.d.).

They’re not wrong. Setting aside living expenses, a student at NYFA would, at the tuition rate the school reported to the Department of Education in 2021, spend roughly $95,000 on a Screenwriting BFA over the course of three years (U.S. Department of Education 2021a). By comparison, the most recently reported tuition rates for undergraduates at NYU and USC were $52,204 and $59,260, respectively (U.S. Department of Education 2021b; 2021c). Over the course of four years, those tuition costs would amount to $208,816 and $237,040, more than twice the cost of completing NYFA’s screenwriting BFA. NYFA’s degree programs are not cheap by any stretch, but for students who are confronting the prospect of student loans and of multiple years away from opportunities for full-time work, an extra year to complete the degree and an extra $100,000 is not easy to dismiss.

Moreover, neither NYFA nor LAFS have substantially increased their tuition costs over the past decade, despite expansions in their course offerings and instructor pool. The cost of tuition for full-time students at both schools has hovered between $30,000 and $35,000 since 2008 (U.S. Department of Education 2008a; 2011c; 2021a; 2021d), while the estimated tuition for full-time students at NYU increased from roughly $37,000 to $56,000 in the same period (U.S. Department of Education 2008b; 2021b) and the estimated tuition at USC increased from roughly $38,000 to $61,000 (U.S. Department of Education 2008c; 2021c). By positioning themselves as degree-seeking institutions, however, NYFA and LAFS are also promoting themselves more explicitly as viable paths to careers in screenwriting and filmmaking. As the following section draws out, their promotional narratives depend heavily on their perceived

proximity to Hollywood and their accessibility as pathways to a film career, despite little in the way of tangible evidence to support these claims.

Proximity and Professionalization

Throughout their marketing campaigns, NYFA and LAFS promote their screenwriting degree programs first and foremost as job training for careers that for most students will never materialize. Of course, the same could be said, to a certain extent, of screenwriting degree programs at non-profit institutions. Most screenwriting students will not become professional screenwriters, regardless of what school they attend. But, I have argued that FPCUs are worth distinguishing from non-profit institutions because FPCUs are, as their name suggests, driven centrally by the need to create and increase profits. Because FPCUs are so dependent on tuition, moreover, they are more likely to say and do whatever they can to convince prospective students to sign up for their degree programs, whether or not it really makes sense to do so. In pursuit of higher enrollment numbers, screenwriting degree programs at FPCUs participate more readily and more consistently in the same rhetorics of meritocracy and monoculturalism that characterize the commercial how-to screenwriting industry as whole.

For example, NYFA and LAFS have created application procedures that are as streamlined and aggressively friendly as possible. The LAFS application page, for example, assures prospective students that the process will take only 10 minutes and a high school diploma (“Admissions” n.d.). Curious to know what LAFS would ask of applicants, I created an LAFS application account, which requires an email address and phone number. Within five minutes of creating the application profile (I created the profile at 11:24am), I received a call (at 11:28am) from a friendly LAFS representative reaching out to ask if I had any questions about the form or

about LAFS. Although I explained to the rep that I was just trying to get a sense of the school's application process, I received several follow-up phone calls from LAFS in the subsequent weeks asking if I wanted or needed help applying. Whether or not this is a typical experience, it speaks to the investment LAFS has made in making the sales process for new students as responsive and aggressive as possible.

In addition, both schools have what NYFA describes as an "open enrollment" policy, meaning that anyone with a high school diploma who can afford tuition (or apply successfully for student loans) is admitted. At the same time, both schools promote their screenwriting degree programs as accessible pathways to careers, which requires both NYFA and LAFS to construct a narrative that anyone can become a professional screenwriter. Of course, this is a narrative that casts a lumpy curtain over clear evidence to the contrary. For one thing, as I explore in more detail in the introduction, professional screenwriters are and always have been disproportionately white and male in the American film industry (Ramón, Tran, and Hunt 2023). However, it benefits the enrollment numbers at NYFA and LAFS to claim otherwise: that access to professionalization in the film industry is possible for anyone willing and able to invest in their degree programs.

To make the case that their screenwriting degree programs can kickstart the careers of students who complete them, LAFS and NYFA have both claimed an atypical proximity to the film industry that is both literal and figurative. As part of their emphasis on "hands-on" learning, a phrase that is ubiquitous in promotional materials for both schools, NYFA and LAFS promote their programs as highly attuned to the emerging technologies and industrial trends that will make graduates attractive to employers in the film industry. For example, NYFA recently offered workshops on virtual reality media production and transmedia storytelling. Promoting the latter

program to screenwriting and filmmaking students in a recent advertisement, a NYFA instructor claimed that "we're creating writers for the twenty-first century" (New York Film Academy 2017). Alongside instructor interviews and student testimonials about the school's transmedia coursework, the video features B-roll of Comic-Con showing displays of comic books and merchandise for franchises like Marvel and Star Wars. Appealing to students eager to work such blockbuster franchises, NYFA positions itself as a program that is unusually committed to helping students tailor their creative work to the sorts of commodities that are emerging or currently popular in the film industry.

One of the tangible ways LAFS promotes its proximity to Hollywood is through its commitment to emerging media production technologies. At its launch, LAFS promoted the fact that it had extraordinarily new and expensive equipment. An *LA Weekly* write-up on the school's launch described the campus's gear with fetishistic detail:

> 19 XL-1 Mini-DV cameras with upgraded manual-lens systems and XLR sound inputs, plus a number of state-of-the-art 1080 Progressive digital cameras with variable 24- and 30-frame-per-second shooting speeds (the kind George Lucas has announced he will shoot the next Star Wars with). There are 21 Avid editing systems on premises — 12 top-line Media Composers and nine newer Express DVs — and one of the only working broadcast-ready Hi-Def sets in L.A. outside of the Sony labs and the Jay Leno stage. (Cullum 2000)

The article continues in this vein, describing the cameras (and their price tags) available to students. Moreover, every current LAFS student, including those in the Screenwriting program, receives a "TechKit" (a term trademarked by LAFS). The TechKit for screenwriting students includes "a MacBook Pro loaded with software like Final Draft, Adobe Suite and Microsoft Office" ("Writing for Film & TV" n.d.). Assuring readers that the TechKit features "everything you need to start your professional screenwriting journey," LAFS frames its degree programs

and the technologies they provide to students as tools that might make the difference for aspiring screenwriters who would otherwise struggle to professionalize in the film industry.

NYFA and LAFS also claim a proximity to Hollywood through the involvement of high-profile Hollywood players as consultants and instructors for the school. At the launch of LAFS, *LA Weekly* noted…

> …cinematography classes are taught by William Fraker (Rosemary's Baby), Ralf Bode (Coal Miner's Daughter) and Janusz Kaminski (Saving Private Ryan); the directing faculty includes Jon Amiel (The Singing Detective, Entrapment) and Donald Petrie (Mystic Pizza); editing classes might be helmed by Dede Allen (Bonnie and Clyde), and Ron Judkins, Spielberg's sound mixer, might bring by the wild tracks from Saving Private Ryan for students to remix. (Cullum 2000)

And one of the more consistent and striking narratives NYFA has used to promote its proximity to Hollywood was claiming status as "the film school of choice" for the children of Hollywood filmmakers. For years, from the 1990s into the 2000s, the NYFA website proudly highlighted the various Hollywood progeny who attended the school, culminating in a lengthy list in 2006. NYFA announced that its current and former students included "the son of Steven Spielberg; the son of the former James Bond, Pierce Brosnan; the daughter of director George Romero (Night of the Living Dead); the son of Academy Award winning actor F. Murray Abraham; the sister of director Luc Besson (Fifth Element, La Femme Nikita)…" ("New York Film Academy School" 2006). And the list goes on for twice this length. Lest applicants worry that NYFA catered specifically to Hollywood's progeny, the site added diplomatically that "some of the best films to come out of the New York Film Academy are from students with no connections to the film industry" ("New York Film Academy School" 2006). Beneath the appeals to glamor in this promotional copy is also a canny implication that Hollywood celebrities know a poorly kept secret: that elite films schools can't really teach their students anything more than FPCUs like NYFA or LAFS.

Finally, LAFS and NYFA both promote their literal proximity to the commercial film industry. In 2014, a newly redesigned LAFS website assured prospective students that, at LAFS, "Hollywood is your classroom" ("Hollywood Is Your Classroom" 2014). A promotional video for the LAFS screenwriting program described the program as an opportunity to "unleash your imagination" while the visuals prominently feature Los Angeles as a media capital, showing the city's skyline and the Hollywood Walk of Fame, locating imagination in an industrial space. Students also leave the LAFS screenwriting program with a professional "portfolio," the video claims, and "industry-experienced instructors" instill in students "the technical, creative, and collaborative skills required in the film industry." Ultimately, an instructor claims, students will learn how to develop their ideas "from story drafting and dialogue creation all the way through to pitching and selling a script." Beyond graduation, LAFS's "dedicated career development team will continue to work with and guide you along your path in the entertainment industry," suggesting a longstanding career benefit to LAFS graduate status.

Similarly, NYFA's promotional materials focus on how coursework blurs the lines between its campus and professional work worlds. In a promotional video for NYFA's screenwriting program, a series of instructors pitch the school as a place where students will learn not just how to write but how to thrive professionally in the film industry. "We are teaching practical realities of the business of Hollywood," one instructor claims (New York Film Academy 2017). Another continues, describing the range of professional skills that NYFA will provide to screenwriting students: "How to find an agent or a manager. How to do with meetings. How to pitch." Another instructor promotes a class called the Business of Screenwriting as a space where students learn "how to survive in a very challenging business." And a graduate student praises the program for making it possible for students to "actually

network with Hollywood professionals." Beyond its emphasis on professionalization, the video promotes NYFA as a space where students will actually interact with Hollywood decision makers who might foster their careers.

Along these lines, the video places particular emphasis on NYFA's annual pitch festival, an event for graduating screenwriter students in which they're given the opportunity to pitch their projects directly to industry professionals. According to one instructor, students "will spend months learning the craft of pitching, which culminates in our pitch fest" (New York Film Academy 2017). Another instructor adds, "our pitch fest is probably one of the best pitch events of any film school. We hear that from our guests. We bring producers, development execs, managers." Another instructor takes over: "Truly an incredible event that we do at the Andaz Hotel on Sunset Boulevard overlooking all of Hollywood." A few students promote the event: "You're basically selling your story to Hollywood." "Sort of like a speed-dating type of thing. You go from one table to the next." A professor jumps back in: "And almost all of our students leave with some contacts." A graduate student, emulating an industry professional at the pitch fest: "Oh, here's my card. I like your writing style. Please send your script." Promoting the networking opportunities that students can earn by completing the NYFA screenwriting program, the video and its participants frame the school as a direct pipeline to industry, at a fraction of the cost of an elite film school.

Several studies of higher education have drawn out the significance of place in student decisions about where to attend college (López Turley 2009; Ovink and Kalogrides 2015; Hillman and Weichman 2016; Lee and Pirog 2022). Often, students attend schools that are nearby to them, because they have little choice (Hillman and Weichman 2016). This is particularly true for nontraditional students, who often have dependents, full-time work, and

roots in their communities (Hillman and Weichman 2016). The desire for proximity in higher education varies along ethnic and racial lines, as well, with Latino students less likely than white students to enroll in colleges that prevent them from living with their families (Ovink and Kalogrides 2015). Building on the role of place in student decisions about college, López Turley (2009) argues that scholars "should stop treating the college-choice process as though it were independent of location and start situating this process within the geographic context in which it occurs" (p. 4). Answering that call, Hillman and Weichman (2016) identify what they describe as "education deserts"—regions that present their students with few opportunities for higher education. They define education deserts as local spaces where there are either (a) no colleges or universities nearby, or (b) where only one community college is the only "public broad-access institution nearby" (p. 4), meaning that there are no other public colleges in the area designed to broadly serve the educational needs of local students.[7] FPCUs benefit from educational deserts to the extent that already accessible public two-year colleges can render them less attractive for local students (Cellini 2009). In spaces where FPCUs and public two-year colleges compete, however, FPCUs can sometimes rely on their higher marketing budgets to prevent public two-year colleges from pulling away students (Lee and Pirog 2022).

NYFA and LAFS add a wrinkle to scholarly conversations about the role of place and FPCUs in student choices about where to attend college, since they appeal to students not on the basis of their geographic convenience but instead on the basis of their claimed proximity to the film industry. Recall that LAFS promoted itself at its launch as "the only one-year professional craft school in the area" (Variety Staff 1999), and that NYFA distinguished its services from

[7] "Local" can be understood in various ways. But, for the purpose of their study, Hillman and Weichman (2016) identified localities within the United States using "commuting zones," which describe as "cluster counties according to journey-to-work data from the U.S. Census Bureau" (p. 6).

those offered at more "elite" schools in media capitals like New York and Los Angeles. Unstated but crucial to the appeal of these schools for prospective students is the belief that the bulk of the United States represents a professionalization desert of sorts for those who aspire to become screenwriters. NYFA and LAFS appeal to students on the understanding that a practical screenwriting education, one that might lead to a career, could *only* happen in what Curtin (2003) described as a "media capital"—an urban center of media activity whose distinctive industry logics influence the global flow of culture. With campuses in Los Angeles (NYFA and LAFS), New York (NYFA), and South Beach (NYFA), LAFS and NYFA appeal to their students not on the basis of their geographic convenience but on the basis of their embeddedness within the spaces and professional communities they position as central to American film culture.

It's worth noting that more elite screenwriting degree programs located in media capitals, like those at NYU and USC, use similar strategies and narratives. A promotional video for USC's screenwriting program, for example, positions the school as "a place for young writers who want to work in the business" ("Writing Division" n.d.). Distinguishing between creative expression and professionalization, the Writing Division's chair, Jack Epps, Jr. (who, a title notes, was the screenwriter for *Top Gun*), claims that USC wants students "to be able to not only write their vision but also get their vision produced. It's a blending of art and commerce." Later, a grad student in the Writing Division describes how TV writing courses are run like rough-and-tumble writer's rooms: "I like talking over people. I like rapid talking and shouting and just pitching and cracking jokes." An alum promotes the fact that USC is constantly updating its curriculum to meet shifting industrial practices: "The landscape is changing significantly for writing. There are so many different ways to get into it. Knowing how to do those different disciplines can help you in your career." Moreover, the video promotes the industry connections

embedded into the program through its faculty and alumni. An undergraduate student notes that, "every teacher, every person in the office knows someone who can help you out, because it's USC."

USC even offers its screenwriting students a pitch festival with film professionals as the culmination of its undergraduate program. Indeed, the quotes that students and instructors offer in a promotional video for USC's First Pitch event are eerily similar to those included in the video for NYFA's pitch festival: "it's speed dating for your screenplay" (Tommy Trojan 2022), an alumni and screenwriter claims. "They might ask for you to send them the script," offers the Division Chair. "I know that, in our year," one alumnus claims, "in First Pitch everybody definitely received callbacks. And there was a lot of interest. I think some people were repped." Broadly, the school's website promotes the USC Writing Division as a space that "teaches students how to create the kinds of scripts that excite creative collaborators, agents, managers, and investors to become real projects." The BFA, in particular, is promoted as a degree program "for students who want a real career in screen and television writing" ("Writing Division" n.d.).

While NYU's BFA program in Dramatic Writing emphasizes that it is designed to "give students a liberal arts based education with an emphasis on writing for theater, film and television" ("Undergraduate Program" n.d.), downplaying the role of the screenwriting program as a pipeline into the film industry, NYU's screenwriting program mirrors those of NYFA and LAFS in other ways. For example, NYU has begun offering a short-term screenwriting workshop for nontraditional students. Encouraging students to "invest in your passion" ("Screenwriting Certificate Through Film and TV" n.d.), a promotional video for NYU's summer screenwriting program features a woman who describes herself as a practicing CPA who recently stopped working in accounting to pursue her passion for film. The student notes that the

program gave her an opportunity to "invest" in that passion. She's frank about the challenges of managing her coursework while working and commuting from New Jersey and working part-time in Brooklyn, but she praises the program for allowing her to take night classes.

The student adds that the professors "aren't just academics floating around in an institution. They are real-world professionals who have been involved in the film industry, had some success, sold scripts, or worked on films." Praising that experience for giving her regular access to seasoned writers, the student contrasts NYU's summer program with "something that you get in a guru seminar over a weekend in Tampa." Finally, the student speculates that being associated with "the Tisch brand" might help her develop a career as a screenwriter. She mentions working at a production company in Brooklyn and suggests that her connections at Tisch enabled the job. Throughout the interview, the student highlights those aspects of summer program that distinguish it from more casual how-to screenwriting products—like weekend seminars—but also from full-on degree programs in screenwriting. Only at a summer session like NYU's non-credit certificate program would a student be able to attend the Tisch School of the Arts, learn from its experienced instructors, and gain the social capital that comes with attending Tisch, while also taking night classes and working part-time outside of coursework.

Nor is NYU alone in its efforts to appeal to nontraditional students looking for short-term workshops in screenwriting. UCLA has for many years run a successful how-to screenwriting business in its Extensions programs. Offering rotating screenwriting workshops throughout the year, students in the Extensions program can take 10-week (or longer) workshops on craft-focused topics "Crafting Powerful Dialogue," more industry-oriented topics like "TV Series Showrunning," and professionalization-focused topics like the "Show Bible and Pitch Deck Workshop." Most cost less than a $1000 ("Screenwriting" n.d.). And, just as LAFS and NYFA

promote their proximity to the film industry at its most profitable centers, nonprofit universities with prominent filmmaking programs have in the last decade expanded their facilities to include campuses in Los Angeles: NYU, Columbia College, Syracuse University, UT-Austin, Carnegie Mellon, and several others have begun offering their filmmaking students the option to earn credits in Los Angeles for a semester or more (Doperalski 2012). Emerson College spent $100 million on its LA facilities in the heart of Hollywood (Doperalski 2012). All of which is to say that the emphasis on proximity to Hollywood in the promotional materials for LAFS and NYFA is heightened but is reflective of a broader sense in higher education that effective pre-industry pipelines for screenwriters are located physically in Los Angeles.

Examined as pre-industry pipelines to the film industry, non-profit academic institutions operate according to similar industrial logics as FPCUs, emphasizing their proximity to Hollywood and their "hands-on" training in industrial workflows. Miller (2013) even argues that film schools are, broadly speaking, detriments to higher education because they are so often "central to the university's mission of making money, serving capital, and producing workers" (p. 156). The purpose is drawing these connections is not to suggest an equivalence between non-profit degree programs and FPCUs, however. Non-profit institutions are commercially motivated, to be sure, but they are typically not as dependent on tuition for revenue, and they are not structurally driven to generate profit; they are not likely to open enrollment for degree programs to anyone who wants to enroll, nor to expand their enrollment numbers when nearly half of their current students fail to graduate. The low retention rates, expanding profits, and open enrollment policies of NYFA and LAFS speak subtextually through their promotional narratives, which frame industrial gear, workflows, and proximity to the film industry as keys to professional communities disproportionately reserved for affluent white men.

By the same token, what speaks subtextually through the promotional materials for elite screenwriting programs is an understanding that the value of a degree from NYU, USC, or UCLA is only partially about what their students learn. These schools are pathways to careers *because* they are exclusive and exclusionary. Writing anecdotally as someone who worked for four years in the film industry and industry-adjacent jobs, I was told in multiple job interviews that my degrees from NYU and USC made me seem a safer hire and a more attractive job candidate. No one quizzed me about what I learned or how my coursework might have prepared me for professional work better than someone who had attended a less prestigious school. So, when I draw distinctions between non-profit institutions and FPCUs, I want to be clear that I am not suggesting that non-profit schools are without fault. On the contrary, FPCUs are enabled by the persistent failure of non-profit institutions to serve low-income and nontraditional students. The purpose of drawing such distinctions is to demonstrate the extent to which pipelines to screenwriting work are stratified, with the most "accessible" pathways to professionalization driven by profit and consequently committed to reproducing the very concentration of media power that they claim to upend through their services. That same contradiction—appealing to excluded aspirants and yet reproducing the very aspects of the system that exclude them—characterizes the how-to screenwriting industry as a whole.

NYFA as a Global FPCU

At a ceremony to ring the closing bell of the NASDAQ in 2008, then-president of NYFA Jerry Sherlock described the school as a space "for students from all over the world that want to get a hands-on filmmaking education… It's a no-nonsense approach. We welcome everyone and anyone" (New York Film Academy 2008). Indeed, NYFA was undergoing an expansion in 2008

that would transform the school from a national FPCU into a global enterprise. Today, NYFA boasts a number of branch campuses in cities around the world, including Paris, Moscow, Beijing, Shanghai, Florence, Abu Dhabi, and Nigeria. Moreover, NYFA's American campuses serve as many international students as domestic, with a considerably higher proportion of international students than even other FPCUs like LAFS. Appealing to students from around the world who want an American film degree and proximity to Hollywood, NYFA generates a substantial fraction—if not a majority—of its revenue from a global customer base.

NYFA's expansion beyond the United States began early in the school's history. As early as 2000, NYFA offered students study abroad programs to major European cities like London and Paris. Initially, such programs seemed designed to entice American students to spend more money, if they could afford it, on the school's short-term filmmaking and acting workshops. NYFA offered both 4-week and 6-week filmmaking programs in London and Paris, each costing around $4000, not including equipment fees. Promotional copy for these programs promised "exciting" getaways ("Study Abroad" 2000). Students at the Paris filmmaking program, the NYFA website claimed, would "enjoy the delicious food, the brilliant culture, the beautiful art," and so on. London was promoted as a glittering cosmopolis that would inspire filmmakers to reach new heights of creativity: "with its love-it-or-hate-it grandeur, London stands out as a city on the creative edge." Broadly, NYFA exoticized its study abroad locations. In 2001, the school began offering filmmaking programs in Japan and China. Pitching the programs toward American students, the NYFA site claimed that students would be "immersed in Asian life at restaurants and street markets, in ancient Chinese temples, or in parks watching the morning Tai Chi ritual" ("Tokyo Shanghai Taiwan" 2001). Emphasizing the appeal of their study abroad cities as tourist locations, NYFA framed their workshops as pleasurable vacation opportunities.

Occasionally, the pleasure-based appeals of NYFA global workshops would be even more direct, as when NYFA promoted its programs in Florence by promising students a "free Vespa to travel Europe and take home with you!" ("New York Film Academy" 2012). And in 2005, NYFA offered a Filmmaking & Acting One-Week Cruise in which students would learn filmmaking while sailing across the Aegean and Mediterranean Sea aboard the SS New York Film Academy. The NYFA site promised that students would "take in the sun, swim in the emerald waters, and learn how to direct their own movies or act in them" ("Filmmaking and Acting One-Week Cruise" 2005). These perks were designed to making NYFA's workshops not efficient or affordable but fun, even as promotional copy insisted that the workshops are "focused, intensive, and extremely hands-on" ("New York Film Academy in Florence, Italy" n.d.). Despite their avowed mission to make film education accessible, NYFA sought to make film education as diverting and pleasurable—and consequently as profitable—as possible.

It's unclear to what extent these programs were pursued by American students or by local students, but by 2007 NYFA was promoting its international campuses as more than tourist locations—they were also footholds for the NYFA brand in a global how-to market. In June of 2007, Jerry Sherlock inked a deal with the government of Abu Dhabi to bring New York Film Academy to the country, with the school set to open in January of 2008 (Carver 2007). An article covering the deal in *Screen Daily* claimed that the focus of the program would be on "developing indigenous talent" (Carver 2007). Abed Awad, the president of the new Abu Dhabi Film Commission positioned the new NYFA campus as a step forward for the nation: "Ultimately, we need a local film industry if we're able to participate in the global film industry and build creative capital." While the NYFA website would still promote the Abu Dhabi campus to American students—a promotional page for the Abu Dhabi program would feature an image of

someone smiling in NYFA T-shirt on a camel ("Abu Dhabi" 2008)—the site also emphasized that the program was a "branch campus" that "will become an educational center for the nascent film industry in Abu Dhabi and the region" ("Abu Dhabi" 2007). NYFA would immediately offer one-year and two-year programs in Abu Dhabi, alongside shorter-term workshops.

NYFA would set out to forge a similar relationship with Nigeria as part of the country's broad efforts to build up its film industry. The media company Del-York International partnered with NYFA in Nigeria in 2010 to offer students there a four-week screenwriting and filmmaking program in Abuja (Pasquine 2010). Promoting the workshop on their website after the fact, NYFA pitched the workshop not as a space for American tourists but as a service for Nigeria. "During a time of national rebranding," a NYFA blog post on the workshop claimed, "a modernized film industry could be a powerful unifying agent for the country of Nigeria" (Pasquine 2010). The blog post added that NYFA "was honored to be invited by Linus Idahosa and Del-York International to help launch a filmmaking program in Abuja and hopes that the Nigerian film industry will continue to grow and gain recognition." A promotional video for NYFA's Nigeria program produced by Del-York International in 2011 pitched the program as a good thing for the nation of Nigeria, not just students. In a talking head interview, instructor Pat Utomi claimed, "I think that this will make a phenomenal difference to the motion picture production enterprise in Nigeria" (Del-York Creative Academy 2011). The video also offered viewers the opportunity to "sponsor a student." Indeed, the four-week program was expensive. A 2012 Politico article examining NYFA's expansion into the developing world noted that a short-term workshop in Nigeria cost $5000, with most students attending "on scholarships sponsored by corporations and Nigerian government institutions" (Rice 2012).

NYFA has used its branch campuses and study abroad programs to enhance and expand its name recognition around the world. Through its deals with the governments of Abu Dhabi and Nigeria, moreover, the school has generated considerable revenue from state funds in other countries—just as it has with the federal loans granted to students within the United States. In both the United States and abroad, NYFA has capitalized on the stratification of pre-industry pipelines for screenwriting careers in different ways—in the United States by appealing directly to students who cannot afford or are unable to gain entry into schools that are higher in the hierarchy for pathways to film work, and abroad by appealing directly to national governments that perceive NYFA—whether accurately or not—as a meaningful representative the American film industry. NYFA has capitalized on the prestige of the Hollywood in another away, by appealing to international students who want to pursue an American filmmaking degree.

While data on the race and ethnicity of students at NYFA is inconsistent and often incomplete, with many students declining to report their race, the most striking fact that emerges from NYFA's reported data on race-based questions is the school's unusually high number of international students, whose status is reported in the race and ethnicity portion of the data collected by the Department of Education. In the 2019-2020 academic year, a little more than half of all undergraduates categorized themselves as nonresident alien students (U.S. Department of Education 2019i). Similarly, of the roughly 1200 students enrolled full-time as undergraduates at NYFA in the 2020-21 academic year, 44 percent identified as nonresident aliens (U.S. Department of Education 2020c). The consistent dominance of international students at NYFA in recent years suggests that they have become a key source of revenue for the school and reframes the school's efforts to offer increasing numbers of workshops around the world. Aside from increasing the school's prestige, branch campuses and satellite workshops around the world

increase the name-recognition of NYFA as a global, not simply national, for-profit film school. For students interested in getting an American filmmaking degree, NYFA's global presence and open enrollment policy may make it particularly attractive.

As I explore in different ways over multiple chapters in this dissertation, the how-to screenwriting industry in the United States consistently ties itself to Hollywood as an American film industry while at the same time appealing to a global customer base of aspiring screenwriters. Exporting screenwriting knowledge to global aspirants, schools like NYFA, magazines like *Creative Screenwriting* (Chapter 1), and platforms like The Black List (Chapter 4) frame screenwriting as a creative practice that is at once universal in its aesthetic standards, meritocratically accessible to anyone willing to learn those standards, and yet defined at its core by the industrial needs of Hollywood as an American institution. Hence, the value of studying filmmaking in Florence is not to learn filmmaking as it is practiced in Italy but instead by filmmakers trained in the United States (at elite film schools, no less!), and students in Nigeria, a country with an intensely prolific and profitable film industry of its own, are taught curricula that center American filmmakers. Learning to write screenplays or make films like a professional, the how-to industry suggests, is learning to do these things as they are done in the United States.

Conclusion

Building on media industries studies and higher education studies, this chapter has set out to map the stratification of higher education as a pipeline to professional screenwriting work, focusing on the efforts of FPCUs to compete with and ultimately differentiate themselves from more elite degree programs at non-profit institutions. I first set out to understand the factors that enabled NYFA and LAFS—the two most prominent for-profit film schools with screenwriting

programs in the United States—to emerge in the 1990s and then expand dramatically over the next few decades. Drawing on publicly available data, I argued that these schools cater in particular to nontraditional and international students who aspire to professional status in the film industry but who are otherwise excluded from more elite screenwriting programs like those offered at USC and NYU. I also analyzed the promotional materials used by these schools to attract students, drawing out their persistent emphasis on developing practical skills for their students and hands-on experience with screenwriting tools and techniques. In ways that reproduce the strategies use by screenwriting higher education programs at non-profit institutions, NYFA and LAFS position themselves as pipelines to professionalization for their students, promising immediate proximity to professional filmmaking work.

For-profit screenwriting schools are structured to generate profit, regardless of the cost to students, and as a result they emphasize professionalization more often and more directly than screenwriting programs in nonprofit institutions. But, I have also argued that structures of exclusion in higher education have enabled for-profit screenwriting programs to exist and thrive. Flawed as they are, for-profit screenwriting schools also provide a service to low-income and nontraditional students who otherwise could not gain admittance to or afford to pursue a filmmaking education. Across the how-to screenwriting industry, commercial services profit from selling their customers hope for professionalization. But, as the following chapter continues to explore, that sense of hope often carries with it a belief that those excluded from the film industry are, in the ultimate analysis, those who do not deserve to be full participants in cultural production.

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CHAPTER 3

Scriptshadow and Gatekeeper Lore

In 2012, *The New York Times* profiled an emerging voice in the how-to screenwriting industry: Carson Reeves, creator of the blog Scriptshadow.[8] "Five days a week," the profile said of Reeves, "he offers a breezy course on screenwriting theory, passing along tips on structure, character and dialogue to an eager audience of aspiring writers" (Rossen 2012). In the long history of the how-to screenwriting industry, popular screenwriting educators are commonplace, but two things made Reeves noteworthy: first, Scriptshadow was devoted to reviews of industry screenplays that were in development but as yet unproduced—the newest scripts sourced from the beating heart of Hollywood. Second, Reeves had little-to-no experience in the industry he theorized. Despite his visibility, he hadn't worked professionally as either a screenwriter or a script reader, the typical prerequisites for how-to screenwriting experts.

Given Reeves's lack of experience, why did anyone pay him the sort of attention he received from *The New York Times* or assign any value to the advice he offered aspirants? According to Reeves, his expertise arose from the fact that he's read more screenplays than most: "One of the reasons I have a unique perspective on screenwriting is that I've read more bad scripts, from cover to cover, than anyone else on earth," Reeves wrote in a 2021 blog post: "I can't prove this, of course. But if I'm not number 1, I'm definitely in the top 5" (Reeves 2021). As a result of his steady work analyzing scripts over the past decade and change, Reeves has undoubtedly developed a strong understanding of their mechanics. It is hard to argue with the fact that Reeves has attained some degree of expertise through his years of work. But that doesn't explain what enabled him to achieve visibility in the first place.

[8] Carson Reeves is a pseudonym.

As I argue in the following pages, Reeves's authority as a screenwriting expert was built on his access to and willingness to share unproduced screenplays by professional screenwriters. Sharing links to downloadable copies of scripts, first on his blog and then through a mailing list, Reeves typically did so without permission from the authors. As a result, his blog became notorious among professional screenwriters and of considerable appeal to aspiring screenwriters, who found in Scriptshadow a source for a sort of screenplay difficult to find elsewhere. Since the advent of digital file sharing, screenplays have been relatively easy to find online. However, the *newest* screenplays—screenplays that have been purchased (or even simply considered) by established producers but not yet produced—are not easy to come by. Reeves offered his readers access to the latter and promoted the newest scripts as vital means for aspirants to understand what Hollywood decision makers want (or don't want) *right now*.

Reeves is not, on his own, a major influence in American screenwriting, and he would remain on the periphery in most scholarly models of the film industry. In fact, by distributing screenplays in defiance of copyright law, Reeves might at first glance seem an *anti*-industrial figure. But I have chosen Reeves as the focus of this chapter because his visibility in the how-to screenwriting industry defies conventional wisdom about how screenwriting authority is formed. Reeves represents a new group of how-to screenwriting experts who have achieved visibility and authority among aspiring screenwriters, despite their amateur status, through their reliance on digital file-sharing networks and their mastery of user-generated-content platforms like YouTube, Blogger, and others. Flaunting copyright in ways that would be professionally risky for screenwriting experts with industry experience, experts like Reeves position themselves as fearless truth-tellers and aggregators of industry knowledge that digital archives of media have made newly possible to collect and distribute to Hollywood outsiders.

What forbidden knowledge does Reeves sell to aspirants? His unfiltered opinion, built on his expertise reading and analyzing the latest scripts in development, about precisely what industry gatekeepers want from screenwriters moment to moment. In a 2017 blog post, Reeves described the "six audiences a screenwriter must write for" (Reeves 2017a). Subverting the expectation that he might talk about segments of the public, Reeves instead listed the following audiences as most important: (1) script readers, (2) producers, (3) literary agents, (4) studios, (5) the film industry writ large, and finally (6) "the paying audience." Reeves mused on the irony of putting moviegoers last on his list: "why does it seem like they're the least important? Because, in a way, they are. Look at how many levels the script has to get through to get to this place." For aspirants, Reeves argues, it doesn't matter how strongly a writer feels a script will appeal to moviegoing audience if it doesn't appeal to industry gatekeepers first. Describing the types of scripts that different kinds of industry decision makers like and dislike, Reeves claimed that script readers prefer simple and easy-to-follow stories, producers want "juicy characters" and "weightier themes," talent agents want unique voices, studios want low-cost, high-return concepts, and the industry writ large wants quirky, unusual fare. As for the viewers at home? Reeves suggests that "audiences" broadly want sheer entertainment.

Rendering the moviegoing public into a background blur, Reeves focused his readers instead on Hollywood gatekeepers. His advice about how to appeal to such gatekeepers in this post is generally vague and contingent. If talent agents seek out unique voices and "the industry" wants unusual stories and ideas, it remains for gatekeeper experts like Reeves to keep aspirants up to date on precisely what is usual in the film industry at any given time. Reeves positions himself as an indispensable intermediary between aspirants and an audience of industry professionals whose tastes are otherwise obscure. Reeves is also careful to argue for the

significance of industry decision makers beyond script readers, whose opinions can be readily obtained through the various feedback services available to screenwriters. Capitalizing on his status as a nonprofessional development worker, Reeves presents himself as someone who, by working from the "shadows," can uniquely afford to be frank and honest with aspiring screenwriters about the ever-shifting rules for professionalization in Hollywood.

This chapter argues of Reeves that he traffics in a particular form of industry lore—*gatekeeper lore*—that encourages aspirants to mold themselves and their work to shadowy representations of what industry decision makers want from moment to moment. Situating gatekeeper lore within existing scholarship on industry lore, I then draw out the discourses of meritocracy and entrepreneurialism that Reeves uses to render the lore he creates valuable. With more than 3500 blog posts published between 2009 and the present, Scriptshadow has been an active screenwriting blog for more than a decade. Although it was not possible for me to review every blog post in detail, I paid particular attention to non-review posts, which make up roughly a third of the blog, as these often include reflections on the blog's place in the film industry and value for readers. Lastly, I consider how Reeves's authority as a screenwriting expert was made possible by his access to copyrighted material, and the implications this has for cultural authority in the how-to screenwriting industry.

Like the more conventional how-to screenwriting services explored in the first two chapters, Scriptshadow is driven at least in part by profit. Reeves does not charge readers for access to his blog, but from nearly the beginning he commodified his perceived expertise by selling feedback to aspirants at a premium cost. Reeves has capitalized on the belief among aspiring screenwriters that professionalization in Hollywood requires first appealing to an insular community of gatekeepers—script readers, assistants, development executives, talent agents, and

managers—whose tastes are both particular and ever-shifting, responding continually to industry lore and to emerging trends in professional screenwriting. While screenwriting manuals may offer their readers advice about stable principles of the craft, tapping into the latest trends in Hollywood requires more direct, more continual access to information about precisely what types of scripts are selling on a week-to-week basis. Dependent for his continued appeal on an investment in that information among aspirants, Reeves promotes his blog as a source for the latest trends in screenwriting—the (previously) unwritten rules that dictate success or failure for would-be screenwriters.

Theorizing Gatekeeper Lore

Havens describes industry lore as "any interpretation among industry insiders of the material, social, or historical realities that the media industries face" (2014a, p. 50). Industry lore shapes what gets made and for whom, constructing audiences according to the biases and assumptions of industry insiders and devaluing audiences that are less visible or comprehensible to decision makers. As a product of insider beliefs, industry lore is not always visible to the public (Havens, 2013), prompting how-to media experts to frame themselves as sources of hidden and highly valuable knowledge. But what figures like Reeves sell to their customers is a particular, nonstandard form of industry lore—gatekeeper lore—that positions industry gatekeepers, not public audiences, as the most valuable audiences for aspiring media professionals to target. A subset of industry lore, gatekeeper lore is a shadowy reflection of what actually attracts its imagined audience, a reflection that becomes tangible over time as it calcifies into conventional wisdom. Put simply, gatekeeper lore is the conventional knowledge among aspiring media professionals about what will best appeal to industry gatekeepers.

While industry lore has clear descriptive value as a framework for understanding how media workers collectively turn their beliefs into practices, the clearest stakes of the concept lie in the extent to which industry lore reproduces cultural beliefs about who has value and who does not. Saha and Van Lente (2022) examine how industry lore racializes professional and aspiring professional media makers, for example. Examining the UK book publishing industry, they point out that publishers are less likely to accept work from authors of color if that work doesn't conform to white, middle-class expectations about the sorts of books authors of colors should write. As a consequence, "being able to write [professionally] in the most commercially lucrative of genres, like romance and classic Christie-esque thriller, is a privilege denied to writers of color" (1814). In their study, Saha and Van Lente interviewed authors of color in the UK who were aware of these expectations and leaned into them to become published. While these authors were professionals responding to industry lore, their efforts to appeal to publishing companies alongside a broader public demonstrate the importance of gatekeeper lore: if industry lore shapes what gets produced, gatekeeper lore shapes what gets pitched to decision makers in the first place and how aspirants manage themselves into more suitable job candidates.

To the extent that gatekeeper lore reproduces the biases already present in industry lore, gatekeeper experts encourage aspirants of all identities to internalize those biases in their work. But it is important here to reiterate that, as a subset of industry lore, gatekeeper lore has distinctive features. Industry decision makers set out to legitimate industry lore by gathering data about their audiences, but the same cannot be done by aspirants in their efforts to understand gatekeepers. Media industries are hard at work accumulating data about their audiences, enough that Havens (2014b) suggests that industry lore is increasingly complicated by an excess of data in an "era of overabundance"—an overabundance that has only been exacerbated by the

expansion and proliferation of streaming services (Burroughs 2018). By contrast, there is a dearth of organized data about what industry decision makers want and enjoy in potential projects. Beyond the obvious answer—something profitable—it remains for figures like Reeves to interpret what gatekeepers want. For his readers, examining what decision makers purchase, and not long after the moment of purchase, seems like a reasonable way to determine that.

Gatekeeper lore builds on Bishop's (2020) concept algorithmic lore: the assumptions made by content creators about how best to manipulate algorithms on user-generated content (UGC) platforms—how algorithms can "be *won*" (Bishop, 2020, p. 1), in other words. The figure of the gatekeeper expert mirrors that of the "algorithmic expert"—entrepreneurial how-to workers in the digital creator industry who sell aspiring media producers knowledge about how best to manipulate algorithms. However, algorithmic experts promote themselves as authorities on what algorithmic systems are designed to reward (Bishop 2020) rather than what industry decision-makers temperamentally want. In some ways, algorithmic experts and lore represent threats to gatekeeper experts like Reeves, who rely for their influence on their ability to divine what an obscure community of industry gatekeepers wants. In their place, algorithmic experts offer their followers knowledge about how aspirants can more directly reach the public, manipulating algorithms (and the self) to become as visible as possible on UGC platforms. Inevitably, however, gatekeeper lore and algorithmic lore coexist, with shrewd how-to experts straddling both forms of knowledge.

The gatekeeper concept has been used to address varied research questions in cultural theory and social psychology and is therefore worth unpacking briefly to clarify what I mean by the term. Among the range of intermediaries at work in media industries, gatekeepers in particular are those who "admit persons or works in a cultural field" (Janssen and Verboord

2015). Social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1947) is generally regarded to be the progenitor of gatekeeping theory. Lewin wanted to understand why people eat what they eat and how their food got to the table in the first place. Lewin argued that the movement of food into a household is governed by whomever does the buying—a "gatekeeper" for the pantry. Focusing his research on these gatekeepers, Lewin examined how financial constraints, health considerations, taste, and social aspirations shaped their food purchasing habits. Adapting Lewin's ideas to journalism studies only a few years later, David Manning White (1950) argued that participants in the journalistic process manage the flow of news from the world at large to the reader at home—serving as gatekeepers for the facts of the day in ways that reflect their respective beliefs, biases, and constraints. Paul Hirsch (1972) would bring the conversation into the study of cultural industries, arguing that gatekeepers of various stripes—talent scouts, production companies, and critics among them—manage the flow of cultural products to the public.

If in journalism studies gatekeeper theory has served to acknowledge and analyze the role that intermediaries play in shaping the news, industry studies would expand the critical value of the concept by exploring the role of the gatekeeper in determining which aspirants participate in the cultural production of commercial media. Disproportionately white, male, and affluent, gatekeepers in media industries privilege aspirants and creatives with similar attributes (Negus 2002; Banks and Milestone 2011; Conor, Gill, and Taylor 2015; Wreyford 2018). While some recent work on gatekeeping in digital cultures has furthered the approach taken in journalism studies, emphasizing the role that gatekeepers and gatekeeping mechanisms play in shaping the flow of content to the public (Bonini and Gandini 2019; Siciliano 2022), gatekeeper lore as a concept foregrounds the role that gatekeepers play in enabling select creators—not just content—to achieve visibility in the commercial media industries (Balaji 2020; Thorkildsen and Rykkja

2022). Even as algorithms and platforms play an increasing role in gatekeeping the flow of culture to consumers (Bonini and Gandini 2019), creators are conscious of the biases embedded in these systems and use them strategically to promote their careers (Bishop 2019, 2020; Cotter 2019; Duffy 2020; Klawitter and Hargittai 2018; MacDonald 2021; Morris 2020).

This chapter also builds on Scott's (2019) research into reactive misogyny at work in fan cultures and the industries that cater to them. Scott argues that media industries and men within fan communities have resisted female fan engagement, validating male fans as the ideal in the process. Characterizing fan misogyny as a collaboration between male fans and media industries, Scott argues that male entrepreneurial fans (or "fantrepreneurs") and fanboy auteurs are often designated by fans and media industries to stand in for (masculine) fan communities. Although aspiring screenwriting are not fans per se, there is something similar at work among aspiring screenwriters and the how-to screenwriting industry. As an aspiring screenwriter who rose to prominence in popular screenwriting culture by making copyrighted material accessible to aspirants, Reeves is an entrepreneur who positions himself as a bridge between aspiring professionals and Hollywood. Just as fantrepreneurs influence widespread assumptions among fans about who should or should not be acknowledged as a fan, gatekeeper experts influence widespread assumptions among aspirants about how they should alter themselves to appeal to media industries: who should or not bother pursuing professional work in Hollywood.

A Pirate's Life for Reeves

Reeves began his career, like many how-to screenwriting experts, as an aspiring screenwriter and filmmaker. He attended film school before moving out to Los Angeles in the early 2000s to make movies. And for many years he struggled to professionalize. Looking back

on this period, Reeves wrote that he failed to find success for a simple reason: he was "a terrible screenwriter," a fact that he attributes to his ignorance of screenplay mechanics: "I didn't know what I was doing wrong" (Reeves n.d.-a). According to Reeves, a turning point arrived when a friend sent him a recently sold screenplay that hadn't yet been produced and encouraged him to read it. Reeves "opened the script begrudgingly, preparing to be bored out of my mind, and instead had as close to a religious experience as a writer can have" (Reeves, n.d.-a). Reeves claims he read screenplays voraciously after his conversion experience, which inspired him to create a blog, Scriptshadow, where he would review unproduced scripts by professional screenwriters and so impart his newfound understanding of screenwriting craft to others. Despite Reeves's lack of professional experience, Scriptshadow would quickly find an audience among both aspirants and professionals alike. Although the scope and balance of that readership is difficult to quantify, Reeves's notoriety is certainly measurable: national publications like *Wired* picked up on the blog's buzz within its first year, touting Scriptshadow as a new means for the general public to insinuate itself in the film development process (Brown 2009).

Crucially, Reeves not only reviewed but posted links to downloadable copies of the industry screenplays he got his hands on. Eventually, and presumably to avoid legal repercussions, Reeves stopped posting these links directly to his blog, sending them to readers instead through a newsletter that readers could sign up to receive. Sometimes the links would be active for only a matter of hours before Reeves deactivated them, whether at the request of the screenwriter or of the producers who had purchased the scripts. Reeves acquires the screenplays he reviews and distributes through a network of script traders within Hollywood. Although screenplays are theoretically protected from being publicly displayed without permission, assistants and interns in Hollywood regularly participate in informal networks of script-sharing

that make enforcing copyright law difficult for screenwriters and script owners. Despite the amount of money riding on script sales, screenplays are often shared among industry professionals as PDFs that are unmarked and unencrypted, making them easy to leak and difficult to track. However, those who do not work in the film industry are unlikely to participate in such networks, because those who share industry scripts understand that leaking them to the public comes with professional risks in an already precarious industry. As a result, unproduced screenplays by professional screenwriters are theoretically spreadable but are practically accessible only to those who can afford to work in the development industry.

For that very reason, those in Reeves's immediate orbit were concerned by his willingness to leak unproduced screenplays to the broader public when Scriptshadow launched. Only a few months after Scriptshadow went live, the community of script traders Reeves relied on kicked him out, citing "fears that my reviews were drawing attention to them" (Reeves 2009a). Reeves explained the situation in a blog post: "Although I am upset, there are no hard feelings. I understand [the script traders] were just covering their asses" (Reeves 2009a). Reeves claimed he still had other sources for industry scripts, but he also called on his readers to help him keep the blog alive by sending him new scripts by professional writers: "So if you're plugged in and have access to these scripts, send them my way. Your identity will remain anonymous. You have my word!" (Reeves 2009a). Conscripting his readers into an anonymous network of sources for new material, Reeves built on his burgeoning popularity to ensure that people with access to scripts in circulation would send him new material on a regular basis. Before the day was through, Reeves reported that a number of readers had already sent him screenplays. He even set up a rotating "Need" list for specific scripts that he had heard about but hadn't yet acquired.

Reeves's willingness to share copyrighted material with his readers has earned him a following among aspirants, but it has also drawn criticism from established industry professionals, who claim that Reeves is hurting working screenwriters. In December 2009, less than a year after the blog launched, prominent screenwriter John August published a two-part post to his own blog explaining "How ScriptShadow hurts screenwriters" (August 2009a; 2009b). August recounted an experience he had had earlier in the year with a screenplay then in development at Fox for a tentpole movie. According to August, ScriptShadow had acquired and posted a review of an early draft of his project, and as a result, Fox executives and legal representatives placed "extraordinary restrictions on exactly who could read the script" (August 2009a). Contributing to a discussion of August's blog post on the screenwriting forum Done Deal Pro, screenwriter Gary Whitta described himself as "on August's side of the issue," writing that he found it "kinda distressing that so many people seem to think publishing unfinished creative work without the permission of the writer is okay" (Whitta 2009). Describing Reeves as a threat to working screenwriters, August and Whitta made the case that, by posting screenplays without the permission of their writers, Scriptshadow was putting their livelihoods in jeopardy.

August devoted most of his blog posts, however, to rejecting the idea that access to industry scripts needs democratizing. August claimed that "Aspiring screenwriters have always had access to this material the same way Reeves apparently got access to it: by working and interning in the industry" (August 2009a). In his second blog post, August responded to dissenting reader comments by suggesting that aspiring screenwriters can read Hollywood scripts in many cases simply by googling them, dismissing the difference between professionally written scripts and *the latest* industry scripts as a superficial interest in Hollywood "buzz" (August 2009b). The fact remains, however, that many aspiring professional screenwriters do not

live in media capitals, work in the film industry, or have a practical means to do so. Entry-level jobs and internships in Hollywood are notoriously exploitative, accessible only to those who can afford to take substantial financial risks in pursuing them. August argued further that the popularity of ScriptShadow "speaks to a culture of entitlement" (August 2009a) among aspiring professionals. Echoing August, the prominent screenwriting blogger The Bitter Script Reader (TBSR) characterized many of Reeves's defenders as "a group of entitled, aspiring screenwriters" (The Bitter Script Reader 2009). Both claimed that, in the final analysis, studios own the screenplays they purchase and have a legal right to fight copyright infringement.

August and TBSR objected to Scriptshadow in part because Reeves's willingness to share pirated copies of screenplays exposed producers to enough financial risk that they considered cracking down on the informal flow of copyrighted material within Hollywood. August described what he envisioned as a nightmare scenario in which development workers could be fired for informally distributing screenplays in ways that were once acceptable; screenwriters would have to keep a closer eye on their laptops, lest anyone steal and share their work; and writers hired for studio projects might be forced to do their work in studio offices, on studio computers (August 2009a). For August, the fear was that Reeves's work might force studios to take more stringent measures to enforce laws already on the books protecting their intellectual property: "The more often sites like Scriptshadow poke that hornet's nest," August warned," the bigger the reaction is going to be" (August 2009a). In other words, Scriptshadow exposed, by its very existence, that digital technology had evolved to such a point that studios could no longer protect their intellectual property without taking extreme measures to enforce copyright. Scriptshadow's survival, however, has demonstrated that studios are willing to allow figures like Reeves to flaunt copyright law rather than overhaul the protections imposed on digital scripts.

While screenwriters own the copyright on their own screenplays until they are sold, understanding how Reeves was able to distribute screenplays without the permission of the authors and without serious consequence requires looking back into the history of screenwriting's place in copyright law. From the beginning, copyright law has existed to benefit film producers and financiers rather than screenwriters, directors, or other participants in the filmmaking process. In 1912, just as the US government was beginning to dismantle the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC) with an anti-trust lawsuit, President Taft signed into law the Townsend Amendment, which granted federal copyright protections to commercially distributed films (Liepa 2011). No longer hindered by the fear that larger companies would pirate their work, a consortium of independent producers on the west coast developed what would emerge as the Hollywood studio system. But while copyright law now protected finished films, the same protections were not afforded to screenwriters. It would not be until 1978, when the 1976 Copyright Act came into effect, that unpublished materials like screenplays would receive more than common law protections against unauthorized usage (Liepa 2011).

More than a minor delay, this decades-long period helped establish an entrenched production culture in which screenwriters are not authors in their own right so much as contributors to a larger industrial machine run by producers and financiers. While playwrights typically license their manuscripts to theatre producers, retaining ownership of the copyright on their plays, screenwriters had no means to make the same demands and establish similar practices within the film industry. Fisk (2016) argues that script writers in the early studio era negotiated for what benefits they could afford to demand. Since the studios claimed ownership of anything written by writers working under contract, studio writers insisted that they should at least enjoy steady work and the ability to unionize (Fisk 2016). In 1933, studio writers formed

the Screen Writers Guild (SWG), in large part to combat abuses in how the studios, as the owners of their screenplays, assigned credit to writers. Not bound by law in the assignments of credits, the studios would at least be bound by their agreements with the SWG and what would eventually become the Writers Guild of America (WGA). Moreover, the WGA would fight to maintain their authority to arbitrate disputes about screenwriting contracts (Fisk 2016), discouraging writers from turning to the courts to resolve their issues.

As Hoyt (2011) points out, California Civil Code offered broader copyright protections to authors than the rest of the United States up until 1947, enabling writers in Hollywood to win some early victories in the courts. Even where a case could be brought against producers, however, shrewd aspirants were often loathe to file suits, lest they gain a litigious reputation. In a buyer's market for screenplays, American screenwriters have always had more to lose than to gain by suing the decision makers who might hire them. Where fledgling writers did file suit, Hollywood simply responded by erecting more barriers to entry for aspirants (Hoyt 2011). While screenwriters post-1978 may own the copyright on their scripts under federal law, for example, most production companies now refuse to accept "unsolicited submissions" as a matter of policy, largely as a means to forestall the copyright lawsuits that might result (Hoyt 2011). With the collapse of the studio system in the postwar era, studio contracts for writers dwindled into rarity. Hollywood embraced a freelance model for screenwriting in which writers would pitch their own stories to producers, or else be hired on the basis of their existing work to develop material already owned by production companies (Bernardi and Hoxter 2017).

Today, it is also important to acknowledge that most of the screenplays that circulate among industry decision makers were not written to be produced. Instead, they were written as samples, demonstrations of skill within a particular genre that can be used to match a writer up to

a project already in development—typically, adaptations of source materials purchased and so owned by producers. While screenwriters own the copyright for the screenplays they submit to production companies, those same screenplays have little exchange value in and of themselves and are often unimportant as commodities to the industry professionals who read them and casually forward them on to colleagues (who then casually forward them on to figures like Reeves). The value embodied in an unsold spec script is usually not an original story but something more intangible: a creative sensibility and set of skills that might be matched to whatever intellectual property industry decision makers are trying to develop into a film. Given that producers are often more interested in contracting a writer for their suitability to an established project than for their own stories, the fate any individual spec script is only rarely of serious concern to companies with the clout and resources to intimidate Reeves. They have been similarly unimportant to the WGA, which focuses more on arbitrating disputes and establishing contractual standards than protecting aspirants or screenplays which are as yet unsold.

Finally, it is worth noting that many original screenplays, even when they are considered for production, are not at first sold but rather optioned—which is to say that production companies temporarily purchase the option to develop screenplays into produced films, for a fee that is considerably less than a script sale. After a period of time, if the producers do not in fact purchase the script and develop the film, the option reverts back to the writer, who may then shop the script elsewhere. However, the more a screenplay languishes in development, the more likely decision makers are to assume that the script is not worth making. A negative review from Scriptshadow might not only sink an optioned project but make it difficult for a screenwriter to develop interest from other producers when the option reverts. Reeves has reviewed screenplays that are simply under consideration as well as those that are sold, and even those that are sold

may be languishing in a delicate phase of development. For producers who become convinced that a screenplay is no longer worth producing, Reeves's reviews may represent an annoyance, but in the end, a costly investment has been avoided. For the screenwriters involved, however, a work of considerable speculative labor has been rendered less valuable.

Where Reeves has received visible legal pushback, it has been for posting screenplays that were already sold and in development as would-be high-profile projects at major studios. In April 2009, for example, the hosting platform Blogger took down a review Reeves had written in of the screenplay *State of Play*, which had already been produced as a $60 million film starring Russell Crowe, Ben Affleck, and Rachel McAdams and was set to be released only a few weeks later. Reeves indicated in a follow-up post that the review had been removed because he had posted the screenplay for the unreleased film, prompting a legal threat from Universal Studios. Reeves presented himself as more annoyed than concerned: "What pisses me off is that they erased the review not only from the blog, but from my personal blogger database, which means it doesn't exist anymore. Not too happy about that" (Reeves 2009b). Reeves would repost the review without the screenplay, and this reposted review would be allowed to remain on the site. In subsequent years, Reeves continued to upload, review, and then take down the links to screenplays at the request of the writers and studios involved.

Aside from expressing annoyance, Reeves has not often responded publicly to criticisms of his blog from professional screenwriters. Where he has sought to justify his actions, he's suggested that Scriptshadow works to make the film industry more accessible for his readers. In 2012, Reeves released a screenwriting manual, *Scriptshadow Secrets*, which offers readers "500 Screenwriting Secrets Hidden Inside 50 Great Movies." In the manual, Reeves promotes the Scriptshadow blog as a democratizing force: "For years, this information was private. You

needed to be 'in the club' to get it. I didn't think that was fair. Not when these screenplays held the source code for how to become a great screenwriter. I felt the little guys deserved access to that information too, not just the big guns making $500,000 an assignment" (Reeves 2012a). Embracing his relative marginal status, Reeves brands himself as a Robin Hood figure whose willingness to pirate copyrighted material makes him a unique and valuable resource for aspiring screenwriters. In his first review, Reeves signed off by saying that he was "reporting from the shadows…" (Reeves 2009f), suggesting that his blog's name was a reference to his informal participation in media industries, outside the industry's labor hierarchies and in defiance of both copyright law and Hollywood's professional protocols. From the beginning, however, Reeves also sought to profit from his willingness to flaunt copyright, naturalizing his authority as a screenwriting expert by promoting his access to industry scripts and then selling his services as an expert to readers.

While the Scriptshadow blog is freely available to the public, Reeves uses the blog to promote his services as a script consultant and his own career as a producer. In the first months after Scriptshadow's launch in 2009, Reeves offered aspirants feedback on their screenplays for a fee (Reeves 2009c). As Scriptshadow's notoriety grew, so did the fees. Reeves currently sells his followers screenplay "consultations" for several hundred dollars: four pages of notes cost $499, while eight pages of notes cost $749 (Reeves n.d.-b). Reeves even offers feedback on loglines—one- or two-sentence descriptions of screenplays—for $25 a piece or $75 for five loglines (Reeves n.d.-b). Promoting his logline service as a means to avoid writing bad screenplays from the jump, Reeves writes of his feedback, "I highly recommend not writing a script unless it gets a 7 or above" (Reeves 2018a), with scores ranging from 1 to 10. Alongside these services, Reeves regularly reviews amateur screenplays for free on his blog to build interest in his

consulting service. Comparing these aspirant scripts to those written by professionals, Reeves promotes his consulting service as a means to bridge the gap between them.

Reeves has also tried to parlay his success as a blogger into more conventional industry work as a film producer. As early as 2009, Reeves wrote a blog post about Horsethief Pictures, a production company that allowed consumers to get involved in the development process. “These guys are doing exactly the kind of thing I want Scriptshadow to pioneer,” Reeves wrote, “which is to allow the public to interact with the development process, so that the people who will be seeing the movies, will be able to offer input on how to make those movies better” (Reeves 2009e). In 2012, Reeves wrote a post explaining that he was considering getting into producing (Reeves 2012b): “what I’d like to do… is find material through Scriptshadow, partner up with a much more established producer (say Scott Rudin), sell the script to one of the studios with both of us attached, then let him use his muscle and expertise to get through the system” (Reeves 2012b). Critics took Reeves’s disinterest in actually performing the work of a producer as another sign that he was simply out to profit as much as he could from aspiring screenwriters.

However, Reeves emphasized that becoming a producer would make it much easier for him to help aspiring screenwriters boost their careers: “I’ll have access to more untapped writers than any place in town. So I’ll have plenty of options to hire people to rewrite material I need punched up… That’s exciting. And it’s the reason you guys should keep submitting Amateur scripts to the site” (Reeves 2012c). Similarly, Reeves promoted his coverage service as a potential direct line to Hollywood, noting that he sends the “top 3% of my consults to industry contacts” (Reeves n.d.-b). Screenwriting bloggers Emily Blake and The Bitter Script Reader subsequently criticized Scriptshadow for his ambitions to produce: “I don't know exactly when it happened,” Blake wrote, “but one day Carson stopped trying to figure out how to be a better

writer, and starting thinking about how to monetize his good idea" (Blake 2012). Criticizing Reeves's increasing fees for script feedback, TBSR called Reeves an "unscrupulous opportunist" and a "poser who knows nothing about what he's trying to do" (The Bitter Script Reader 2012). For Blake and TBSR, as for other critics, Reeves had crossed a sacred line for how-to experts, blurring the line between his work as a writer's consultant and his work as a producer.

Posting links to the screenplays he reviewed and describing their stories in some detail, Reeves was an accessible source for pirated industry material before he was anything else. Today, Reeves devotes his blog to detailed synopses and reviews of scripts in development, but much of Reeves's early success was built on his willingness to share scripts that most of his readers couldn't access. Taking professional and legal risks that low-level industry professionals couldn't afford to take, Reeves capitalized on his relative outsider status, pushing boundaries in ways that rankled insiders but had little impact on Reeves himself. The same commitment to gatekeeper lore that Reeves promotes from the margins of the film industry reproduces beliefs that were embedded into American screenwriting nearly from the birth of the film industry: that screenplays create commercial value for their authors only when they are purchased and produced, and hence that screenwriters must ensure their screenplays appeal to industry decision makers before they can ever appeal to the public. As opposed as they might seem, aspirants who read Scriptshadow and professionals who condemn it are fighting the same battle from different vantage points: aspirants seeking insight into how they can appeal to gatekeepers; professionals protecting the fragile potential of commodities that only gatekeepers can render valuable.

Copyright legislators and copyright owners have, in collaboration with media workers dependent on them for income, developed a film industry in which screenwriters are perennially subservient to the industry's gatekeepers and decision makers—those who have the means to

actualize screenplays as commercial films. Through state power and financial pressure, the American film industry has embedded this understanding in the screenwriting profession. Gatekeeper experts like Reeves reaffirm what Foucault (1980) argued: that knowledge is not simply a consequence of power but also the means by which power is reproduced. Aspirants who turn to Reeves for insider knowledge confront an industry that molds them into workers who exist to serve the ever-shifting needs and tastes of industry gatekeepers. Scriptshadow thus extends the power of those gatekeepers well beyond their typical sphere of influence over professional screenwriters who rely on gatekeepers for work. Presumably, most industry gatekeepers have little interest in what aspirants who read Scriptshadow believe; they do not need (or even want) Reeves to interpret and disseminate their tastes to the public. But Reeves does so anyway, in defiance of the film industry proper, in pursuit of an income. For gatekeeper experts, knowledge—the latest insider knowledge—is a valuable commodity.

Any effort to understand how power is reproduced should include consideration of how knowledge is circulated, even if that circulation is informal. As Lobato and Thomas (2015) write, "Media history is a story of *interactions* between and across the formal and informal zones" (p. 20), zones which "can be separated only for the purposes of analysis" (p. 20). By informal, they mean unmeasured and unregulated, beyond the scope of what the state would normally allow and what can easily be observed (Lobato 2012). As someone who pirates the screenplays he distributes and reviews, Reeves participates in an informal economy for media production knowledge. However, the fact that many development workers reject Reeves as an authority and decry his work is not a de facto sign of his unimportance to media industries. Rather, Reeves's success as an authority operating "from the shadows" demonstrates simply that media production knowledge—knowledge about how to properly make media—is both valuable and practically

impossible to copyright. As the following section draws out, the informal flow of media production knowledge on the internet has enabled industry outsiders to construct themselves as authorities on screenwriting beyond the conventional boundaries of the film industry.

A Sidebar on *Lessons from the Screenplay*

Scriptshadow is the focus of this chapter, but he is only one example of a broader shift in the construction of screenwriting authority that has enabled figures like Reeves to emerge. The following section briefly examines another case study, the popular screenwriting YouTube channel Lessons from the Screenplay (LFTS), to argue that Scriptshadow's reliance for his cultural authority on the informal flow of copyrighted material online is not unique. Although the creator of LFTS, Michael Tucker, does not share unproduced screenplays with his readers, his authority as a popular screenwriting expert rests on his technical proficiency as a video editor and his access to high-quality copies of the films and series he analyzes. Like Reeves, Tucker attended film school before pursuing a career in filmmaking. Like Reeves, Tucker never worked professionally as a screenwriter before he joined the how-to screenwriting industry as a popular source for screenwriting wisdom. His videos examine commercial films, series, and games, drawing out lessons from their screenplays for would-be screenwriters.

Tucker launched LFTS in June of 2016 with a video essay extolling the work of screenwriter Gillian Flynn on the screenplay for *Gone Girl* (2014). Analyzing what makes the writing for commercially or critically successful media work, Tucker amplifies the dominant philosophies of screenwriting in the commercial film industry. For example, Tucker borrows liberally from established screenwriting manual authors: of the 65 video essays on LFTS at the time of this writing in May of 2022, 37 reference popular screenwriting manuals, often drawing

the titular “lessons” directly from the manuals and then applying them to the film or series at hand. Among the most frequently cited manuals are John Truby’s *The Anatomy of Story* (13 videos), Robert McKee’s *Story* (11 videos), and John Yorke’s *Into the Woods* (9 videos). Quoting these industrial figures (sometimes at length), Tucker frames screenwriting as a well-theorized craft with correct and incorrect approaches.

In the years since its launch, LFTS has amassed well over a million subscribers, making it the most successful screenwriting-focused channel on the platform as of this writing in 2023. Indeed, LFTS is considerably more successful than the active YouTube channels run by more established screenwriting experts like Robert McKee and John Truby—the very figures Tucker cites most. McKee and Truby remain successful how-to experts as screenwriting manual authors. As of this writing in May of 2023, their manuals remain high on the list of 100 Best Sellers for screenwriting books on Amazon, at #2, #6, and #13 (Truby), and #13 and #14 (McKee). But, neither McKee nor Truby has more than twenty-thousand subscribers on YouTube, a mere fraction of Tucker’s following. And this is at least in part because McKee’s and Truby’s videos are comparatively barebones, featuring talking heads of McKee and Truby talking directly to the camera for several minutes. Tucker, on the other hand, builds on audiovisual conventions established by successful film analysis YouTube channels like Every Frame a Painting and Nerdwriter. Like these channels, LFTS combines a calm, conversational narrational style with complex editing techniques: professionally recorded audio, carefully mixed music and narration, custom-animated titles and graphics, and high-quality clips of popular media.

While Tucker makes occasional appearances in his videos, they are almost always dominated by high-definition footage from the movies, series, and games he analyzes. The fact that his videos feature HD-quality clips, skillfully edited and carefully analyzed, is not an

incidental component in the success of his channel but rather the foundation for his perceived authority on YouTube over and above the legacy screenwriting experts he cites. While copyright law grants certain fair use protections to creators who meaningfully transform their source materials, The Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) of 1998 criminalized undoing copy-protection hardware and software even when it would be otherwise impossible to make fair use copies (Hilderbrand 2009). Whether Tucker acquires his footage through torrents, ripping, or some other means, accessing the high-quality footage he incorporates into his videos requires that he subvert the DMCA, even if his videos themselves are protected under fair use law. All of which is to say Tucker's authority as a screenwriting expert, just like Reeves', would be impossible without UGC platforms and new technologies that enable consumers to copy and redistribute files extralegally within digital communities of film enthusiasts.

My purpose in including this brief discussion of LFTS in this chapter about Scriptshadow is not to equate the two. LFTS has never leaked an unproduced screenplay to its subscribers without permission from the author. And while Tucker and his team generate income through Patreon subscriptions, Tucker doesn't sell aspiring screenwriters feedback. While LFTS traffics in the same implicit understanding as Scriptshadow that there are rules governing screenwriting and objective standards for screenplay quality, LFTS represents what I believe could best be described as a screenplay appreciation channel, and its role in the how-to screenwriting industry is arguably benign. But, filesharing communities and YouTube enabled LFTS to emerge in the same way that script-sharing communities and WordPress enabled Scriptshadow to emerge.

Throughout this chapter, I've referenced the fact that Reeves had no professional experience as a screenwriter or script reader when he began Scriptshadow. This fact made him unusual, but I want to clarify that it does not make his expertise any less natural or more arbitrary

than the expertise claimed by more established figures in the how-to screenwriting industry. As Ashton and Conor (2013) argue in their study of "digital ecologies of expertise," different spaces foster and require different forms of expertise. A figure who claims expertise readily as an author of screenwriting manuals, for example, may struggle to do so in a space like YouTube, and vice versa. Reeves's legitimacy is tied to the ecology of expertise he inhabits, just as manual authors like McKee, Truby, Syd Field, Linda Seger, Christopher Vogler, and Blake Snyder cultivated expertise on the basis not of successful screenwriting carers but rather of their writing styles and their access to decision makers in the book publishing industry. But, Reeves' and Tucker's lack of professional experience is important to the extent that it demonstrates the negotiated nature of screenwriting expertise. In their entrepreneurial use of file-sharing communities and UGC platforms, they demonstrate the role that the commercial how-to screenwriting industry plays in reconstructing cultural authority around whichever forms of expertise are most profitable.

Positivity and Persistence

Gatekeeper lore is constructed and sold specifically to aspiring media producers as part of their efforts to *become* professionals, to become legitimated as media people (Couldry 2000). In pursuit of this becoming—and the upward mobility, social status, and cultural capital that are promised along with it by industry proselytizers—aspiring screenwriters are encouraged by gatekeeper experts to mold themselves into subjects that suit the ever-shifting needs of industry gatekeepers, regardless of how homogenized and oppressive those subjectivities might be. Gill (2010) argues that one of the characteristic features of contemporary media work is the demand for workers to manage themselves—not in the sense of having ordinary discipline but in the sense that media workers are required, in the process of serving the shifting needs of their

industries, to radically remake their own subjectivities. Not simply present in the air, that pressure to manage the self is daily reproduced by a broad range of participants working at every level of the contemporary media industries, including gatekeeper experts like Reeves.

To convince readers that they should become the ideal aspirants he blueprints in his blog, Reeves works tirelessly to promote Hollywood as a meritocracy with rules that, while obscure and always changing, can be mastered—specifically by keeping up with Scriptshadow. In August 2009, just six months after launching Scriptshadow, Reeves conducted an informal experiment with his readers: he wanted to determine, he claimed, whether writers with representation (managers, agents, etc.) were noticeably better than writers without representation. Soliciting screenplays from repped and unrepped writers among his readers, Reeves reviewed the results. However, Reeves did not ask for the submissions to be anonymized. And as he posted his reviews, he freely noted which submissions were written by professionals and which were not. In the end, Reeves wrote that, in his opinion, repped writers submitted better scripts than unrepped writers. Not only that, but writers who were selling screenplays submitted better scripts than repped writers who were struggling to sell their material. Reeves came to what he admitted was an "unscientific" conclusion: "by and large, writers are successful because they deserve to be successful" (Reeves 2009d). Not only unscientific but absurdly so, the purpose of the experiment was not simply to naturalize the labor hierarchy for screenwriters. In addition, the experiment presented Reeves himself as an authority whose opinions, despite his lack of experience, could be trusted to reflect the governing taste cultures of the development industry.

Extending well beyond his early "experiment," meritocratic beliefs suffuse Scriptshadow, as they do the broader how-to screenwriting industry. Throughout his blog, Reeves espouses a social Darwinist perspective in which adversity serves only to separate the talented from the

unworthy, in screenwriting and in life: “Screenwriting is not a hopeless cause. It’s just hard, like any profession. And if you’re in a situation where it’s a little harder for you than the next guy, you have to work harder than the next guy. That ain’t exclusive to screenwriting. That’s life” (Reeves 2013). Compare the above statement to the one made by Syd Field (1994) in the conclusion to his influential screenwriting manual, *Screenplay*: “Writing is hard work, a day-by-day job, and a professional writer is someone who sets out to achieve a goal and then does it. Just like life” (p. 256). Both Field and Reeves describe screenwriting as a competition in which each individual is in a constant struggle for visibility with the rest. But more telling is the fact that, for Field and for Reeves, the cutthroat world of screenwriting mimics the realities of the world at large: struggle is a natural part of the human condition, not something worth disrupting through collectivization.

Reeves steers readers away from collectivization by insisting that screenwriting is a zero-sum game. “YOU HAVE TO BE BETTER THAN EVERYONE ELSE,” he wrote in what was meant to be a motivational blog post: “You have to write more. You have to work harder” (Reeves 2013d). Reeves echoes this sentiment routinely: “You’re competing against tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of other writers. You have no choice but to outwork them if you’re going to survive” (Reeves 2014a). Those who are unprepared to give everything to screenwriting are, Reeves claims, not truly screenwriters: “Real writers never give up. They NEED to write. First and foremost, writing has to be FOR YOU. It has to be an outlet that you can’t stop yourself from doing, like a drug” (Reeves 2014c). Hence, disadvantaged writers have no choice but to “suck it up” and work harder than their privileged competitors: “everybody’s trying to do it. And the only way to rise above others is to do it more” (Reeves 2016b). Framing nepotism, racism, and misogyny as individually surmountable forces in Hollywood, Reeves

insists that "most writers still make it into the industry the old fashioned way – *hard work*" (Reeves 2014c).

Moreover, Reeves perceives in the harsh realities of screenwriting a kind of fairness. According to Reeves, anyone with the right work ethic and ideas can succeed as a screenwriter: "This may sound like a shocking statement, but I believe anybody can be a screenwriter. Everybody in the world has at least one interesting story in them" (Reeves, 2010). Setting aside systemic inequalities in the film industry, Reeves insists that screenwriting is a fair game: "It's not as impossible as it looks. The game isn't rigged. Every producer, manager, and agent I know is DYING to find the next great script" (Reeves 2013a). But Reeves insists further that simply believing Hollywood is structured by inequality is self-destructive: "If you think Hollywood is run by nepotism and it's impossible to get your script read or sold, then you're never going to get your script read or sold" (Reeves 2013b). Acknowledging systemic inequities in media work, in other wors, and questioning whether the industry should be different is a surefire path to personal failure. In article subtitled "Your Success Is In Your Own Hands," Reeves wrote that "my first piece of advice would be to NEVER blame anyone for your lack of success other than yourself. If it's all you, that means you have the power to fix the problem and change your circumstances. If it's all on the system, there's nothing you can do so you might as well quit" (Reeves 2018b).

Like the advice columnists explored in Chapter 1, Reeves projects extraordinary agency onto his readers, portraying their careers as firmly in their hands as individuals. Reeves even claimed, in rhetoric that mirrors that of *Creative Screenwriting*'s columnists, that sales for original screenplays in Hollywood are dwindling not because media conglomerates are shifting their focus to established IP but because original screenplays aren't good anymore: "Now I've been reading a lot of the specs out there, the ones making big enough waves to get noticed, and

the biggest reason they're not doing well, in my eyes, is because they're not good enough" (Reeves 2014b). As always, Reeves suggested, "good" scripts will sell: "write an awesome script about anything you want and I PROMISE you, you'll get noticed" (Reeves 2014b). Understanding what makes a good script good, of course, requires reading the sorts of scripts Reeves reviews on Scriptshadow, but Reeves insists also that passion is key: "You have to knock it out of the park. To achieve this, make sure you are BEYOND PASSIONATE about your idea" (Reeves 2014b). In the Scriptshadow universe, those who cannot or will not mold themselves (and their passions) to the industry's ever-shifting needs are discouraged from pursuing careers.

As Chapter 1 explored in greater detail, passion is often promoted as a prerequisite for work in creative fields (Arvidsson, Malossi, and Naro 2010; McRobbie 2016; Duffy 2017). Just as passion is expected to motivate aspirants to seek careers in media industries, passion is simultaneously expected to be maintained—even performed—as a motivation for media work, no matter how precarious or exploitative that work might be. Reeves certainly didn't invent but rather capitalizes on a culture of entrepreneurial work within media industries. As Gill (2010) writes, the ideal worker in contemporary media industries "must be flexible, adaptable, sociable, self directing, able to work for days and nights at a time without encumbrances or needs, must commodify herself and others and recognise that… every interaction is an opportunity for work." Just so, the ideal aspirant constructed on Scriptshadow is one who adapts always to the industry and has an overriding need to work that makes them more committed, more resilient than competitors.

Reeves draws on this discourse to naturalize his authority as a screenwriting expert. If screenwriting is an individualistic pursuit within an industry that can be mastered but never effectively resisted, the only way to win is to know the rules better than everyone else—by

keeping up with the latest industry trends on Scriptshadow. Indeed, the subtitle for Scriptshadow promotes the fact that Reeves is "reviewing the latest scripts in Hollywood." The more his readers perceive the value in the gatekeeper lore he constructs, the more valuable he becomes. If Hollywood can't be won, if there are no rules to be discerned, Reeves is just another critic, one offering his thoughts on scripts that few will read. But if, as Reeves suggests, success is elusive because its rules are simply intricate and ever-changing, Scriptshadow becomes a crucial tool in an aspirant's effort to gain a leg up toward professionalization.

Not unique to Scriptshadow, an interest in what's selling *today* has been promoted in the how-to screenwriting industry nearly since its inception. As Liepa (2010) notes, early movie studios solicited scenario submissions from the general public, offering suggestions for the types of stories decision makers were seeking at the time. While screenwriting manual authors like those explored in Chapter 1 promote their theories of screenwriting aesthetics as universal and immutable, serial screenwriting publications have always kept a close eye on what's selling (or not selling) moment to moment. Throughout much of its run, for example, *Creative Screenwriting* magazine featured a regular column title "The Agent's Hot Sheet" which focused nearly exclusively on what sorts of scripts were selling *that month*, with the answers coming directly from the mouths of agents and managers in Hollywood. While this hot-off-the-press brand of gatekeeper lore seems to invite the new, it is essentially conservative, since it encourages aspirants to tailor their work to existing successes, to succumb to industry biases, and to always mimic the dominant screenwriting trends.

There is a commonsense quality to the advice offered by gatekeeper experts like Reeves. The harder you work at something, the more likely you are to succeed. Undoubtedly, in any industry, hard work, resilience, optimism, and passion are useful attributes. But Reeves does not

simply advocate that his followers should work hard. Equally important is what he believes aspirants should be working toward: and for Reeves, the answer is that aspirants should remake themselves (thoroughly and continually) to reflect the interests and beliefs of Hollywood gatekeepers—interests and beliefs that are not present directly but rather represented by Reeves. If media production is a practice that has the capacity to reshape subjectivities, allowing creators and audiences to luxuriate in complexities that reframe or reaffirm our beliefs, gatekeeper lore encourages aspirants to always steer that practice toward (shadowy reports of) the tastes of industry decision makers. The danger here is not just that aspiring professionals will create "soulless" product, as the columnists of Chapter 1 feared, but that those interested in making media will perceive cultural production as a realm reserved only for those who can best internalize the shifting tastes of Hollywood gatekeepers.

Conclusion

Reeves's success attests to the value of the screenplay as a commodity beyond the film industry proper: screenplays are widely distributed and read, not only by industry professionals but by the public as well. Entrepreneurial screenwriters have built on this fact to commodify their labor outside the Hollywood system, posting scripts online on a regular basis and then crowdfunding their work through subscription services like Patreon. In addition, publishers sell paperback copies of the screenplays for popular films, and independent vendors sell unauthorized printouts of produced and unproduced screenplays on the streets of media capitals like New York and Los Angeles. It cannot be taken as a given that industry professionals are the exclusive audience for screenplays, particularly when file sharing communities among aspiring screenwriters and screenwriting enthusiasts are thriving both within and beyond the film

industry. Gatekeeper lore thus works to naturalize an understanding that is thoroughly unnatural: that screenplays are best written for an insular community of development workers. Gatekeeper lore is both a skewed representation of what gatekeepers actually want and a forceful claim that their particular wants should matter more than anything else for would-be creatives.

As Lobato (2012) argues, media industries distribute more than media because distribution is equally "about the transmission of values, competences and ideology" (p. 15). The history of screenwriting is the history of a creative form that copyright law and distribution practices have oriented firmly toward a particular audience: professional development workers. Nominally, what Reeves sells his customers is his expertise, but what he really sells them is the belief that professionalizing as a screenwriter requires knowing what Hollywood wants at any given moment and working tirelessly to provide it. This is a comforting belief, because it whittles the world down to a simple set of variables: success in screenwriting and professionalization are rendered synonymous, and those who fail are simply those who do not know enough or have not worked hard enough to mold themselves to the needs of the mass market film industry. However, this belief is not equally comforting to all—and particularly not to those who are already systemically devalued as consumers and media creators by media industries. Moreover, the belief that success in screenwriting and success in the mass market film industry are synonymous obscures the potential for screenwriting to fulfill its practitioners in other ways and within other economies, as Chapter 5 explores in greater detail.

Like the aspiring screenwriters considered in the following chapter, Reeves constructs media person status for himself on a user-generated content platform. For his readers, he represents access to the film industry, but for industry professionals, he represents a clear threat to the status quo—an upstart amateur with pretensions to expertise whose reckless disregard for

copyright law threatens the informal ease of distribution for unproduced screenplays in Hollywood. Commercial media industries encompass and rely on the workers they employ but also on the collaborative efforts of media consumers, media makers, and the how-to media industries to position industry decision makers as the key cultural authorities on which stories should be valued. The participation of so many in this process might lead some to suspect that there is no practical means to alter it, beyond the wishful suggestion that we all just agree to consume and discuss more media produced by more diverse, more equitable production cultures. However, there are participants in the construction of media industries whose voices are more influential than others, and whose concentrated influence is thus more vulnerable to disruption. As this dissertation argues broadly, many such voices are located in the how-to media industries.

Mayer (2011) argued that workers who are excluded from insider status in the film industry are inevitably more precarious. In the case of figures like Reeves, however, that precarity can make outsiders all the more insistent about the rules and obligations that are more casually endorsed by established insiders. If enviable Hollywood insiders follow "the rules" because the rules have been constructed to benefit them, envying outsiders follow the rules because they are (or seem to be) the keys to becoming an insider. Those who regard insider status as practically inaccessible (as it is for many) do not try, or even think to try. But this neat picture is not representative of everything and everyone. As Chapter 5 of this dissertation will draw out further, there are alternatives: activists who take on the advocacy for overlooked aspiring screenwriters that for-profit companies often pretend to prioritize; entrepreneurs who profit directly from their screenwriting through crowdfunding; and communities of screenwriters who write and distribute screenplays for free within gift economies.

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CHAPTER 4

The Black List as a Negotiated Pipeline to Screenwriting Work

This dissertation examines the companies that sell professionalization tools, opportunities, and advice to aspiring screenwriters. In trade coverage and industry scholarship, how-to companies and their customers are often rendered mechanical and passive, respectively: market-driven machines and exploited dupes. Stephen Galloway described many screenwriting professionalization services as "schemes designed to prey on the Hollywood dreams of gullible strivers" (2018). Referencing the broader range of professionalization services, Caldwell (2013) described some how-to vendors as "bottom-feeders that opportunistically sell access and insights to desperate aspirants" (p. 164). Schemers and the desperate can be found throughout media industries. However, the industries that sell professionalization tools and services to aspirants are worth critical attention because their workers are often sincere in their efforts to professionalize customers and because their customers are anything but passive. Rather, professionalization services and their customers collaboratively define media work at industry's borderlands.

How-to screenwriting companies and aspiring professional screenwriters cannot be understood separately. They are, this chapter argues, interdependent in ways that are reflected across the range of how-to media industries. Examined in isolation, media makers seem mysteriously subject to the ideologies that direct their behavior, like otherwise lifeless windsocks pushed this way and that by the prevailing climate. Positioned as the sources of media production culture, the most profitable centers in media industries appear to assert ever-greater control over the media production habits of once-resistant amateurs. However, nonprofessional media makers are neither controlled by media industries nor merely activated by broad cultural forces. Just like their professional counterparts, nonprofessional media makers shape and are shaped by their

production cultures. Moreover, the spaces where they debate and distribute media are not neutral in this process; rather, they bring their own ambitions to bear on it, ambitions that privilege some voices and deprivilege others, hierarchizing their users.

Among the most legitimized professionalization services is The Black List, a platform that connects aspiring and professional screenwriters with development workers looking for writers and scripts. Funneling screenwriters and development workers into distinct camps, with different application procedures, logins, and interfaces, the platform appeals to a wide range of participants but profits from its screenwriter users, who use the site to "break in" to the film industry or bolster careers. In turn, screenwriter users pay a monthly fee to host downloadable copies of their screenplays on the site—$30 a month for most users, or less for members of approved screenwriting unions. In addition, screenwriter users are strongly encouraged to purchase feedback reports (at a $100 per screenplay) from The Black List's freelance readers. These fees are the primary source of revenue for The Black List, which does not take a cut of deals made through the site or charge industry users for access. Rather, development workers can search the site's archive of screenplays for free after going through a verification process, which requires new users to supply a work email and an IMDb or LinkedIn profile. Through its discounts for union writers and its free use for development workers, The Black List courts the participation of professional media workers to lend industrial legitimacy to the platform.

Trade publications have lent further legitimacy to The Black List by describing the service as transcendent in the broader industry that appeals to amateur screenwriters.[9] However,

[9] See, e.g., John August (October 25, 2012), 'Scriptnotes, Ep 60: The Black List, and a stack of scenes — Transcript.' https://johnaugust.com/2012/scriptnotes-ep-60-the-black-list-and-a-stack-of-scenes-transcript; Beejoli Shah (November 5, 2013). *Are All Screenplay Services Bullshit? The Black List Might Not Be*, Gawker. http://defamer.gawker.com/are-all-screenplay-services-bullshit-the-black-list-mi-1458939273; and Galloway, 'Why Are So Many Wannabe Screenwriters Getting Scammed?'

the platform's creators and most valued users insist that The Black List is not a space for amateurs but rather an industrial space intended to digitalize film development writ large, creating more accessible pipelines to media careers in the process. Analyzing promotional materials, trade publications, and an interview I conducted with the site's co-founder Franklin Leonard, I draw out the history of the Black List brand, revealing that the current platform reflects the latest step in Leonard's longterm efforts to revolutionize film development with what he describes as "perfect information"—the concentration of all salable screenplays in a singular archive. In pursuit of perfect information, The Black List promotes screenwriting as a meritocracy in ways that obscure systemic inequities in the film industry. Examining online discussions about the platform, I argue that many of the site's most vocal users are equally if not more insistent that The Black List is a space for development workers, not amateurs.[10]

My interest in drawing out the complex motivations that shape screenwriting services like The Black List is personal and maybe self-serving, since I have been at different times both one of the gullible who use them and one of the schemers who work for them. But I also embodied a fact that is often overlooked in accounts of media industries that portray their consumers and professionals as neatly demarcated: among the many aspiring professionals in screenwriting are media workers in other areas.[11] As this chapter draws out, distinctions between media producers

[10] My analysis of online discussions about The Black List among users examines conversations in the r/screenwriting community on the forum site Reddit, in large part because Leonard has been an active member on the site since 2013. Specifically, my analysis focuses on two popular 2017 threads created in reaction to The Black List-ScriptBook partnership, and on the range of threads that referenced The Black List in the first three months of 2021, when the research for this article was conducted; 87 Reddit threads referenced The Black List in this period, resulting in hundreds of comments.

[11] This uneasy fact has generated controversy about who qualifies as an "emerging screenwriter." For example, Shia Labeouf became embroiled in a minor controversy in 2020 when he won the Sun Valley Film Festival's High Scribe award, which critics noted was meant to promote "emerging screenwriters" (Marks 2020). An established actor, Labeouf hardly qualifies as "emerging," but a representative speaking for Labeouf claimed nonetheless that "Shia entered the competition as an emerging writer" (Marks 2020)—i.e., someone not yet established *as a screenwriter*.

and consumers are not simply enforced but constructed in the how-to screenwriting industry. For the people who use them, how-to industries are not marginal but rather the front lines in a continuous debate among consumers about who has the right to participate in media production.

The Discursive Construction of the Emerging Screenwriter

This chapter draws out the entangled motivations at work in the construction of The Black List as a space for a particular sort of screenwriter: neither professionals nor simply amateurs, these screenwriters adopt and reproduce a subject position that is both nonprofessional and firmly industrial—a subject position I refer to as the "emerging screenwriter." I didn't invent the term. "Emerging screenwriter" is already in common use among screenwriters, and it is used primarily by how-to screenwriting companies and aspiring professional screenwriters to indicate a transitional status between amateur and professional.[12] Emerging screenwriters are sometimes described as newly professional screenwriters and at other times as semi-professional aspirants who commit to professional standards of work.[13] However, the precise definition of the term is less important than the distinctions it is consistently used to draw between groups of

[12] At the time of this writing in 2021, a Google search for "emerging screenwriter" yielded 112 results. Of these, 67 reference how-to screenwriting services, products, or publications; 37 came from self-described emerging screenwriters; and 8 were used to describe state-subsidized programs for emerging screenwriters outside the US.

[13] Efforts to police the term have emphasized the liminal status of the "emerging screenwriter" in the film industry. For example, an earlier footnote notes that Shia LaBeouf was criticized for claiming "emerging screenwriter" status when he is already an established film industry professional. However, state-sponsored organizations outside the US have used "emerging screenwriter" to indicate that complete amateurs are unlikely to qualify for subsidies. See, e.g., the FAQ page for Screen Nova Scotia's Screenwriter Internship Program: "An emerging screenwriter has experience in or has completed basic education and training in screenwriting, film and television production, film studies, and/or any field related to narrative and story structure" (Screenwriter Internship Program n.d.).

nonprofessional screenwriters: emerging screenwriters always position themselves as more professionalized than the mass of amateur screenwriters.

According to the most vocal experts on the subject, a story told on the screen properly begins with a screenplay. You are now invited to reflect on how many of the stories you encounter are presented to you on a screen. If you're like me, the answer is "most." Stories and screens are so frequently connected for many that the common storytelling techniques of the screen can't help but shape their understanding of what stories are—also what they can be, and even, when their techniques are calcified into wisdom, what they *should* be. All of which is to say that screenwriting is a niche practice, to be sure, but it is also an argument for the proper way to imagine and participate in the telling of the very stories that reach mass audiences. When groups of people are discursively positioned as less capable of screenwriting, they are likewise excluded from full participation in a screen storytelling culture that has steadily increased in its influence since the advent of the film industry. And, as this dissertation's introduction explored, recent studies attest to the fact that participation is from representative. Professional screenwriting is disproportionately white and male, a fact that has enabled misogyny and racism to structure hiring practices for screenwriters on a broad scale.

As firm as the distinctions between media professionals and media consumers can sometimes seem, no professional screenwriter was born a professional. It is easy to forget but important to remember that professionalization is a process, one that begins long before screenwriters get their first paycheck and continues to unfold long after. Moreover, the process of professionalization for screenwriters is notoriously cryptic and informal. As I argue throughout this dissertation, the considerable scope of the how-to screenwriting industry is a testament not only to the enduring popularity of screenwriting as a creative practice but also to

the dearth of genuinely accessible paths to professionalization for aspirants. How-to screenwriting services are the most accessible contact zones to industry for many interested in screenwriting careers. This is why the boundary work among aspiring screenwriters is worth studying: how-to screenwriting platforms and communities, not professional communities, are central to the construction of screenwriting culture for the overwhelming majority of people who engage in the practice.

The Black List is a valuable case study because it participates in many common practices of how-to screenwriting services but also pushes them to extremes. Many services use reader scores to quantify the value of unproduced screenplays; The Black List does the same but then aggregates reader scores, using them to algorithmically rank screenplays according to a universal (and proprietary) metric. Many services promote their proximity to the film industry; The Black List does the same but strives to dominate industrial script development, positioning itself as *the* central hub for the digital flow of screenplays in Hollywood. The Black List participates in the same rhetorics of meritocracy that most how-to screenwriting services use to promote themselves as accessible paths to professionalization for their users, but The Black List is also working actively to formalize and standardize the professionalization process for working and aspiring screenwriters alike. Lastly, The Black List is perhaps the most legitimized and popular screenwriting platform on the market; and yet, like all other how-to screenwriting services, it continually struggles to maintain that legitimacy among its users.

Drawing out the varied motivations of the participants in public debates about The Black List, I consider the platform from multiple perspectives. Beginning with an industrial history of The Black List, I analyze the site's evolution, promotional materials, and place in industry discourse to draw out the platform's ambitions to revolutionize script development. I also sat

down with Franklin Leonard, the co-founder and public face of The Black List, for an hourlong interview to discuss his views about the The Black List and its role in screenwriting culture. I then turn to user responses, taking a close look at a moment in The Black List's history when consumers collectivized to reshape The Black List platform against the wishes of its creators. Finally, I examine public debates about The Black List among consumers, with a particular emphasis on discussions in the r/screenwriting community on Reddit.

Turning to Reddit for evidence about The Black List's reception among users has limitations. Like any platform, Reddit attracts a subset of internet users who cannot be said to represent the broader public. Moreover, content on Reddit is divided into subreddits, each with their own norms and community characteristics (Proferes, Jones, Gilbert, Fiesler, and Zimmer 2021). Reddit reported in 2021 that 58% of its users were between 18-34 years old and that 57% were male (Proferes, Jones, Gilbert, Fiesler, and Zimmer 2021). In addition, the r/screenwriting community on Reddit conducted its own informal user poll in early 2021. While the poll inevitably has limitations, it can provide at least a general sense of who participates in the r/screenwriting community. Of the nearly 700 users who responded to the survey as of January 20, 2021, 70% identified as male, 26.6% identified as female, and 2.9% identified as non-binary ("r/Screenwriting Responses 2020" 2021).[14] Nearly 70% of respondents described themselves as white, with Black respondents making up roughly 8%, Latino respondents 7%, and Asian respondents 4%. The overwhelming majority of respondents were not unionized writers (roughly 85%) and did not have industry representation (91%). Moreover, roughly 70% of respondents described themselves as living outside a "film hub city" (LA, NYC, London, Toronto, Atlanta,

[14] At the time the survey was conducted, the r/screenwriting community had nearly 1 million members.

Vancouver, and Mumbai), although more than 60% of respondents claimed that they either lived in a "film hub city" or planned to move to one, given the financial and legal means to do so.

While the r/screenwriting user poll accumulated responses from a very small sample of the full r/screenwriting community, it paints a portrait of the subreddit as predominantly white, male, and invested in professionalization. Hence, the discussions of The Black List on the r/screenwriting community should be interpreted within that context, and not as reflective of The Black List's reception for the full range of users. However, the r/screenwriting community is of particular important to The Black List for a few reasons: members of the r/screenwriting community routinely discuss The Black List, and Franklin Leonard has been an active member of the r/screenwriting community since 2013, engaging in regular discussions about the company with its members. Leonard's participation in the subreddit makes the r/screenwriting an important space for the platform's sense of its userbase—the imagined, if not actual, userbase that Leonard interacts with online. Together, Leonard and r/screenwriting members debate The Black List, constructing the platform's proper role in screenwriting culture and its proper modes of usage, such that the role of the company in aspiring professional screenwriting culture can hardly be understood without the perspectives of the r/screenwriting community. As this chapter demonstrates, r/screenwriting participants have had a direct hand in shaping the affordances of The Black List, warding off users less committed to industrial work and rejecting aspects of the service that threaten to dilute its value as a professionalization tool for emerging screenwriters.

Theorizing Emerging Screenwriters as Producers, Laborers

As a critical study, the goals of this chapter are aligned with those of Couldry (2000; 2001) in his writings on "media power"—the concentration in media institutions of the power to

discursively construct reality. Despite the fact that screenwriting is a popular practice, nearly all of the screenplays that have ever been written will never be produced. Those screenplays that, through their production as films, reach and influence widespread audiences are few and far between, and their writers are concentrated within insular production cultures like Hollywood. Couldry (2001) argues that the stakes of this concentration lie in "people's accepting as somehow justified their subordinate position in the distribution of society's *symbolic* resources, the ability to speak and be listened to on what matters to the world at large" (p. 162). The more naturally media production seems to be the province of specialists, the less agency those excluded from media production have to represent and so shape their own realities.

One way to resist media power, Couldry (2001) argues, is to denaturalize distinctions between those with the ability to speak ("media people") and the masses consigned to consumer status ("ordinary people"). The emerging screenwriters examined in this chapter resist their subordinate position in media culture, insisting on their right to participate as media producers in the film industry. However, they do not denaturalize but rather reproduce distinctions between media people and ordinary people, claiming media person status for themselves despite the fact that they don't yet make a living from their work. Dissociating media person status from professional work, emerging screenwriters on The Black List propose an alternate understanding of what distinguishes someone with the ability to speak through media from an ordinary person: screenwriters are, they argue, those who embrace a universal standard for aesthetic quality, one dictated by the ever-shifting tastes and needs of the film industry at its most profitable centers. Far from natural, this universal standard reflects the needs of The Black List platform and the privileged perspectives of those for whom Hollywood production cultures are most accessible.

Scholars who have taken up Couldry's approach to media power have focused either on the institutions that produce mass media or on alternative media practices that reject mainstream modes of media work. For example, scholars have considered how journalists and activists have challenged (or reproduced) journalistic media power (Dreher 2003; Atton 2008; Lester and Hutchins 2009; Lester 2010; Bebawi 2014; Hess 2016; Russell 2017), the participation of ordinary people in media worlds through reality television (Cui and Lee 2010; Cui 2017) or through news coverage (Couldry 2000), and the interaction between ordinary people and media worlds at media tourism sites (Couldry 2000; Peaslee 2007; Johnson 2019). These are valuable contributions to the study of media power. However, focusing exclusively on either mainstream media producers or alternative media producers obscures a neglected facet of media power: sites beyond mainstream and alternative media production where the role of consumers in media production culture is directly negotiated—sites like The Black List.

Couldry (2000) puts particular emphasis on sites where ordinary people and media worlds interact as places where media power can be reproduced and contested, which is why it is surprising that how-to industries have been mostly, so far as I have read, ignored in media power scholarship that takes up Couldry's approach. Reproducing media power in the guise of democratizing media culture, how-to industries sell consumers the means to cross from the ordinary world into the media world. Emerging screenwriters are not simply emerging *into* professionalization; they are emerging *from* the masses of ordinary people. In the process, how-to industries tend to equate a more democratic media culture with a meritocratic one in which everyone (read: every individual) can become a media producer (read: rise from the fray to join an exclusive class of legitimized media producers). Embracing this vision of media culture, the

most vocal aspirants actively participate in the reproduction of media power, legitimizing the services they use and positioning themselves "emerging" media producers.

Although few scholars have studied aspiring screenwriters, multiple scholars have theorized the labor of entrepreneurial and aspiring professional media workers in recent years. Kuehn and Corrigan (2013) describe "hope labor" as "un- or under-compensated work carried out in the present, often for experience or exposure, in the hope that future employment opportunities may follow" (p. 9). Based purely on this definition, the aspiring screenwriters who use The Black List and other platforms are certainly hope laborers. However, Kuehn and Corrigan (2013) associate hope labor with a particular attitude toward professionalization, restricting their focus to those who labor "first-and-foremost, for the intrinsic pleasures of productive processes and for peer recognition of a job well done" (p. 10). For hope laborers, the prospect of professionalization is a secondary motivation. Although hobbyist screenwriters are certainly relevant to this dissertation, it is important in this chapter to distinguish hope labor from the more purposeful aspirant work undertaken by many screenwriters, particularly since emerging screenwriters distinguish themselves from other amateurs on this very basis.

Duffy (2017) defines aspirational labor as "a mode of (mostly) uncompensated, independent work that is propelled by the much-venerated ideal of *getting paid to do what you love*" (p. 5). In contrast with the subjects interviewed by Kuehn and Corrigan (2013), the workers Duffy (2017) interviewed "emphasized the fact that what they were doing was indeed work" (p. 95), albeit unpaid work. As a result, the stakes of aspirational labor are clearer than those of hope labor: Duffy (2017) draws out the long hours and the relational labor of cultivating followers that her interview subjects took upon themselves without pay, because they not only hoped but *expected* that their work would pay off. Duffy (2017) also foregrounds the "historically rooted

gendered bent" (p. 225) of women's work in her study of would-be fashion bloggers, arguing that aspirational labor relies on visibility and emotional labor in ways that are gendered. The Black List users foregrounded in this chapter invest considerable time and money into their aspirations with the expectation that it will one day pay off. Hence, emerging screenwriters are clearly aspirational laborers.

However, this chapter is less concerned with the experiences and expectations of individual laborers than it is with the collective work that how-to companies and their vocal customers do to structure aspiring screenwriting communities. I could not agree more with Duffy's (2017) conclusion that "we should not view social media laborers as cultural dupes" and should instead "call attention to the dubious reward structures for aspirational labor" (p. 221). However, neither Duffy (2017) nor Kuehn and Corrigan (2013) carefully examine the range of products and services that actively structure the dubious rewards of aspirating professional media work: the promotional and user rhetorics that encourage hope laborers to daydream of careers or the professionalization services sold to fashion bloggers by the marketing industry, platforms, analytics services, click farms, and influencer talent agencies, among others. Instead, Kuehn and Corrigan (2013) and Duffy (2017) attribute the recent spread of aspirational work broadly to neoliberalism, a set of political economic policies and an emerging ideology that pressures individuals to create their own opportunities and secure their own well-being.

While broad ideological forces no doubt have played a role in the recent spread of aspiring professional media work online, neoliberalism is a useful framework for understanding aspirational work only if aspiring professional media workers are first acknowledged as subjects who construct neoliberalism in highly local ways. Similarly, while neoliberalism may construct its subjects as individualized, it is not simply embodied in individuals but in collectives. As Neff

(2012) demonstrated in her study of entrepreneurial Silicon Alley employees during the dotcom boom, communities of workers collectively construct the aspirations and expectations of their individual members. As this chapter argues, professional aspirations are additionally constructed through and in collaboration with the range of services that profit from aspiring media creators.

A History of Advocacy

In the following section, I draw out the industrial history that made The Black List such a visible (and visibly debated) service in the how-to screenwriting industry. Throughout its history, The Black List has campaigned to achieve legitimacy as an industry tool and not simply a consumer-facing service. Through partnerships with established film industry institutions, endorsements from prominent trade publications and industry professionals, and community outreach on screenwriting forums, The Black List has worked to cultivate support and active participation from industry professionals as well as consumers. As a result, while The Black List enables consumers to participate directly in the development process, the platform democratizes screenwriting only on particular terms: anyone can use The Black List platform; however, only consumers who can demonstrate their ability to write according to industrial standards are encouraged to perceive their participation as appropriate.

Since the launch of the platform, The Black List has worked continually to maintain its visible proximity with Hollywood by partnering with established film institutions and associating itself with successful media workers. The website boasts an impressive roster of events, programs, and partnerships: tables reads with recognizable actors; screenwriting seminars taught by prominent industry professionals; various labs, fellowships, and residencies, including several designed to promote screenwriters with marginalized identities; partnerships with screenwriting

unions, including both branches of the Writers Guild of America (WGA) and writers guilds in Canada, Ireland, South Africa, Great Britain, Italy, Israel, and New Zealand; and initiatives to promote the work of alumni from various prominent film schools. Such partnerships and events are, furthermore, regularly promoted in Hollywood trade publications, ensuring that The Black List brand is widely associated with the film industry as its most profitable centers.

Supporters of The Black List in media industries often expressed skepticism about the how-to screenwriting industry as a whole. A year after the launch of the service, Beejoli Shah of *Gawker* penned an article titled, "Are All Screenplay Services Bullshit? The Black List Might Not Be" (2013). Shah describes script feedback and promotion services as generally "worthless." Shortly after the launch of The Black List in October of 2012, established screenwriters Craig Mazin and John August brought Leonard onto their screenwriting podcast, ScriptNotes, to discuss the Black List service: both Mazin and August expressed skepticism about its value, with August noting that his "knee jerk reaction" to hearing about The Black List "was that it felt weird that the business model was based around charging fees for people with dreams" (August 2012). In his *Hollywood Reporter* feature, Galloway characterized the how-to screenwriting industry broadly as a "dark corner of the mainstream entertainment business" (2018).

Each of the skeptics in the examples above, however, took The Black List's film industry connections as a cue to position the platform as transcendent in the how-to screenwriting industry, citing their personal faith in Leonard as an advocate for undiscovered screenwriters. Shah notes that a conversation with Leonard about The Black List "really brought [her] around on what the site offers—and how it differs from other services" (2013). Mazin contrasts Leonard with "a world of charlatans who prey on you [aspiring screenwriters] out there" (August 2012). What Leonard has that the charlatans don't, Mazin suggests, is "insight." Mazin continues: "If

they had insight they would probably be doing what John [August] does or Franklin [Leonard] does" (August 2012). "Unlike so many of the moving parts in this cottage industry," Galloway concludes before quoting Leonard, "Black List is well regarded within Hollywood" (2018). For the platform's supporters, the legitimacy of The Black List emerges from Leonard's professional capital and rests firmly on his shoulders.

Not only is Leonard foregrounded in industry endorsements of The Black List; he regularly engages in public conversations about the platform with consumers, industry professionals, and media journalists. Indeed, my hourlong interview with Leonard is another example of the relational labor he has consistently performed to shape the narrative surrounding The Black List brand. Weighing Leonard's answers to my questions (and in his many previous interviews) against the structure and history of the site, I have tried to keep in mind Caldwell's (2009) insistence that media industry disclosures reveal more about the narratives their authors want to promote than they do about their purported objects. However, I am ultimately less concerned with the sincerity of The Black List as a professionalization tool than I am with understanding how the company's ambitions and narratives of legitimacy privilege/deprivilege the voices of different consumers who write screenplays.

Although The Black List consumer-facing platform launched in 2012, The Black List brand dates back to 2005, when Leonard first began to cultivate a reputation as an advocate for overlooked screenwriters. He was working as a junior executive at Appian Way Productions, Leonardo DiCaprio's production company, where he did his job with a lingering sense of dread. As Leonard explained in a 2020 NPR interview, "Every junior executive lives in constant fear of the trade story that breaks about some exciting new script that they didn't know about" (Leonard 2020). It occurred to Leonard that the junior development executives in Hollywood collectively

had the very information that could make all their jobs easier: which unproduced screenplays were worth reading and which weren't (Leonard 2020). What prevented them from sharing their knowledge—from collectivizing—was an entrenched culture of secrecy in Hollywood. So, Leonard came up with a solution that, much like The Black List platform, would set out to make script development more efficient by aggregating the opinions of anonymized readers.

Leonard created an anonymous email address and reached out to the roughly 75 fellow junior executives he'd met—"every single person who had a job similar to mine who I had had breakfast, lunch, dinner or drinks with" (Leonard 2020)—without revealing his identity to them. Leonard asked the other junior executives to send him the names of their ten favorite unproduced screenplays of the year, promising to send back the compiled (and anonymized) results. From the initial 75 emails, Leonard claims the anonymous email address received roughly 90 responses. Leonard compiled the lists into a spreadsheet, treating each mention as a vote and tabulating the results, which he sent back to those who had responded. The list circulated far beyond the initial group of junior development executives and would eventually be publicized in the trades, gaining national recognition and becoming an annual, anticipated industry event: The Black List. Leonard retained his anonymity as the creator of the list until early 2007, when the *LA Times* unmasked him. Within a few months, he'd lost his job at Appian Way.

Leonard's career would survive exposure, however. He was soon working for Anthony Minghella, then as an executive at Universal, then as an executive at Overbrook Entertainment, Will Smith's production company. Throughout, Leonard kept up The Black List annual survey, which has only grown in its influence and its admiration among industry professionals. A 2014 article in *The Washington Post* described the annual survey as "Hollywood's last best hope for smart screenplays" (Merry), and a 2017 feature in *The Atlantic* described The Black List as "the

Hollywood list everyone wants to be on" (Wagner). Similarly effusive articles were published by *The A.V. Club*, *The Verge*, *LA Weekly*, *NPR*, and *The Los Angeles Times*, with most suggesting that The Black List was a welcome means to promote original screenplays in an era of sequels, adaptations, and reboots.[15] Building on this reputation, Leonard delivered a Ted Talk in 2018 in which he explained "How I accidentally changed the way movies get made," suggesting that the survey shines a spotlight on scripts that are otherwise unlikely to be produced (Leonard 2018). As a result of the annual survey and its popularity, Leonard has become a public figure and one of the most recognizable names in the world of screenwriting.

The annual Black List survey has become associated with screenwriter advocacy—a company that is "helping writers get their due" (Neilan 2017), as *The A.V. Club* put it—but its early history is a testament to the continual negotiations of power that shape decisions about which films in Hollywood. Leonard set out not just to elevate screenwriters but primarily to find salable material and to provide junior development executives like himself with leverage to recommend difficult scripts to their bosses. In our interview, Leonard cited *Lars and the Real Girl* as the type of screenplay that benefits most from The Black List's approach to script development. The script is about a man who falls in love with a sex doll, which he is convinced is a real woman. *Lars and the Real Girl* placed third in the first Black List survey and would

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[15] See Dan Neilan (September 14, 2017), 'Hollywood's new Black List is helping writers get their due.' *The A.V. Club*. https://www.avclub.com/hollywood-s-new-black-list-is-helping-writers-get-their-1809943667; Kwame Opam (February 24, 2016), 'Inside man: The Black List's Franklin Leonard on Hollywood, visibility, and #OscarsSoWhite.' *The Verge*. https://www.theverge.com/2016/2/24/11101220/black-list-franklin-leonard-interview-oscars-oscarssowhite; Adam Popescu (July 3, 2013), 'Franklin Leonard, the Man Behind the Black List.' *LA Weekly*. https://www.laweekly.com/arts/franklin-leonard-the-man-behind-the-black-list-4183819; Ari Shapiro (January 27, 2017), 'The Hollywood Black List Turns Overlooked Scripts Into Oscar Movies.' *NPR*. https://www.npr.org/2017/01/27/512047249/the-hollywood-black-list-turns-overlooked-scripts-into-oscar-movies; Josh Rottenberg (December 15, 2014), 'Franklin Leonard's Black List can help green-light screenplays.' *Los Angeles Times*. https://www.latimes.com/local/great-reads/la-et-c1-franklin-leonard-black-list-20141215-story.html

eventually be produced by MGM in 2007 with Ryan Gosling in the lead. Leonard described first hearing about the script at a breakfast meeting with a colleague in 2005, an experience he characterized as "the reason The Black List happened."

> *Leonard*: We sit down for breakfast. I was like, 'hey, how's it going.' Standard breakfast chat. She was like, 'I don't have time for the small talk. I read this script last night. It's fucking crazy. It's about a guy who buys a sex doll, treats it like his girlfriend in order to get over trauma.' I was like, 'whoa, that sounds terrible.' She was like, 'no, that's the thing. It's *amazing*.'

Leonard described reading the script himself that evening and finding himself just as enamored as his colleague and just as eager to share the script with others. According to Leonard, he met with another colleague for breakfast the next day, and he proselytized for the script in exactly the same way. The experience, Leonard suggested, crystallized for him the fact that genuinely exciting scripts were being overlooked just because industry lore about what could succeed was preventing unusual material from getting the attention it deserved.

> *Leonard*: And so what I've always been trying to do with The Black List (always, always, always)—that's the annual list *and* the website… What you're trying to create is momentum behind those shares. You're trying to give somebody a reason to sit down and say, 'well, it sounds crazy, but this other person I trust liked it.'

The Black List survey provided precarious decision makers with a means to operationalize their collective tastes and put their weight behind material that might otherwise be summarily dismissed. From the beginning, then, The Black List has been an advocacy tool as much for industry decision makers as for screenwriters. Leonard would bring this same desire to make talent discovery more efficient for industry decision makers to bear on The Black List platform.

Perfect Information

Leonard met Dino Simone, a software engineer, in 2009, when they began discussing a way to turn the Black List survey into a platform. They came up with an idea for a site that

would use an intricate system of tags and a sophisticated recommendations algorithm to help development executives quickly find material that was right for their needs (Nguyen 2016). In October of 2011, a full year before the launch of the consumer-facing Black List service, Leonard and Simone co-founded and launched a service (also called The Black List) that would track "Hollywood's most popular scripts in real time" for established development workers (Finke 2011). In our interview, Leonard described creating this first iteration of the Black List platform as "really just building a solution for myself as a junior executive." Available exclusively to verified industry professionals, the site charged subscribers $20 a month for access. Like The Black List survey, the platform featured screenplays primarily by professional screenwriters with representation.

A year later, however, in October of 2012, The Black List platform opened itself up to aspiring screenwriters. Verified industry professionals could now use the site for free, and screenwriters would pay to host their screenplays on the site and receive feedback from one of the site's anonymized readers. In our interview, I asked Leonard why The Black List transitioned from a business-facing service to one that welcomed consumers, and he claimed that the consumer-facing platform was in part a response to the many aspiring screenwriters who approached him after the launch of the Black List survey asking for advice about how to break in to Hollywood. Leonard claimed that, until he created the public-facing service, he never had an adequate answer, beyond "pack up the family, move to LA, get a job at Starbucks, and network until someone pays attention to you."

Leonard: Look, I'm a Black kid from west central Georgia. I was very lucky. My dad's a doctor. I grew up upper-middle class. I was basically Steve Urkel as a kid. I got into Harvard. And that introduced me to a network of people. And that is literally… A friend from college knew someone that was working at CAA, got me the interview. Like, I would not have been able to make it out here if it had not been for that. And I know damn well there are more talented people than me out

> there who don't have that direct line. And so, I've always been sensitive to the way in which these access issues pervert a labor market. And so, I was like, okay, well, what if we could build something that would allow people, if they did have a good script, to indicate that it's a good script in a way that the industry would pay attention to.

Acknowledging the marginalization of Black participants in Hollywood, particularly in decision-making positions, Leonard here describing his upper-middle-class upbringing and acceptance into Harvard as crucial legs up for his own ability to rise to prominence in Hollywood as a Black man. Positioning The Black List as a means to help level the playing field for aspirants without the same advantages, Leonard describes the public-facing service as a means to make screenwriting more equitable and accessible. However, Leonard also made clear in our interview and elsewhere that he still regards The Black List as an industry tool, first and foremost. In a 2013 exchange with the r/screenwriting community, Leonard claimed that The Black List was "working toward a comprehensive database of every single script that anyone with the resources to get a movie made may want to be aware of" (Leonard 2013). Leonard wrote that the company was "on an education tour both within the writing community and the agency and management company world explaining the benefits of listing scripts on the site, and thus far that's been very successful in addressing this issue" (Leonard 2013). Campaigning for professional writers to host their scripts on The Black List, Leonard has positioned the database as a means to profit not only from aspiring screenwriters but more broadly from the digital flow of unproduced scripts. For Leonard, making screenwriting more democratic and making script development more efficient are not opposing but compatible—and even intertwined—ambitions.

Twarog: What change [to the film industry] do you think would be most substantial for helping people discover talent more equitably?

Leonard: If everybody in the industry used The Black List exclusively, the industry would be functioning a lot more efficiently. That's why I built the company.

Later in our interview, Leonard expanded on the above:

> *Leonard*: If you go all the way back to Adam Smith, the notion of a free market requires perfect information. And perfect information is… People like to think that there's perfect information. And maybe [in] the New York Stock Exchange, there can be perfect information. But within this marketplace of screenplays, there hasn't been. To be able to create an infrastructure that allows for that ultimately benefits the best writers because it means there'll be increased demand for their work.

Positioning The Black List as the Invisible Hand in script development, Leonard here describes a free market in which everyone—professional and nonprofessional screenwriters alike—can participate and in which the "best writers" will ultimately emerge from the masses. In essence, The Black List promises to make script development more meritocratic by gathering, categorizing, and assigning value to every screenplay on the market. However, meritocracies are premised on the understanding that some people "deserve" to be left behind (Littler 2008). As Littler (2008) argues, meritocracies inevitably advantage those deemed to have "merit" in ways that tend to benefit the privileged, obscuring systemic inequalities and forms of oppression. In their efforts to make screenwriting more equitable by making it more meritocratic, the creators of The Black List are not disrupting industry practices but rather reproducing widespread discourses of meritocracy and individualism in media industries that have consistently rendered inequities in media work more difficult to acknowledge and address (Banks and Milestone 2011; Gill 2014; Wreyford 2018; Perkins and Schreiber 2019). Moreover, by relying on the same pool of script readers as the development industry and by enabling development users on The Black List to seek out established and well-connected writers, The Black List assigns merit to speculative screenplays and writers in ways that reproduce the biases and hierarchies that shape hiring practices for screenwriters beyond the site.

On The Black List, merit takes different forms for professional screenwriters than it does for aspirants in ways that reproduce rather than disrupt industry hierarchies. Professional

screenwriters can demonstrate their value to industry members on The Black List by listing their industry connections on their writer profiles—their agents, managers, and any financing or attachments their screenplays may already have. While it's certainly possible for development workers to use The Black List to seek out unknown and inexperienced writers, the website enables industry members to engage in the same culture of homophily that governs hiring practices beyond the site. Work opportunities in the film industry broadly are governed by an informal but entrenched culture of hiring acquaintances and mutual acquaintances, which reproduces raced, gendered, and classed inequities across the film industry.[16] A careful study of screenwriting work by Wreyford (2017) confirms that hiring practices in screenwriting fail to live up to the meritocratic ideals often espoused by industry professionals, reflecting the implicit biases of disproportionately white and male decision makers in film.

For screenwriters without professional experience, merit is demonstrated through reader scores. Black List users without an ounce of professional capital can nevertheless actively promote their screenplays by purchasing script evaluations from the site. For $100, one of The Black List's anonymized readers will rate a submitted screenplay on a scale of 1 to 10 and provide brief evaluative comments.[17] Users can then choose to make the evaluations visible to industry members, who are encouraged by the Black List interface to weigh a screenplay's scores against the site average. Users can (and often do) purchase multiple evaluations, alongside the monthly subscription fee of $30 charged for every script hosted on the site.[18] As affordable as

[16] See Banks and Milestone, 'Individualization'; Bridget Conor, Rosalind Gill, and Stephanie Taylor (2015), 'Gender and creative labour.' *The Sociological Review*, *63*(1), 1-22; and Wreyford, *Gender Inequality in Screenwriting Work*.

[17] At the site's launch in 2012, The Black List charged users $50, not $100, for screenplay evaluations.
[18] Some screenplays on The Black List have as many as 40 evaluations, each costing $50-100 depending on the time of purchase. To save you the keystrokes, that's as much as $4000's worth of evaluations.

The Black List may be relative to other screenwriting services, the fact that visibility on the site requires continual payment inevitably makes the service prohibitively expensive for some users. For screenplays with multiple evaluations, industry members can, if the writer chooses to make the information public, view the distribution of a screenplay's various scores, as well as a sampling of whichever written evaluations the writer chooses to make visible.

Screenplays on The Black List are not only scored but ranked in a continuously updating list of the "best" screenplays on the site: the "Real Time Top List." Screenwriters have access to the Real Time Top List through the "Industry View" section of the site. This is perhaps done in the name of transparency, but the effect of making the list public is to indicate to users that certain story concepts and certain forms of evaluation are more valued than others. The list provides industry members with a first place to look for potential projects, but it also indicates to users, by its very existence, that the standards for quality implicit in the scores assigned to screenplays on the site can be mastered—that the right revisions at the right time can position an unproduced screenplay at the top of the pile. Along these lines, screenwriters who visit the Real Time Top List are encouraged to compare their scripts against those included in the Real Time Top List using a tool that allows writers to "see where your scripts land."[19] Using the tool, screenwriters can see how the weighted scores their screenplays have received compare to the site average and to the cutoff for the Real Time Top List.

Script readers for The Black List thus play a crucial role in defining merit for the platform—particularly for screenwriters without professional experience or industry connections.

Incidentally, a screenplay by Shia Labeouf listed on The Black List at the time of this writing has 125 evaluations.

[19] Only users with two or more Black List evaluations are eligible for the Real Time Top List, further increasing the cost of the service.

Script readers hired for The Black List are required to have, in the words used on the Black List hiring page, "a minimum of one year, full-time experience (i.e. not interns) reading as, at least, employed first filters for major Hollywood financiers, studios, networks, production companies, agencies, or management companies" ("Jobs at The Black List," n.d.). In his 2013 interview with *Gawker*, Leonard further claimed that the site's readers are experienced professionals who are "either between jobs or taking the careers in different direction [sic]" (Shah, 2013, para. 12). In other words, readers for The Black List are precarious freelance workers who are already entrenched in industrial work. When I asked Leonard what steps he took to ensure that readers for The Black List could represent diverse audiences, he emphasized that readers were asked to focus on the quality of the screenplays rather than industry lore that might lead them to dismiss less apparently marketable projects.

Leonard: Our readers know very clearly that if there's any explicit signs of bias in their evaluations, they won't be reading with us for very long at all. I think that's a product of my public persona and what I believe in. I think that probably what differs for us than maybe every other consumer-facing script evaluation platform I know of is how we guide our readers to evaluate. We don't tell them to rate scripts based on a checklist of qualities that a script has. Just because a script has those doesn't mean it's a good script, or that anybody's going to pay attention to it, or failure to include those doesn't mean that nobody's going to pay attention to it. We don't tell people to evaluate based on whether they think it's going to make a lot of money, or that the industry's going to go crazy for it. It's very simple. Rate a script from 1 to 10 based on how enthusiastically you would recommend it to a peer or a superior in the industry to read. And where that comes from is at the core of what The Black List is.

Here, Leonard argues that The Black List promotes diversity among the screenwriters it elevates by instructing readers to rate screenplays based purely on quality. Setting aside the diversity of the readers themselves, Leonard suggests that script readers responding to their own personal tastes will identify the "best" material, regardless of the identities of the readers or screenwriters involved. However, script readers are of course bringing particular cultural

assumptions to bear on their reading experiences, not least of which is their required experience as professional script readers. Typically freelance workers with aspirations to work in other areas of the film industry, script readers in Hollywood are precarious workers who skew young and privileged. They are comprised of those with enough industry connections to secure such work and those who can afford to work for low pay without a clear promise of more steady work in the future. The question is not whether readers for The Black List are honest in their opinions but whether industrial standards of quality they assign to submission are themselves biased.

Underlying The Black List—and industrial script development in general—is an understanding that what distinguishes a media person from an ordinary person is talent and good taste—talent on the part of the creators and good taste on the part of the decision makers. In both cases, media people rationalize their distinction from the masses on the basis of their insight into a universal aesthetic standard that governs storytelling across cultures. Leonard emphasized in our interview that The Black List represents a global ecosystem of writers and decision makers—that the platform, for example, could connect a screenwriter in the United States to a film financier in Spain. In other words, readers working for The Black List and industry professionals searching for material on The Black List are assigning value to screenplays across cultures according to a standardized metric for quality. In its efforts to radically open up screenwriting to any and all participants, The Black List is not resisting media power so much as formalizing the standards and means by which aspirants can test their worthiness for professionalization.

In his approach to media power, Couldry (2000) draws on "symbolic power," which Bourdieu (1991) describes as the power to speak—to contribute to discourse—with more legitimacy than others, and so to construct reality through discourse. Bourdieu, however, places greater emphasis on the relationship between symbolic power and institutional efforts to

standardize the ‘right’ way to speak. For Bourdieu, every utterance, every discursive act, participates in a “linguistic market” which either reproduces or challenges the power dynamics between speakers. There is no such thing as a neutral utterance, and efforts to standardize or neutralize language are always efforts to consolidate the power of those for whom canonized forms of speech come naturally. Moreover, Bourdieu (1991) argues, standardized forms of language are crucially reproduced by those who owe their position “to their mastery of the instruments of expression” (p. 47). Although Bourdieu cites priests, doctors, and teachers as examples, how-to industries and “emerging” producers similarly depend for their distinction from the masses on the reproduction of a standardized metric for screenwriting quality.

The terms governing what’s good or what’s bad in Hollywood are constantly shifting, but, even if they could be fixed, the precise nature of good screenwriting would nevertheless be beside the point, because the effort to standardize screenplay quality is all that is needed to subordinate those who inevitably do not have the resources to keep up with the ever-shifting tastes of the privileged who participate in industrial script development. As Bourdieu (1991) writes, “The game is over when people start wondering if the cake is worth the candle. The struggles among writers over the legitimate art of writing contribute, through their very existence, to producing both the legitimate language, defined by its distance from the ‘common’ language, and belief in its legitimacy” (p. 58). As the following section draws out, aspiring professional screenwriters on The Black List demonstrate their distinction from ordinary aspirants by committing themselves to the ever-shifting aesthetic standards dictated by The Black List and its algorithmic assessments of screenplay quality. In the process, however, both The Black List and its vocal supporters construct screenwriting as a meritocratic practice in which only the most persistent and malleable subjects will prevail.

“This May Sound Elitist, But…”

One reason to doubt that aspiring screenwriters are broadly “gullible” is that many express a deep skepticism about the how-to screenwriting industry—a popular skepticism cultivated not by industry professionals but by aspirants themselves on forum sites like Reddit and DoneDealPro. Even before the popularization of the Internet, consumers used letters to the editor in popular screenwriting magazines to share their negative experiences with how-to screenwriting services, prompting magazines like Chapter 1’s *Creative Screenwriting* to create regular columns assessing the legitimacy of numberless screenwriting products and services. As murky as the how-to screenwriting industry seems (and often is), consumers have worked continuously and collectively to shine a steady light on its shady business practices. Alongside their work exposing fraudulent companies, consumers have also policed each other about how legitimized screenwriting services should be used. Although this work is often done in the guise of protecting consumers from their own naivety, such work is also a means for consumers to dictate the right way to work as an emerging screenwriter.

Vocal aspirants are as quick to turn on the services they use as they are on each other when either threatens the claim of emerging screenwriters to media person status. Consider the brief, disastrous partnership between The Black List and ScriptBook, a business-facing service that sells algorithmic analysis of unproduced film projects, offering box office predictions for films that have yet to be made. On April 18, 2017, only a year after ScriptBook launched, The Black List announced that it was partnering with the startup: for $100, Black List users could now have their screenplays evaluated by ScriptBook’s algorithm, which would provide customers with a series of numerical scores in categories like character “likeability,” target

audience by age and gender, and estimated box office. “By analyzing thousands of produced film scripts, movies and associated data,” The Black List claimed in a blog post, “their algorithm can analyze a film script based simply on its words” (Chen 2017). In some ways, the ScriptBook service was an extension of the work The Black List was already doing to predict how the film industry would assess unproduced screenplays. If reader scores indicate how the film industry would rate a screenplay, ScriptBook reports would tell Black List users how the film industry would categorize it and perceive its financial value, according to the same high-tech metric used by Hollywood producers. At least, this is how the service was promoted.

Screenwriters interpreted the service differently, however. The same afternoon the ScriptBook service was announced and launched, a member of the r/screenwriting community on Reddit created a thread to discuss it, asking in fairly neutral terms what others thought (Eroticawriter4 2017). Later that day, Leonard created a second Reddit thread to discuss the service. On both threads, the response to ScriptBook was overwhelmingly negative. Of the 14 comments that responded directly to the first thread (resulting in dozens of sub-comments), 11 criticized or questioned service, 2 responded positively, and the last response came from Leonard, who encouraged users to join him on the second thread. Of the 19 comments that responded directly to Leonard’s second thread (resulting in more than a hundred sub-comments), 13 were openly critical of the partnership, 5 were neither supportive nor critical but simply raised questions, and a last comment indicated the existence of the earlier thread. None of the comments responding directly to Leonard’s post were supportive of the Black List-ScriptBook service. Several commenters were quick to suggest that the ScriptBook service was yet another screenwriting swindle. One commenter called the ScriptBook service “insulting and quite honestly a scam” (slupo 2017a), while another took aim at Leonard: “STOP SCAMMING

WRITERS FRANKLIN LEONARD" (IGotQuestionsHere 2017). In our interview, Leonard characterized the negative response to the ScriptBook partnership as among the most difficult moments in the company's public relations history.

> *Leonard*: What we heard from customers was not that there were not people that wanted it, because there *were* people that wanted it. In fact, there were people who had opted in to get it. What we heard from an overwhelming percentage of our customers was not only that they didn't want it, but that they didn't want other people to have access to it. Which is a weird thing. A very weird thing.

As Leonard's comments indicate, critics weren't simply disinterested in the ScriptBook service. Many insisted that The Black List remove the ScriptBook service from the platform. What was so unacceptable about the service for critics? The most common criticism questioned the cost of the service. A few suggested that the service would make sense it if were cheaper, but many took the $100 price point as a sign that The Black List was trying to profit from "desperate" writers. Others argued that the ScriptBook service destabilized the otherwise defensible reputation of The Black List as a transcendent service in the how-to screenwriting industry. As one commenter wrote, "I wouldn't expect The Black List to offer something that seems so fundamentally useless" (oddsoulpics 2017). Another wrote, "this 'service' feels like a scam and is a promotional offer I'd expect from FINAL DRAFT at best" (WoodwardorBernstein 2017).[20] Along the same lines, a third commenter suggested the ScriptBook "hurts the BL brand in my opinion, they should take it down immediately" (TyrionDraper 2017). For these critics, the ScriptBook service on The Black List threatened to turn the platform into yet another service for ordinary amateur screenwriters.

[20] Final Draft is the dominant screenwriting software application on the market. The company that creates the software, Final Draft, Inc., is known for its copious cross-promotional offers. Copies of Final Draft are, for example, frequently included among the prizes for screenwriting competitions.

Professional screenwriters reacting to the ScriptBook service similarly distinguished between their distaste for ScriptBook and their respect for The Black List as an industry tool. Established screenwriter Brian Koppelman and Craig Mazin offered some of the most widely distributed critiques of the service. Koppelman tweeted, "I am a fan of @theblcklst and Franklin is a friend. But I hate everything about this scriptbook idea. In every way. It's offensive and gross" (Koppelman 2017). Mazin, a prominent screenwriter and co-host of the popular screenwriting podcast ScriptNotes, joined a Reddit thread discussing the partnership, where he defended Black List as "a good service to up-and-comers" and Leonard as "a good guy" but criticized the ScriptBook partnership: "I haaaaaaate this Scriptbooks crap. I hate it. I have told Franklin I hate it" (Mazin 2017). Emphasizing their respect for and trust in Leonard, Koppelman and Mazin describe the ScriptBook partnership as a misstep for The Black List without going into much detail about the nature of their objections. However, Leonard claimed in our interview that the screenwriters he spoke to objected broadly to the technology behind the service.

> *Leonard*: I think that screenwriters have a rational fear and discomfort with any algorithmic approach to evaluating material. And I think that they're rational in this discomfort because studios do not have a great… The financing business, the industry as a whole, does not have a great track record of treating screenwriters well with any technological innovation.

A concern for the effect that algorithmic script coverage might have on the film industry certainly makes sense for established screenwriters like Koppelman and Mazin. Beneath many consumer complaints about ScriptBook, however, was a concern for those aspiring professional screenwriters who would not be wise enough to avoid the "scam," and who would fork over their hard-earned money unaware that they were being duped. "Bottom line," one commenter wrote, "This is an easy way for you to make more money at the expense of desperate writers looking for every possible way to break into the industry. All you need to do is license some software, put up

a blog post on your site and wait for unsuspecting writer's [sic] to give you their money" (slupo 2017b). Another wrote, "This may sound elitist, but if a person can't even figure out what genre their script is, they aren't very likely to have a career in this industry" (coquinbuddha 2017). A third suggested that, "No one here [on r/screenwriting] is interested. But you knew this already. Your target market are the truly naive and desperate writers, desperate enough to plunk down $100 for useless information that won't help them write better or sell a script. Shameful" ([deleted], 2017). Each criticized the service not on their own behalf but on behalf of those amateurs who they claimed should not have been using The Black List in the first place.

Repeatedly, Leonard responded to critics by pointing out that users who did not feel the service was worthwhile could simply not use it.[21] But Leonard was missing the point that his critics were making, a fact that he recognized at the time: "I'm confused by the conclusion that offering one product that you don't believe has value invalidates the value offered by everything else we do" (Leonard 2017b). However, ScriptBook *did*, in the eyes of those who condemned it, invalidate the legitimacy of The Black List. The point was not, as Leonard insisted, that people could simply not use the service, but that the existence of the service represented a betrayal of the site's mandated role as a service for "emerging screenwriters," for self-proclaimed media producers who were not yet professional but were more than capable of understanding how their screenplays would be categorized, budgeted, and marketed. What emerges in these threads is an effort to distinguish between those "desperate," "unsuspecting" amateurs who would purchase

[21] See, for example, the following comments, all from the twenty-four hours after the ScriptBook service launched on The Black List: "If you don't believe it's worth $100, then by all means you shouldn't pay for it." "If you don't believe it to be a good deal, by all means, do not purchase it." "If writers are skeptical about its value to them, they shouldn't purchase it." The above examples are not exhaustive, either.

ScriptBook reports and those "emerging screenwriters" who were professionalized enough (despite not yet being paid) to not need the service in the first place.

On April 19, 2017, in response to the backlash, The Black List deleted the blog post announcing the service, promised to refund users who had purchased the service, and permanently removed the service from the platform, only a day after it had launched.[22] Although Leonard insisted a blog post announcing the cancellation of the ScriptBook service that he still felt the service had value, he explained in our interview that, in light of the overwhelming objections of the platform's users, he "didn't see enough of an upside to keeping it on the platform that it made sense to fight it." However informally, screenwriters collectivized during these twenty-four hours to reshape The Black List against the wishes of its creators. Neither gullible nor desperate, these screenwriters asserted that The Black List's workers had misunderstood the role of their own platform in the film industry and in the broader culture of screenwriting. As visible as this incident was, less visible negotiations of screenwriting culture are unfolding every day among consumers and the services they use.

The boundary work Black List users performed during the ScriptBook partnership was not isolated to those twenty-four hours. In the first three months of 2021, for example, r/screenwriting participants referenced The Black List in 87 distinct threads. Thirteen of the posts for these threads were created to discuss feedback the original poster received on The Black List. In the ensuing threads, r/screenwriting participants routinely advise would-be Black List users that the site is not meant for amateurs trying to get feedback on their scripts. Rather, they claim, The Black List should be used to get industry exposure once a script has already been carefully revised. "I would strongly recommend against using the blacklist for coverage," one user advised

[22] As of this year, ScriptBook is selling a similar service on its website; a 3-page report from ScriptBook costs $200.

readers: “That’s really not its purpose” (inafishbowl 2021). “Don’t use it for coverage,” another user admonished in a separate thread: “Use it to get industry eyes on a really strong script” (odewayesta 2021). According to yet another user, The Black List “exists so that seasoned semi-pros on the cusp of breaking in can get noticed” (angrymenu 2021). Throughout, these commenters insisted that The Black List is “not a place for general feedback/criticism” (diehardwithzombies 2021) but rather a space where emerging screenwriters demonstrate their skills to industry professionals.

Even when users insisted that The Black List had been valuable as a space for creative feedback, other users policed their user activity as inappropriate. One r/screenwriting participant created a post expressing appreciation for feedback received from The Black List on the first draft of the first screenplay the poster had ever written. Several commenters pointed out that this was not the right way to use The Black List. “Never publish the first draft of your screenplay in a professional way” (the_Dachschund 2021), one commenter wrote, emphasizing that The Black List is a *professional* tool. Another commenter agreed that The Black List is “not a notes service” (IgfMSU1983 2021). Even after the poster insisted that “I definitely don’t think it was a waste of money” (PaxAether 2021), commenters continued to insist that submitting a first draft was an improper use of the platform. Only two of the eight commenters who responded directly to the original post were uncritical, with one reflecting on the policing at work in the comments: “Weird that you got lot of value out of it, yet people are trying to explain how you shouldn’t be happy about it” (FuuuuuuuckKevinDurant 2021). The remaining commenter, follow-up comments indicate, was downvoted simply for offering the original poster congratulations for receiving relatively high scores for a first draft (AndrewBab, 2021).

The boundary work in these threads may not be reflective of the r/screenwriting community or the Black List userbase as a whole, but emerging screenwriters in these communities daily demonstrate their commitment to protecting their status as "seasoned semi-pros on the cusp of breaking in." Whether or not paid media workers take emerging screenwriters seriously, Black List users on r/screenwriting demonstrate that aspirants are not simply subject to but active participants in the construction of boundaries between media people and the ordinary masses. Beneath the suggestion that how-to screenwriting companies are broadly scams and that consumers who use them are broadly "desperate" is an implicit understanding that aspirants trying to professionalize are on the "outside" of media industries and media work, and that how-to companies are profiteering buffers between the two. This chapter demonstrates, however, that many aspiring professional media workers do not perceive themselves to be outsiders. Moreover, this chapter argues that how-to companies do not operate on the margins of media industries but rather are central for their participants and crucial to the broader reproduction of media power among nonprofessional media makers.

Conclusion

The denigrated status of the how-to screenwriting industry in scholarship and film industry discourse is not entirely unwarranted. Many professionalization services charge exorbitant amounts of money for products and services that will likely do little to further the careers of their customers. Pitch festivals are perhaps the most notorious in this regard: usually for hundreds of dollars, screenwriters at pitch festivals are given access to spaces where industry professionals accept payment from the event organizers to hear pitches, often with no intention of purchasing scripts or hiring writers. Innumerable screenwriting contests accept high

submission fees from their applicants only to offer the few winners “prizes” of minimal value in return. Disreputable screenwriting platforms and competitions will sometimes quietly include among their terms of use stipulations that grant the platform or competition ownership of part or all of the intellectual property submitted to their services. Recognizing a means to profit from the ignorance of their customers, these companies are purposefully misleading.

As Lobato and Thomas (2015) argue, however, informal and formal media economies are always interdependent in complex ways. The how-to screenwriting industry is not broadly informal or exploitative any more than professional screenwriting is broadly formal or just. Indeed, professional screenwriting is increasingly and problematically informal. The Black List requires aspirants to perform speculative labor in the hope that it will lead to paid work. While this fact has encouraged some critics to characterize The Black List as a “scam,” the platform’s efforts to profit from spec work mirrors industry practices for professional screenwriters, who are increasingly working under shorter- and shorter-term contracts without much credit, bargaining power, or assurance of future work (Bernardi and Hoxter 2017). Across media industries, media workers are facing increasing demands to perform spec work to secure their careers (Caldwell 2023).

For the many aspirants without personal connections to the film industry or financial safety nets to fall back on, services like The Black List provide a genuinely accessible means to pursue a screenwriting career. The financial costs, questionable legitimacy, and long odds associated with these services are minimal compared to the costs of packing up, moving to Los Angeles, and trying to get a foot in the door without substantial help from someone on the inside. Indeed, Leonard positioned The Black List as just such an alternative in our interview, as he has routinely since the launch of the platform. “For years people have been asking me how to get

their scripts to Hollywood," Leonard told *The Hollywood Reporter* in 2012: "Short of endless rounds of unanswered query letters and screenplay competitions that may, in the best-case scenario, attract the notice of a few people, I never had a good answer. We built [The Black List] to provide one" (Siegel 2012). To the extent that The Black List provides its users with a functioning product, it is considerably less exploitative than the dominant hiring practices for screenwriters in Hollywood.

That said, The Black List's efforts to formalize script development for aspiring screenwriters are bound up in a broader effort to centralize script development on a global scale by the framing the commercial and cultural value of screenplays as quantifiable according to a universal metric. The Black List is first and foremost a business, and the digital flow of unproduced film projects is a growth market only if (a) The Black List owns the metric by which the quality of screenplays is judged and (b) development workers are willing to hire untested writers. Hiring industry readers to assess the value of screenplays on the platform, The Black List does not disrupt but rather reproduces the taste cultures that systemically privilege upper- and upper-middle class, white, male participants. In turn, The Black List privileges users who have professional experience and connections, who can afford to use the platform over long periods of time, and who can comfortably submit their media production to the ever-shifting taste cultures of the film industry at its most profitable centers.

The Black List and services like it deserve critical attention as pre-industry spaces that aspiring professionals use to pursue media careers. As this chapter demonstrates, taking The Black List and its users seriously as participants in the film industry doesn't require endorsing its ambitions wholesale. In its efforts to formalize hiring practices for aspiring screenwriters and centralize script development on a global scale, The Black List does not disrupt but rather

reproduces media power. In turn, The Black List privileges users who have professional experience and connections, who can afford to use the website over long periods of time, and who can comfortably submit their media production to the ever-shifting taste cultures of the film industry at its most profitable centers. Less “gullible” than skeptical, less “desperate” than committed to a meritocratic vision of Hollywood, these emerging screenwriters resist affordances and competing modes of usage that threaten to make The Black List a space for a broader range of participants.

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CHAPTER 5

The Paraindustrial Media Activism of Thuc Doan Nguyen

The previous chapters explored for-profit screenwriting products and services, setting out to understand how commercial imperatives have shaped and reshaped the pipelines that aspiring screenwriters enter on their paths to screenwriting work. This final chapter sets out in a different direction, examining the media activism of screenwriter Thuc Doan Nguyen as a model for alternative forms of intermediation between aspiring professional screenwriters and the development industry. Through her Twitter campaigns #TheBitchList and #StartWith8Hollywood, Nguyen has asked, encouraged, and pressured industry decision makers to strengthen representation for women in American screenwriting and to mentor more women of color into film careers. Nguyen isn't a part of the commercial how-to screenwriting industry—in fact, she disavows commercialization in her activism altogether—but I argue in this chapter that she nevertheless serves as an intermediary between aspirants and development workers in ways that speak back to the how-to screenwriting industry both implicitly and explicitly.

I first encountered Nguyen's activism while a graduate student at USC in the 2010s. Then an aspiring screenwriter and an assistant in the development industry, Nguyen created her first campaign, The Bitch List, as a subversive take on The Black List annual survey explored in the previous chapter. Just like The Black List, The Bitch List gathered votes from development workers for the best unproduced screenplays circulating in Hollywood. But The Bitch List would differ from The Black List in a few important ways: for one, The Bitch List accepted only screenplays that pass The Bechdel-Wallace Test (more on that later, if you're unfamiliar), a measure of the strength of representation for women in media; and second, The Bitch List would solicit votes from a network of Nguyen's peers—script readers and assistants who were

relatively low-level workers in the development industry. As I argue in my analysis of The Bitch List campaign, Nguyen set out to challenge The Black List both to improve representation for women in American screenwriting and to operationalize the overlooked opinions of low-level development workers in her circle.

This overlap between professional and activist ambitions, experiences, and functions contributes to a pair of interrelated concepts that this chapter sets out to define and defend: *paraindustrial media activism* and *activist paraindustries*. Drawing the study of paraindustry into conversation with the study of media activism, these concepts pinpoint the particular experiences of media activists who are also media workers advocating through their activism on behalf of their own professional communities. I define paraindustrial media activism as grassroots industrial self-theorization designed to remedy injustice within media work communities, and it contributes to a partner concept, activist paraindustry, which is a structure of industrial self-theorization constructed to reverse the dominant flow of power within unjust media hierarchies. And I will make the case in this chapter that identifying activist paraindustries could enable media industry scholars, in particular, to acknowledge forms of resistance (and *potential* resistance) to unjust power structures within media in unexpected places.

Aside from drawing attention to Nguyen's activism, the goal of this chapter is twofold: to explore the relationship between Nguyen's activism and the how-to screenwriting industry, which her activism comments on; and to draw out the potential value of paraindustrial media activism and activists paraindustries as concepts. Ultimately, I argue that Nguyen's activism reverses the flow of power and pressure between aspirants and gatekeepers that animates the commercial how-to screenwriting industry. Rather than pressure aspiring screenwriters to suit their work to the ever-shifting commercial needs of the development industry, Nguyen pressures

development workers to better serve underserved aspirants—particularly women of color through the #StartWith8Hollywood campaign. In the process, Nguyen demonstrates the potential for the commercial how-to screenwriting industry to be supplanted by less fixedly hierarchical structures of intermediation.

To make this argument, I analyze how Nguyen built up the campaigns for #TheBitchList and #StartWith8Hollywood. A relatively small-scale hashtag, #TheBitchList has generated roughly 900 tweets since Nguyen launched the campaign in 2012, with most of those tweets coming from Nguyen herself. The #StartWith8Hollywood has been much more popular, in part because it was from the start a more collaborative enterprise than #TheBitchList. Activists Cheryl Bedfords and Manon de Reeper of the organization Women of Color Unite (WOCU) helped launch and would ultimately take over the campaign. Narrating the lives of these hashtags, I analyze how they were used. I also examine the coverage of their associated campaigns in trade publications, blogs, podcasts, and periodicals. Lastly, I sat down with Nguyen for an hourlong interview to discuss her activism. All of these forms of research have been undertaken with an eye toward understanding how Nguyen's campaigns build on and speak back to the how-to screenwriting industry and how Nguyen's status as both a media worker and activist informs both forms of work.

Paraindustrial Media Activism

The introduction to this dissertation explores the concept of paraindustry more in depth, but its central role in the theories that animate this chapter make it worth revisiting here, particularly as it's been applied to screenwriting research. To gloss the definition presented in the introduction, the paraindustry describes the range of texts and ideas that result whenever media

workers theorize their work and their industries (Caldwell 2013; 2014). Industry scholars are often invested in understanding how media industries operate "behind the scenes," and while there's a lot of media—like behind-the-scenes documentaries—that claim to describe how media industries work, the concern is how to make use of these texts when they're so clearly skewed by spin and commercial imperatives. And Caldwell's (2014) argument is that we don't have to trust the paraindustry. Behind-the-scenes featurettes don't really tell us what's happening behind the scenes, of course. But, that doesn't make them valueless as sources for research, and in fact the bias and commercial imperatives that warp their narratives make paraindustrial texts very useful, because when scholars interpret the paraindustry rather than take it at face value, this buffering field of self-theorization can tell us a great deal about what its contributors want, what they worry about, and how they negotiate power amongst themselves.

While the concept of paraindustry as Caldwell described it leaves room for industrial self-theorization that resists dominant power structures, studies of the paraindustry almost always frame it as a means for industry to reproduce or broadly reflect unjust hierarchies. Recent studies that engage meaningfully with the concept of paraindustry have, for example, analyzed credits (and rules for credits) in video games as a paraindustrial reinforcement of above-the-line/below-the-line distinctions in video game work (Švelch 2022); analyzed influencer retreats as a paraindustrial reproduction of the gendered, classed, and raced logics that inequitably structure influencer work (Edwards 2022); and analyzed television series about television production as paraindustrial reflections of labor hierarchies in media work (Dagnino 2016). These are valuable studies that examine the reproductive function of the paraindustry in inequitable media hierarchies. But, what's been neglected in paraindustry scholarship—and what this chapter

foregrounds—is the potential for paraindustry to construct narratives that upend, not simply reproduce, professional hierarchies in media industries.

Examining the screenwriting paraindustry in particular, Bernardi and Hoxter (2017) frame the paraindustry as functionally synonymous with the how-to screenwriting industry—the range of products and promotional expressions created for public consumptions that are valuable to industry researchers in part "because of the work they do in propagating and sustaining the realities and myths of the screenwriting profession" (p. 16). Focusing their research on the public-facing screenwriting paraindustry, Bernardi and Hoxter uncover valuable insights into what professional screenwriters believe, fear, and want, but they also draw what I believe are arbitrary distinctions between paraindustry and the range of inter- and intra-industrial expressions that screenwriters use to negotiate power within media industries: media surrounding strikes, memoranda issued to development executives, and meetings among professional screenwriters to debate the future of their field. These, too, are important aspects of the screenwriting paraindustry for professional screenwriters.

As Caldwell points out, the paraindustry may complicate or enable industry scholars to interpret what media workers believe, but it serves its contributors first and foremost as an inter- and intra-industrial instrument of power: "makers constantly negotiate with themselves through texts" (p. 732). To the extent that power within media industries is diffuse and multi-directional (Havens, Lotz, and Tinic 2009), the paraindustry is an instrument of power accessible to contributors at every level, not simply to those who set out to reproduce dominant power structures. This is an important point not only for this chapter but for the broader project of this dissertation, as one of my key arguments has been that aspiring screenwriters, although they are typically framed as passive consumers, are in fact key contributors to the paraindustry, just as

they are unpaid and invisible workers within media industries. Reserving paraindustry as an instrument of power for "industry" risks euphemistically conflating industry with the people, beliefs, and habits that reproduce its unjust hierarchies.

As a media worker who theorizes her field online, Nguyen contributes to a development paraindustry through her campaigns. But, she is simultaneously participating in media activism. What exactly makes her campaigns activist? First, media activists intentionally set out to rectify social injustices in media industries. As Lopez (2016) argues, activism broadly can be defined as "intentional participation in a political act designed to remedy a social injustice" (p. 24). So, media activists identify injustice in the media world and then take action to remedy that injustice (Lopez, 2016). Lopez (2016) also argues that media activists are fighting for cultural citizenship—the ability to participate fully, as equals, in a cultural form. Certainly, Nguyen's work fulfills these criteria. Recognizing the lack of representation for women (and women of color, specifically) in American commercial screenwriting, Nguyen set out to remedy that injustice by publicly pressuring industry decision makers to acknowledge, promote, meet with, and hire more women of color, enabling them to participate more fully in cultural production.

Second, Carroll and Hackett (2006) associate media activism with "grassroots efforts" to create or alter media practices, suggesting that activism by its nature is a bottom-up form of collectivization rather than than a top-down application of power. While the state and powerful decision makers in media industries may set out to alter media practices, even in directions that tend toward justice, their direct policy work can hardly be considered activist. As a working but not prominent screenwriter, Nguyen is a media professional who speaks from, at best, a mid-level position of power within media industries. Moreover, when Nguyen first began the campaign for #TheBitchList, she was an aspiring screenwriter just beginning her process of

professionalization. In addition, Nguyen's activist work often advocates on behalf of aspiring screenwriters, unpaid workers whose status as media people is often called into question.

In an effort to explore the overlap between paraindustrial work and activism, this chapter explores the contours of what I describe as paraindustrial media activism, which incorporates elements of paraindustry and media activism. In the introduction to this chapter, I defined paraindustrial media activism as grassroots industrial self-theorization designed to remedy injustice within media work communities. Building on this section's discussion of paraindustry and media activism, I would simply add here that paraindustrial media activism represents an intentional effort on the part of media workers to theorize their fields in ways that reframe how unproduced film projects are valued in the development industry. To the extent that media workers use the paraindustry strategically to negotiate power, paraindustrial activism sets out to form more equitable contact zones between communities of media workers whose interactions are typically characterized by dominance and control.

The #StartWith8Hollywood and #TheBitchList campaigns are also examples of hashtag activism—"the creation and proliferation of online activism stamped with a hashtag" (Jackson, Bailey, and Foucault Welles 2020). Kuo (2018a) describes hashtags as "indexical signifiers of '*solidarity*'—through hashtags, solidarity circulates as an act of visualized and visible claims-making" (p. 41). Nguyen uses the #StartWith8Hollywood in just this way, expressing her solidarity with other women of color in Hollywood but also exhorting prominent industry figures to use the hashtag, too, to meet with and mentor women of color, and so to enact that solidarity in their working lives. Focusing the #StartWith8Hollywood campaign on women of color, Nguyen also used the hashtag to bring intersectionality into a conversation that, in its first form in the tech world, focused more broadly on gender. As Kuo (2018b) argues, hashtags are

"discursive spaces where racial relations and encounters happen" (p. 43). In her tweets, Nguyen often combines the #StartWith8Hollywood hashtag with #WOC and other hashtags making more explicit references to race, discursively framing inequity in Hollywood as raced *and* gendered, not simply gendered.

Several scholars have explored how audiences use hashtag campaigns to advocate change in media industries, calling for greater diversity in widely distributed commercial media (Lopez 2016; Gutiérrez 2022; Scott 2017), critiquing media narratives about their communities and issues that impact their lives (Florini 2019; Lopez 2016), or demanding that media industries make media more accessible to diverse communities (Ellcessor 2018). This chapter builds more directly on studies of hashtag activism undertaken by media workers on behalf of their own work communities (Lopez 2016; Ochsner 2019; Salamon 2020; Lui 2023) in an attempt to more directly theorize the overlap between activism and paraindustry. Lui (2023) argues, for example, that activist campaigns carried out in parallel by media workers and by the broader public can sometimes compete in their respective motivations. And as Salamon (2020) argues, social media sites are complex spaces where freelance media workers engage simultaneously in entrepreneurial self-exploitation and activist resistance to their exploitation by employers. In other words, Twitter has particular significance for paraindustrial media activists, who might otherwise use the platform to promote their work or form more genial connections with prominent industry figures. Exhorting screenwriters in her Twitter network to support her campaigns, Nguyen encourages screenwriters (aspirants and professionals alike) to use the platform as a space for political collectivization, not just entrepreneurship and self-promotion.

#StartWith8Hollywood focuses broadly on women of color, and, through both her activist work and her general social media, Nguyen often advocates specifically on behalf of

Black, Indigenous, and Asian American women. While scripts need only pass The Bechdel-Wallace Test to qualify for The Bitch List, Nguyen has used #TheBitchList campaign to advocate greater representation for women of color and to critique racist tropes in portrayals of women of color in American media. Nguyen insisted, for example, that scripts included on The Bitch List should not feature Black women in "slave-servant" roles, nor Asian women in stereotypical roles. Nguyen also paired #TheBitchList hashtag frequently with #WOC and other activist hashtags, like #BlackPowerYellowPeril and #AsianFemaleExcellence, and she often uses her Twitter to promote "racial justice activist hashtags" (Kuo 2018a) like #NotYourAsianSideKick. In so doing, Nguyen's work on Twitter exemplifies the claim made by Kuo (2018b) that hashtags can be understood as "indexical signifiers of '*solidarity*'" (p. 41)—means for solidarity to circulate among activists with varied, intersecting concerns. Nguyen frequently uses the @ sign in her tweets to address public figures, exhorting them to acknowledge or participate in her campaigns, building on the widespread use of the @ symbol on Twitter as a means to visibly address specific users (Honeycutt and Herring 2009).

The fact that Twitter is a professional space for aspiring screenwriters complicates its potential as a host for networked counterpublics, as it is often studied (Graham and Smith 2016; Gutiérrez 2022; Jackson and Foucault Welles 2015). Habermas (1989) proposed the public sphere as a concept to explain the role that public opinion plays as a mediating force between state authorities and their citizens. Habermas conceived of the public sphere as an ideal, an open space for discourse where anyone could speak, contribute to public opinion, and so maintain the proper functioning of a democratic society against the tendency of the state to misrepresent public opinion and so oppress its people. However, Fraser (1990) critiqued the Habermasian ideal as one that posits white, male, upper class participation as the norm. If it can be said that

there is a dominant public opinion, Fraser argued, then there must also be competing counterpublics in which marginalized groups talk through their identities and political aims. Counterpublics draw out the power imbalances and injustices otherwise left unchecked in the hegemonic construction of public opinion.

Networked technologies brought with them the potential for a networked public sphere (Benkler 2006), but they also enabled the formation of networked counterpublics otherwise too costly, too dangerous, or too logistically difficult to form (Jackson and Welles 2015). Large-scale hashtag activist campaigns within media industries, like #MeToo and #TimesUp, generated meaningful counterpublics in their widespread usage, their visibility to the broader public beyond media industries, and the participation of prominent industry figures. While Nguyen's activism received some limited media coverage in trade publications and benefitted from a few prominent co-signers within media industries, it would be questionable to suggest that her hashtag activism generated a networked counterpublic; indeed, her activism is firmly industrial and highly local. Rather, I argue that the limited scope of Nguyen's Twitter campaigns, which were often maintained and promoted by Nguyen herself, forced and enabled Nguyen to blend her activism with her media work in complex ways.

The Story of #TheBitchList

A precise measure of the impact of The Bitch List, Nguyen's first and longest-running campaign, is difficult and maybe fruitless to attempt, since the purpose of the list is not to ensure the sale of selected screenplays but instead to enhance their visibility in the market. Working screenwriters have credited their placements on The Bitch List for dramatically expanding their professional networks (Crawford 2020) and even for helping to launch their screenwriting

careers (Dever 2018). Trade publications and platforms like *IndieWire* and *The Tracking Board* have amplified the impact of the list by covering its release and republishing the names of its winners. And in our interview, Nguyen reported that development executives reached out to her directly for script recommendations as a result of her work assembling The Bitch List. But whether or not The Bitch List achieved its stated goals of convincing Hollywood to invest more in stories about women, the campaign indicates the potential for digital activists working at small scales to reframe the relationship between aspirants and gatekeepers.

Over the course of several years, The Bitch List made enough noise that national publications and prominent industry figures took notice, promoting the survey in ways that legitimized Nguyen and her activist work for many aspiring screenwriters and industry professionals alike. And as the later part of this chapter draws out, the sense of legitimacy in screenwriting discourse that Nguyen built up over the years enabled her to launch her second major campaign, #StartWith8Hollywood, in such a way that industry professionals quickly took notice and signed on. But the path to visibility for Nguyen and The Bitch List was a long one, marked by scattered periods of incremental growth. In contrast with more prominent paraindustrial activist campaigns like Time's Up, which was launched by a group of celebrities and so benefitted from near-immediate visibility (Donoghue 2020), The Bitch List achieved relative visibility within the screenwriting community on Twitter only after years of persistent, aggressive work from Nguyen. As the following section describes, Nguyen built her influence in the screenwriting paraindustry through patience, persistence, and collectivization.

Nguyen would form her activist organization The Bitch Pack while a graduate student in screenwriting at USC, but the seeds of her efforts were planted in childhood, when Nguyen experienced discrimination from her white peers. A refugee from Vietnam, Nguyen immigrated

to the United States while still a child. Her family was sponsored to Kinston, North Carolina, a community Nguyen described as "very white bread" in an interview with the blog Project Yellow Dress. Their next home, a community in southern Maryland, was similarly dominated by white residents. As Nguyen noted of her community in Maryland, "we had to drive about an hour to Northern Virginia before seeing any other Asians at all" (Project Yellow Dress n.d.). In the same interview, Nguyen described being bullied as a child for being an Asian girl in Maryland: "I was called a 'Chinese bitch' at my locker in seventh grade by a mini-white supremacist girl. I think that's the first time it really struck me. I never did anything to her. I had to just ignore her and take it, much like I've had to take other bitter pills when it comes to blatant discrimination" (Project Yellow Dress n.d.). The experience would be echoed for Nguyen in graduate school when a USC classmate gave Nguyen and a few of her peers a nickname: "The Bitch Pack."

This time, Nguyen embraced the moniker, turning The Bitch Pack into an organization that would pressure Hollywood to make more content by and for women. For their first project, Nguyen would create The Bitch List, a feminist revision to The Black List survey explored in the previous chapter. Nguyen's list would differ from The Black List in a few important ways: first, The Bitch List assembled only unproduced scripts that passed the Bechdel-Wallace Test. Popularized by cartoonist Alison Bechdel in 1985, the Bechdel-Wallace Test is a measure of the prominence of female characters in a film. To pass the test, a film must suit three criteria: "(1) it has to have at least two women in it, who (2) talk to each other, about (3) something besides a man" ("Bechdel Test Movie List" n.d.). The purpose of the test—and a number of more intersectional successors the test has inspired (Dargis 2016; Hickey, Koeze, Dottle, and Wezerek 2017)—has been to spark conversations about how few films (and screenplays) pass what Nguyen described in interviews as a purposefully "low-barred test" (Project Yellow Dress n.d.).

The second thing that made Nguyen's list different from The Black List was the group of workers who sourced the screenplays in the first place, lower-level development workers who promoted scripts that not only passed The Bechdel Test but that they also felt were being undervalued. As the previous chapter draws out in more detail, The Black List survey has always gathered screenplay recommendations from development executives, relatively high-up figures in the development industry. When she assembled the first annual Bitch List in 2012, Nguyen was working as an assistant and script while aspiring to a screenwriting career, and she gathered screenplays from a network of her peers—assistants and script readers. As I touched on briefly in the last two chapters, assistants, script readers, and interns serve a first filters for potential film projects at development companies, comprising what Caldwell (2023) describes as a "vast underclass" of "underling preproducers" who engage in a "narrative preanalysis" of unproduced projects that "essentially culls, preselects, and cognitively projects an idealized imagined narrative for quick comprehension in the minds of producers, agents, and network executives" (p. 103). Assistants and script readers are encouraged simultaneously to judge screenplays according to their tastes and at the same time mold their sense of taste to the opinions and commercial needs of their employers.

As a quick example of this, I worked as an intern writing coverage—written assessments of submitted screenplays—at multiple development companies during my undergraduate and graduate studies in the late 2000s and early 2010s, around when Nguyen was doing the same sort of work. In my last internship, at a small but prominent production company in Los Angeles, I was asked in my coverage to provide my honest opinion about the scripts and manuscripts I was assigned to read, but I was also encouraged to view and read as many materials as I could that the company had already approved to familiarize myself with the company's 'house style'—its

particular brand of good taste. Moreover, the other interns and I were tasked with prioritizing particular genres that suited the company's brand, giving special consideration to "elevated thrillers" and stranger-than-fiction true stories. It was understood that our job was to find projects that would be the right "fit" for the company, not for our own sense of quality.

When I asked Nguyen what motivated her to create the survey in the first place, she described, alongside her desire to greater representation for women in film, frustrations with her work experiences as a media consumer but also a script reader:

Nguyen: I had no real goals except to gripe because I was very frustrated, as I still am. So there was no outlook, and it was very selfishly motivated, because I just wanted better things to read and watch. Nothing was coming across my desk.

Later in the interview, Nguyen emphasized this point: "I was just trying to get better stuff for me and mine to not sit around rolling our eyes as assistants." In this regard, alongside its activist impulses, The Bitch List served a clear paraindustrial function from the start—a means for Nguyen and her peers to comment on their professional frustrations with being forced to read submitted material that routinely underrepresented women. And ultimately this fact—that the list was being sourced by assistants, readers, even interns—would help create interest in the list among development executives, who saw it not as a means to create more representation for women on screen but as a means to get relatively "unfiltered" recommendations for new material.

Nguyen described development executives reaching out to her because they wanted to know what overlooked screenplays would be on the next year's list:

Nguyen: They want to know what I think and what I am reading and liking because… And one of them told me, a very high up exec told me—again, not to slag The Black List—but they're like, 'well, I mean, the stuff on your list isn't packaged yet. It's fresh.' It's like, 'we'd rather have something we can have more creative control over than The Black List.' By the time it's on The Black List, that's already like halfway through into pre-production. And we can't do anything with that. And I

> mean, I guess it's tooting my own horn, but I mean, this is what I was told by people. And then some major actresses would request things from The Bitch List and whatnot because they believed it was just fresher.

Indeed, The Black List has always had an overriding bias toward the opinions of those at the perceived centers of the film industry. Respondents include three-hundred-odd executives in the insular heart of conglomerate Hollywood, and the results of the survey reflect this fact every year. Of the 80 screenplays selected for the 2020 Black List, for example, nearly half (39) were written by writers represented at a handful of agencies: United Talent Agency (UTA), Creative Artists Agency (CAA), William Morris Endeavor (WME), The Gersh Agency, and Verve Talent and Literary Agency. Of the remaining 41 screenplays, 39 were written by writers represented by agents and/or managers working under the aegis of established companies. Indeed, 62 of the 80 screenplays on the list already had producers and/or financiers attached. All of which is to say that The Black List doesn't promote undiscovered writers or projects so much as it promotes projects that might, for whatever reason, need a little extra push to get greenlit.

Nguyen: The Black List was great, because it was voted on by people's managers and reps. Of course, that's biased. They want their clients to be on the list so they can make money. But people knew that. The Bitch List was mostly pleb assistants like me who are tasked with reading. So it's our unfiltered opinion, because we are also those media consumers.

While Nguyen contrasts The Bitch List with The Black List here, what interests me is the fact that the two lists are not so different in their origins. Both The Black List and The Bitch List garnered attention from prominent figures in development on the basis of their perceived commercial value as sources for more meritocratic script recommendations. Moreover, as I explore in the previous chapter, Franklin Leonard began The Black List as a means for junior executives to collectivize their opinions about promising screenplays that they felt were being overlooked, using the placement of scripts on the survey as leverage to convince higher-ups that

the screenplays were worth producing. Just so, Nguyen described The Bitch List as a means for assistants to promote the screenplays they most enjoyed, with an added investment in promoting screenplays featuring women. Compare Nguyen's frustration at the material coming across her desk to the frustration Leonard expressed at struggling to find quality screenplays to recommend to his higher-ups. Both Leonard and Nguyen created their respective lists in part to collectivize and formalize creative perspectives that they felt were being overlooked by higher-ups in development.

In this respect, both The Black List and The Bitch List serve a paraindustrial function as a means for lower-level development workers to re-theorize value in unproduced screenplays in a way that resists rather than reproduces the dominant flow of power and pressure in professional hierarchies. Framing The Black List survey as "activist" by virtue of this fact would seem counter-intuitive, since The Black List survey was created to operationalize the opinions of fairly high-level development workers. And yet, I want to argue that The Black List survey, in its efforts to resist the dominant flow of power in professional hierarchies, carried with it activist potential. In time, as Nguyen and others have claimed, The Black List survey became an intra-industrial marketing tool for agents, managers, and producers to promote their clients or projects that profit them. But tracking the project from its origins and foregrounding its foundation in resistance opens up the possibility of alternative futures—a Black List survey more centrally devoted to improving representation for marginalized folks or promoting the opinions of undervalued voices—The Bitch List, in other words. Here is where I see value in framing The Bitch List not simply an activist campaign but as a form of paraindustry—that doing so forces us to acknowledge its embeddedness within industry and its kinship with entrepreneurial actions that don't seem at first to carry activist potential.

In his description of paraindustry, Caldwell (2014) compares the self-theorization that media workers undertake to a sort of "shadow academy," which seems to mimic the theoretical frameworks that industry scholars sometimes use to understand industry's operations. Providing four examples, Caldwell claims that media workers engage in *para-political-economic work*, where media workers theorize their own political economies, often in ways that serve commercial imperatives; *para-aesthetic work*, where media workers analyze their own aesthetics, often in ways that benefit their respective claims to authorship; *para-cultural studies work*, where media workers frame their work as culturally transformative; and *para-industrial standpoint theory*, where media workers criticize the actions of their peers. Incorporating Nguyen's paraindustrial media activism into this framework, we might imagine and seek out spaces where media workers engage in a sort of *para-service work*, putting their critical theorizations of industry to work in actions that extend beyond—and sometimes trouble—their paid work. While not (yet) activist, for example, The Black List represented a project that Leonard undertook beyond the boundaries of his paid work in an effort to both facilitate his paid work of finding promising scripts and to operationalize the undervalued perspectives of his fellow junior development executives. While The Black List is now a valued institution within the development industry, Leonard relied on anonymity to protect his extra-curricular efforts to revalue unproduced screenplays and was ultimately fired for disrupting his company's power structures when his identity was exposed.

Because it relied on the participation of executives, relatively high-level figures in the development industry, The Black List achieved near-instant visibility in trade publications. The Bitch List, by contrast, experienced a much longer and more difficult road to visibility—and significantly less visibility than The Black List has ever achieved. At its launch in 2012, Nguyen

promoted The Bitch List across platforms, creating a website, Twitter account, YouTube account, and Facebook page for the event. Nguyen created a video on YouTube to promote The Bitch List. About a minute in length, the video featured stills and posters from recent box office successes, followed by the (very high) box office numbers for each film shown. Toward the end of the video, a title asks, "What do these have in common besides strong box office returns & tons of fans?" (HollywoodBitchPack 2012). A second set of titles explained, "They pass The Bechdel Test and prove that: Women want to watch women kick ass on screen." Directing the video toward Hollywood professionals, a final series of titles suggested that decision makers could find similarly profitable screenplays by examining The Bitch List at TheBitchPack.com.

Within a few days, Nguyen was excited to report on Twitter that their video had received "over a hundred views already" (Nguyen 2012). Between 2012 and 2021, #TheBitchPack would be used in roughly 800 tweets, most of which came from Nguyen herself. Indeed, in the first year of #TheBitchPack, the hashtag would be used in reference to Nguyen's campaign only 51 times, with 48 of those mentions coming from Nguyen. Nguyen would tweet at screenwriters, filmmaking publications, management companies, film festivals, advocacy organizations, and screenwriting software maker Final Draft, Inc., each time using the hashtag #TheBitchList to promote the list. Thanking Twitter users for their retweets, tweeting articles that encouraged producers to pay more attention to women creators and audiences, and encouraging industry professionals to submit votes for the Bitch List, Nguyen maintained a digital presence for The Bitch Pack largely on her own. In the long story of #TheBitchList, its first year was one in which Nguyen worked hard to raise awareness for the project. Despite Nguyen's efforts, however, the first Bitch List—published on the Bitch List WordPress site in January 2013—was comprised of only 16 screenplays (Nguyen 2013a).

The hashtag's second year would be even more dire, with #TheBitchList used only 6 times in direct reference to the campaign and 3 of those uses coming from Nguyen herself—all in January. Two of those uses occurred in tweets in which Nguyen was promoting the previous year's list. Nguyen hadn't given up on the campaign, however. In November 2013, Nguyen published a blog post titled "Write the Change" in which she argued that creating films that passed the Bechdel Test could simultaneously "change the world" and "earn 'billions' more than non-passing content" (Nguyen 2013b). Nguyen also took her blog post as an opportunity to promote other hashtag campaigns, including #BeTheChange, a campaign for screenwriters to write women without turning them into sexual objects, #NotYourAsianSidekick, #BlackPowerYellowPeril, and #BlackPowerLiberAsian. From only 6 uses in 2013, #TheBitchList hashtag would grow steadily in its usage over the years, climbing to 125 uses in 2018 and then peaking at 257 uses in 2019. Throughout its history, however, #TheBitchList hashtag has been used most by Nguyen herself. And yet, as a result of the perceived commercial value of The Bitch List as a space for "unfiltered" opinions on projects in development, prominent development workers in the film industry took notice. In the coming years, Nguyen's activist efforts would receive coverage in publications like *IndieWire*, *Salon*, *The Hollywood Reporter*, *Bitch Media*, and *The Huffington Post*.[23]

Enabled and Constrained

As Lopez (2016) and Perlman (2016) have argued, media activists are both enabled and constrained by proximity to industry. When media activists are also media workers, as is always the case with paraindustrial activism, their efforts to pressure people in power to change industry

[23] See Knott (2014), G'Sell (2016), Drury (2020), Hashimoto (2013), and Brucculieri (2016).

practices threatens their livelihoods (Lopez 2016). At the same time, access to industry knowledge and networks enables media workers to bolster their activist efforts and make those efforts more targeted and efficient (Lopez 2016). Nguyen relied on a professional network of script readers to gather script submissions for The Bitch List, but she also relied on her embeddedness within professional networks to build a coalition among other paraindustrial workers. Framing The Bitch Pack as a loose organization that encompassed this coalition, Nguyen said in her Project Yellow Dress interview that, "over the years it's become a collection of writers and believers, mostly in Los Angeles but also from all over, who know they literally have the power in their hands to create characters that will show humans how to be better to each other, characters who believe in equality" (Project Yellow Dress n.d.).

In the early days of The Bitch List, Nguyen reached out to screenwriting contests, higher education programs, and professional organizations for support. According to Nguyen, The Bitch List quickly developed a following among Chapman University MFA students in directing and screenwriting. And in its first year, The Bitch Pack would partner with Shriekfest, a horror screenwriting contest, to offer contestants a "Bitch Pack Award" for the best horror screenplay that passed the Bechdel Test. Even before the first Bitch List was released, The Bitch Pack partnered with the Los Angeles Female Playwrights Initiative (LAFPI), an organization devoted to promoting representation for women on stage. Co-founder of the LAFPI Jennie Webb described the organization's decision to partner with The Bitch Pack in a statement made to promote the event in 2013:

> One of the things that we told ourselves when we started LAFPI is 'Let's not say no.' We wanted to focus on the positive and the possibilities while staying true to our goals: helping put women's voices onstage. So when we heard a cry in the wilderness from the Bitch Pack, of course we jumped at the chance to help one another by joining forces wherever possible. (Shamas 2012)

The LA FPI would host an event to promote the first Bitch List at the Samuel French Bookshop in Hollywood in January of 2013, bringing visibility to the organization and authorizing its efforts. As Fotopoulou (2016) writes, networked feminism is "characterised by complex connectivity and… operates at the intersections of online and offline, and across campaigning activities, feelings, and people" (p. 49). Nguyen built publicity for The Bitch List by soliciting support from a broad coalition of feminists and potential feminists in the how-to screenwriting industry. Through cross-promotional support, Nguyen increased the visibility of The Bitch Pack.

When I asked Nguyen to say more about how she went about building a coalition of supporters early in the history of The Bitch Pack, she suggested that a great deal of luck was involved: "Maybe my very cavewoman SEO [search engine optimization] was working." But Nguyen also described using a combination of persistence and patience in asking industry professionals for support: "Because I believe in actually having a human interaction for 20 years or so before I would start asking for favors, I have actually gotten well-received by [prominent] white men [in Hollywood], and I have had in-person meetings when I lived in Los Angeles with very major production companies." Speaking to the concern that prominent white males in film would resist activist efforts to upend their disproportionate influence in media industries, Nguyen describes her efforts to develop professional networks gradually over time as enabling her to attract prominent co-signers for her activism. Her professional status and career in film development enabled her to build a network of supporters around her activism.

And yet, Nguyen's activism would also face backlash from development workers in ways that sometimes troubled her professional work. The name The Bitch List, for example, would receive immediate pushback from people in Nguyen's network. In our interview, Nguyen explained that she chose the name "The Bitch List" to subvert the power of a misogynist slur that

had been used against her personally in her efforts to resist misogyny in screenwriting. In our interview, Nguyen described how some pressured her to change the name to something less controversial: "a lot of people told me, 'Why aren't you The Femme Pack?' I'm like, 'I am not a maxi pad.'" Nguyen elaborated:

> *Nguyen*: Sometimes you have to be a little more provocative to get a point across than others because... And I wanted to be alliterative. The Blood List… [The Blood List creator] Kailey Marsh is awesome. And The Black List. What was I going to call it, the Femme List? So what better B-word? But a lot of people were like, 'oh, no, you know, you shouldn't call women bitches.' […] I understand these arguments, but there is that kind of subversion. Let's subvert it. Let's own it.

While the decision to make The Bitch List alliterative with The Black List and The Blood List may have been a playful one (Nguyen laughed after describing her decision to give the list a name with a "B-word"), it also positioned The Bitch List quickly and clearly in a subversive dialogue with more longstanding, better known organizations. Indeed, the fact that The Bitch List plays on The Black List in such a clear and subversive way is a part of what caught my attention when I first encountered The Bitch List in the 2010s. While it would perhaps be more difficult to imagine established industry figures like those who created the Time's Up campaign to use a misogynist slur in their primary hashtag, Nguyen began her efforts from a relatively marginal position in Hollywood. Like Reeves, Nguyen embraced notoriety to generate visibility for her efforts. At the same time, Nguyen describes subverting the power of the word "bitch" as a misogynist slur, using the word instead to fight for greater representation for women in Hollywood—an article published by the Los Angeles Female Playwrights Initiative would claim further that the "bitch" in Bitch List was also an acronym, standing for "Brilliant, Intriguing, Creative, Tenacious Heroines" (Shamas 2012).

The name would also cause headaches for Nguyen years later. When Nguyen created The Bitch Pack, she was a graduate student not yet professionalized as a writer in media industries,

and she positioned herself primarily as a consumer. Today, Nguyen works professionally as a magazine writer and screenwriter, and she uses her Twitter account to network and promote her writing. For many years, her Twitter account, which she created to promote The Bitch Pack, took for its handle @biatchpack. Since her work as a paraindustrial activist overlapped with her emerging career as a screenwriter, Nguyen built up a professional network and an activist network that cannot be entirely separated. However, Nguyen recently changed her Twitter handle to @Consider8Media, because she had concerns about the effect that using the handle @biatchpack would have on her ability to find and maintain her work as a magazine writer.

Nguyen: I've changed it to 'Consider8Media' because I wanted to be more of a grownup after a while, be more professional. […] I'm going to streamline my presence so that I can include my magazine editors so they don't go, 'oh, my goodness, who did we hire?' I mean, I work for *Southern Living*, so I don't want to be like, 'Oh, this article about food by someone [called] what?' So it's more for my magazine editor.

While any activist effort involves risk, Twitter is a complex space for paraindustrial activism, particularly for those who don't have the same job security as celebrity activists or the same indifference to gatekeeper ire as consumer activists. For media professionals, Twitter is simultaneously a space for activism and a space for networking, job hunting, and professional self-promotion (Salamon, 2020). When I asked Nguyen if she ever had concerns that her activist work pressuring industry decision makers would ever affect her career, she said "no."

Nguyen: Because I'm not that bright. Or I don't think that far in advance. Or I just have to say it. But you know what? The results have been… When I have reached out to [those] who some people might call powerful white men, guess what? I had a meeting with Ted Hope at Amazon Studios. Or guess what? Fabulous independent producer Cassian Elwes, who has won Oscars, follows me.

Here, Nguyen describes her activism as a boon to her career, a means to network and generate professional capital that would otherwise be difficult to cultivate. Her rise to visibility resembles and differs from that of a figure like Carson Reeves in Chapter 3. Like Nguyen,

Reeves initially sought to influence screenwriting discourse from the position of an aspirant—an outsider with few claims to authority in Hollywood. Like Nguyen, Reeves built up his influence in screenwriting discourse with the collective support of a network of likeminded peers—a script-sharing community of industry professionals with access to the latest unproduced screenplays in Hollywood. However, there is a key difference here: Nguyen marshalled a coalition of industry supporters in support of an effort to remedy injustice in screenwriting, while Reeves marshalled his network and readers in support of an effort to reproduce the belief that Hollywood is a meritocracy.

#StartWith8Hollywood

For her next campaign, #StartWith8Hollywood, Nguyen broadened the scope of her activism, targeting industry professionals at every level of the film and television industries. #StartWith8Hollywood took inspiration from #StartWithEight, a campaign to pressure venture capitalists to support women in the tech industry. In March of 2018, the investment platform Alpha Edison launched #StartWithEight with a blog post. The blog described the widely documented fact that women in tech—and women of color in particular—are underfunded by venture capital and underrepresented in leadership positions at venture capital firms (Alpha Edison 2018). Taking inspiration from the arrival of International Women's Day on March 8, Alpha Edison committed to taking meetings with 8 women from outside its network by the end of the month and asked other venture capital firms to make the same commitment. Within a week, 50 other investment firms and 7 other tech-related companies had joined the campaign.

As Nguyen explained in our interview, she participated directly in the Alpha Edison campaign as one of the 8 women invited to meetings by investments firms and tech-related

companies. The day after Alpha Edison published its blog post, she set out to transpose the campaign to Hollywood, challenging Hollywood decision makers on Twitter to make a similar commitment: “Meet w 8 women, 4 of them #WOC this month+ Start with writers from #TheDiversityList #TheBitchList Who’s in? #filminclusion #timesup” (Nguyen 2018). From the beginning, Nguyen raced the call to action put forth by Alpha Edison. While Alpha Edison referenced the fact that Black women are underfunded by venture capital firms, the company’s call to action for the initial #StartWithEight campaign asked only that venture capital firms meet with “8 new women” (Alpha Edison 2018). Nguyen instead called on Hollywood decision makers to meet with 8 women, including at least 4 women of color. The following year, when Nguyen raised the idea to begin #StartWith8Hollywood, she would focus the campaign exclusively on women of color.

On May 8, 2019, Nguyen sent a tweet to the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, a think tank studying diversity and inclusion in entertainment: “Dearest @Inclusionists, do we have any stats on who gets #filmfunding? I’m willing to be[t] numbers are just like #WomeninTech w/ 0.02% going to #WOC… #Brotopia is tech and has also been and is Hollywood” (Nguyen 2019a). Drawing out the misogyny and white supremacy that structures both Hollywood and the tech industries, Nguyen argued that a similar campaign to #StartWithEight for WOC in the film industry could make a difference for women of color who were aspiring filmmakers. In a follow-up tweet on the same thread, Nguyen targeted the American Film Market (AFM), the largest annual film market in the United States and a key space for film financing and distribution, asking if there were “any funders who will commit to meeting with #WOC this year in November? Happy to advertise who they are. #StartWith8 began in the tech world- funders

committing to meet with 8 #WOCinTech…" (Nguyen 2019b). The AFM would not publicly respond.

A year later, on May 20, 2020, Nguyen officially launched the #StartWith8Hollywood campaign from her Twitter account: "We begin with simple conversations between gate keepers/producers & 8 #WOC" (Nguyen 2020). In the tweet, Nguyen described the campaign as a collaboration between herself and Cheryl L. Bedford, creator of the organization Women of Color Unite (WOCU), a Los Angeles-based non-profit organization committed to "fair access, fair treatment and fair pay for women of color in all aspects of the entertainment and media industries" ("Welcome to Women of Color Unite" n.d.). As I explain below, Bedford would go on to develop a more permanent mentorship program called #StartWith8. Over the next few weeks, Nguyen would send tweets to prominent industry professionals, asking them to commit to having brief conversations about the film industry with 8 WOC.

By June 3, nearly 30 writers, filmmakers, and executives had joined the campaign. By June 8, that number had climbed to 50, with each member pledging to speak to 8 mentees, resulting in more than 400 meetings between WOC and producers, showrunners, marketers, literary agents, and others. Nguyen would solicit formal applications for mentees on June 3 to begin the process of matching up WOC with the industry professionals who had pledged their time. According to Nguyen's tweets around this time, Bedford organized the meetings between mentors and mentees, several of whom took to Twitter to thank their mentors, Nguyen, and WOCU. With Nguyen's support, writer and actor Murry Peeters would develop a similar campaign, #StartWith8HollywoodNorth for WOC in the entertainment industry in Canada.

In 2020, Nguyen would partner with Bedford to develop the #StartWith8Hollywood campaign into a more sustainable advocacy program for women of color in the entertainment

industry. Concluding in July of 2020, the first #StartWith8 campaign matched up 300 women of color working in the entertainment industry 75 industry mentors. According to the #Startwith8 website, "each mentor was matched to 8 mentees, and each mentee was matched to 2 mentors" (#StartWith8 n.d.). The second cycle of the program, later in 2020, would double the number of participants, with 600 women of color participating. The program would expand to the entertainment industries in Canada and the UK the following year. To date, the program has made more than 3500 matches, with more than 500 mentors and more than 1600 mentees. Today, the #Startwith8 program is run by exclusively by WOCU. The #StartWith8 website notes that the organization operates "in an industry that hides behind the myth of 'meritocracy' but in reality functions on personal connections" ("Welcome to Women of Color Unite" n.d.).

Nguyen distanced herself from Bedford and WOCU in 2021, however, when WOCU trademarked the #StartWith8 hashtag. In a July 2021 tweet, Nguyen explained to her followers that "Thuc D. Nguyen & The Bitch Pack do not affiliate w/ the trademarked #StartWith8," adding that she was also "in no way affiliated with 'WOCU' aka 'JTC-List' or their representatives" (Nguyen 2021a). A few days later, Nguyen took to Twitter again to criticize the WOCU's decision to trademark the hashtag, pointing out that they didn't originate it: "@AlphaEdisonLA originated #StartWith8. For some reason, others trademarked it w/o asking them" (Nguyen 2021b). Nguyen would go further, correcting those who praised #StartWith8 for helping #StartWith8Hollywood participants in their careers: "Those wins were from #StartWith8Hollywood […] #StartWith8 is totally separate and those of us who originated the ideas have nothing to do with this new trademarked situation or WOCU" (Nguyen 2021c). When another Twitter used asked Nguyen whether she would still endorse the #StartWith8 campaign

launched by WOCU, Nguyen responded that she and WOCU didn't have the "same morals/ethics" (Nguyen 2021d).

In our interview, Nguyen elaborated on her concerns with WOCU's approach to the #StartWith8 campaign, explaining that she objected to more than WOCU's willingness to trademark a hashtag they didn't originate. In particular, she objected to WOCU's efforts to commercialize the campaign Nguyen had helped create. "They monetized," Nguyen said of WOCU: "They were taking donations from these people"—both WOCU followers and prominent figures in the film industry. Nguyen quickly added, "They weren't giving me any money. I didn't want any money, because I legally don't want to touch any money. I don't want it legally in my account. I don't want to be seen as that person. I'm not a script doctor. I'm not one of those people." Perhaps remembering our previous discussion of the how-to screenwriting industry in our interview, Nguyen here drew an implicit connection the commercialization of the #StartWith8 campaign to the profit-making of script consultants—people who sell feedback to (predominantly) aspiring screenwriters.

While it is important to distinguish between the work of script consultants like Carson Reeves and the work of activist organizations like WOCU and The Bitch Pack, both promote themselves as means for screenwriting professionalization to become more egalitarian—Reeves by redistributing screenwriting knowledge typically reserved for industry professionals and WOCU and The Bitch Pack by providing aspirants with a means to network with industry professionals who are typically unreachable. A key difference between them is that WOCU and The Bitch Pack pressure industry professionals to shift their habits, expanding their networks to make screenwriting more equitable, while Reeves pressures aspirants to remake themselves for the film industry, molding themselves into ideal screenwriting subjects. For Nguyen, however,

WOCU's trademarking of #StartWith8 crossed a line that she, as a paraindustrial activist, refused to cross.

Nguyen: I've never monetized any of my stuff because the business of diversity, from my encounters and just in general, has been a complete turnoff and cash grab. I never want to be viewed like that. I've never even put myself out as a script consultant even. I've never done anything professionally that way.

Nguyen added of organizations that attempt to generate income from their activism, "That's not activism to me." I asked Nguyen if she could describe her own sense of activism, and she had the following to say:

Nguyen: I wrote a screenplay about Lucy Parsons, and she's an activist—a mixed-race woman of color activist in the 1800s for labor. And because I have read so much stuff of hers, and I went to the Chicago History Museum—touched documents that she wrote, and read about the activism back then and how difficult it was for her… She's not turning around and selling fucking mugs or trying to ask people for thousands of dollars in donations for her work. They call her the mother of the sit-down strike. So, before lunch counter sit-ins, she would sit in and sit down with a group of other women, to use your body, use your voice to speak out on behalf of other people. And also, you know, I have blocked highways. I didn't get any money for it. I have jumped on to the 101, lost a shoe, had to get pushed over. So, I feel like that's real activism.

Here, Nguyen dissociates activism from the commercial market and associates activism with the body: specifically, the collective use of the body, including the voice, to enact justice and fight inequity by positioning the body in defiance of systems that typically constrain the body and the voice. Even for an organization like WOCU, which defines its mission as increasing equity for women of color in Hollywood, Nguyen describes any efforts to secure profits from or stake proprietary claims over activist efforts as a betrayal of the principles motivating the same. In her descriptions of what troubled her about the trademarking of #StartWith8, Nguyen focused on the extent to which WOCU's efforts to raise money seemed to have little to do with helping screenwriters find work: selling merchandise like mugs and T-shirts or soliciting donations from celebrities. Regardless of how WOCU's organizers intended to use

the resulting funds, Nguyen expressed concern for activist efforts that structured themselves as dependent on the market and wealthy donors rather than dependent on the collaborative support of volunteers.

However, I have argued throughout this chapter that Nguyen's activism and her media work cannot be separated—that her campaigns blended paraindustrial and activist motivations. Time will reveal whether WOCU's decision to trademark the #StartWith8 hashtag and solicit donations from wealthy supporters will hurt or benefit their cause, but the conceptual borders between media work and media activism are messy and uncertain. As Perlman (2016) argues, media activism or advocacy is media work, and many work full time, dependent for their income on their work as media activists in ways that don't diminish their commitment to their causes. So, I'm pushing back against Nguyen's definition of activism a bit here, but I still believe that there's value in understanding her own articulation of activism, because it speaks to what she describes as the essence of her work: her efforts to speak up—to push up—against more powerful figures in media on behalf of marginalized workers and undervalued projects. While I see value in thinking more carefully about paraindustrial activism in its specificity, I don't believe that the concept reframes media activism as it's been explored in existing scholarship. But I do believe that paraindustrial activism has something to contribute to scholarly conversations around paraindustry. Envisioning paraindustry as potentially activist reframes its function in media industries, foregrounding its potential to resist rather than reproduce unjust power structures. Constructing paraindustrial conversations that are designed to reverse the flow of power in inequitable media hierarchies, Nguyen contributes to what might be described as an *activist paraindustry*.

We can see this reversed flow of pressure in #StartWith8Hollywood, where, rather than pressure aspiring filmmakers to mold themselves and their work to the needs of industry gatekeepers, Nguyen pressured industry gatekeepers to better serve the full range of aspiring filmmakers. We can see it in The Bitch List: while assistants and script readers are normally pressured to sublimate their opinions to the needs and interests of their employers, instead development executives were pressured to acknowledge the perspectives of their employees. We can even see activist *potential* in The Black List, which began as a means for junior development executives to pressure more senior executives to consider their opinions but, despite its efforts to reverse the dominant flow of power in development, never established a clear commitment to justice, instead becoming coopted as an intra-industrial marketing tool for agents and managers promoting their clients.

Conclusion

My interest in this dissertation's research project—and by extension in Nguyen's activism—was borne out my experiences as an aspiring screenwriter and someone invested in a film career from a young age. Hearing Nguyen describe her experiences, it occurred to me that we were both on similar trajectories in our early careers—both of us script readers and graduate students in Los Angeles in the early 2010s. In fact, Nguyen's experiences as a screenwriting student at Cal State University contributed to her decision to pursue activism. In her Project Yellow Dress interview, Nguyen described how, as a screenwriting student, she "noticed discrepancies in the way screenwriting is taught and how the emphasis was on male students and male stories at the cost of women's voices and dialogue" (Project Yellow Dress, n.d.). And in an interview with the podcast Vietverse, Nguyen recalled that "the golden boy of our program was

just laughing about how all of his female characters are, like, his girlfriend or should be an assistant, and I did an LA thing and started rolling my eyes. The thing is, it didn't sound odd to anyone else in the room, except me it seemed like" (Vietverse 2022). Nguyen raised the issue with her department heads, but they declined to address it.

In our interview, Nguyen repeatedly made a point to distance her activism from both the "business of diversity" and the commercial how-to screenwriting industry—what might be called a 'business of professionalization.' And while there are clear and important differences between Nguyen's activism and the for-profit enterprises explored in previous chapters, Nguyen's concerns that she might be confused with a commercial screenwriting expert—"I don't want to be seen as that person"—speak to the fact that she's operating in a shared space. Moreover, we can see in Nguyen's rise to visibility in screenwriting culture a similar trajectory to figures like Franklin Leonard and Carson Reeves. Like Reeves and Leonard, Nguyen achieved visibility at first in part by courting notoriety, putting a misogynist slur in the name of her organization and its primary project. Like Leonard, Nguyen caught the attention of industry decision makers by offering them a distinctive product—access to curated and potentially salable screenplays. And like Reeves, Nguyen rose to prominence from relative obscurity with the support of a digital network of script readers and assistants.

However, Nguyen has used her position as an intermediary between aspirants and gatekeepers to consistently pressure the latter to shift their habits to suit the needs of the former. Framing Nguyen's activism as paraindustrial reveals that it is a competitor in the same intermediary space between aspiring screenwriters and industry gatekeepers as the commercial services that I used to understand media work as an aspirant. As I describe in the introduction to this dissertation, one of the reasons I felt so comfortable pursuing a career in screenwriting is that

the paraindustrial narratives that I encountered—the software products and degree programs and screenwriting manuals that I used and that framed media work as I understood it—were created for people like me: white, middle-class, or affluent male aspirants. I was never made to feel unwelcome in screenwriting workshops, or pressured to write about characters whose experiences didn't mirror my own for the sake of an imagined commercial appeal. Contributing to a more activist paraindustry, Nguyen demonstrates the potential for fluidity in the structures of power that bind aspirants and industry gatekeepers—for the full range of aspirants and gatekeepers both to acknowledge and hold themselves accountable for the inequities that continue to structure media work. How might my understanding of media work have differed had I sought out paraindustrial narratives as Nguyen constructed them?

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CONCLUSION

A search for commercial guidebooks on dissertation writing will yield, among others, the following results: *Write Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day*, *How to Write a Thesis*, *Authoring a PhD*, *The Dissertation Warrior*, *Demystifying Dissertation Writing*, *The Dissertation Journey*, *How to Complete and Survive a Doctoral Dissertation*, *Destination Dissertation*, *Writing Your Doctoral Dissertation or Thesis Faster*, *Writing the Doctoral Dissertation*, *Doctoral Writing: Practices, Processes and Pleasures*, *How to Write a PhD in Less Than 3 Years*, and my personal favorite—judging purely by the title—*Finish Your Dissertation, Don't Let It Finish You*. I haven't read any of these books. Probably I should have, as they likely would have prevented inefficiencies and missteps. I include them here to indicate that how-to industries are a part of nearly any professionalization process and to reflect on the fact that this dissertation is itself a product of a professionalization process not so different from those experienced by the aspirants considered in the previous five chapters.

Each of the previous chapters examined a different service or figure that acts as an intermediary between aspiring screenwriters and the range of professionals in a position to hire them. And I've argued that, where those intermediaries are driven first and foremost by profit, the stories they tell about what it means to become a screenwriter—what screenwriting is and can be—are constructed to narrow the paths forward for would-be screenwriters down to those few that benefit the commercial film industry. In the process, the how-to screenwriting industry often conceals difficult but important truths about the persistent and systemic inequities that structure hiring practices for screenwriters in the commercial film industry. In their efforts to cultivate interest in screenwriting among their readers, and in their longing for a bygone industry that created more consistent opportunities for privileged (white male) screenwriters, the advice

columnists of *Creative Screenwriting* examined in Chapter 1 constructed screenwriting as a practice that only the resilient and malleable were worthy of. In their efforts to continually expand their services and their profits, the for-profit screenwriting schools of Chapter 2 positioned themselves alternately as accessible, affordable, and entertaining paths to screenwriting work, even as their graduation rates dwindled. In his efforts to legitimize his authority as a screenwriting expert, despite his lack of professional experience, Carson Reeves acknowledged the harsh realities of screenwriting work and then encouraged his readers to ignore them—to perceive success as a natural consequence of individual drive rather than collective action. And in their efforts to profitably digitalize the development industry writ large, the creators of The Black List set out to formalize a meritocratic standard for the value of unproduced film projects that unintentionally (but inevitably) reproduced the monoculturalism and homophily that made screenwriting hiring practices inequitable in the first place. By contrast, Chapter 5 explores the work of an activist who makes a point to avoid profit—income of any sort—from her intermediary work, even if her activism sometimes benefits (and sometimes hinders!) her broader media career.

Noting the wealth of how-to products and services available to aspiring academics also enables me to gesture toward the broader range of questions surrounding how-to media industries that this dissertation, in its particular focus on the how-to screenwriting industry, was unable to explore, and that future research might profit from exploring. In the following pages, this conclusion draws out a number of ideas for future research into the how-to media industries, building on the points raised in the previous chapters to indicate where their arguments overlap and might be extended or even revised by a broader focus. Starting with a discussion of the how-to screenwriting products and services left out of the dissertation, I then consider how the

dissertation's historical focus on the digitalization of the how-to screenwriting industry might productively be applied to the study of the how-to media industries writ large. Finally, I reflect on the specific threads of research and argumentation that, while not central to any chapter, emerged across the evidence gathered for the project.

Selecting the five case studies that structure this dissertation was an ongoing challenge; the chapters changed in substantial ways from what I first proposed, and there are several types of how-to screenwriting products and services that I left aside and would happily take up in future research. Pitch festivals, for example, are among the most parasitic products in the how-to screenwriting industry. Often charging hundreds or even thousands of dollars for admission, pitch festivals sell aspiring professionals a chance to stand in line to "pitch" their script ideas to development workers who are paid to attend and typically low enough on the decision-making ladder that their interest would yield little in the way of career opportunities for aspirants. While the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic when I first proposed my dissertation made that sort of study seem impractical, I still believe that a participant-observer study of pitch festivals would yield valuable insights about the forms of greed and hope that fuel the film industry. I hope as well to undertake a similar study of screenwriting festivals or screenwriting courses.

A careful study of screenwriting software products would, particularly in the emerging era of AI, no doubt draw out the persistent interrelationship between digital technologies and the increasing role of nonprofessional creators in media industries. The range of screenwriting software products advertised in the pages of *Creative Screenwriting* magazine alone was vast and fascinating, and I believe the history of the relationship between digital technologies and the how-to screenwriting industry would make for compelling research. Along these lines, while a great deal has been written already about screenwriting manuals—often to the exclusion of other

how-to screenwriting products and services—I could well imagine a research project with a more historical focus productively examining the history of screenwriting manuals from an industrial perspective: considering their shifting value to the publishing industry and the forms of screenwriting expertise that they shape and are shaped by. While this dissertation focuses on the twenty-first century, I would be eager to more carefully chart the long history of the how-to screenwriting industry back to its origins.

Focusing on the twenty-first century how-to screenwriting industry meant that, without planning to, I ended up researching the digitalization of the how-to screenwriting industry. Because the chapters are organized roughly in chronological order, beginning with the expansion of *Creative Screenwriting* magazine in the 1990s and ending with the #StartWith8Hollywood campaign of 2020, the dissertation charts a gradual shift toward a more participatory how-to screenwriting industry. *Creative Screenwriting* was run and operated by academics and screenwriters. The for-profit screenwriting schools of Chapter 2 are run and operated by film professionals and venture capitalists. The Black List is run and operated not simply by development workers but also by software engineers and, to a certain extent, by the site's users. Chapter 4 explained how The Black List's screenwriter users have collectively shaped the platform's affordances to suit their needs, and the site depends for its functioning on the continual creation of content by its paying users. While The Black List may not incorporate advertisements or commodify its user data to the same extent as more multi-sided platforms, it is nevertheless a user-generated-content platform in its reliance on user labor to function. Finally, Chapters 3 and 5 consider the direct participation of aspiring screenwriters in the how-to screenwriting industry, in both cases enabled by UGC platforms like WordPress and Twitter.

However, I want to avoid framing the digitalization of the how-to screenwriting industry in optimistic terms. For one thing, participatory media is nothing new, and the participatory nature of the how-to screenwriting industry predates the internet by a long stretch, with Liepa (2010) arguing that the popular film writing movement of the 1910s helped the commercial film industry—with its arbitrary barriers and its consolidation of media power—to emerge in the first place. The internet may have minimized the barriers to entry for many in popular conversations about screenwriting professionalization, but aspirants have always had and exercised their collective power to shape screenwriting discourse. In Chapters 1 and 2, aspirants can still be seen playing an active role in the how-to screenwriting industry: students participate visibly in marketing materials for for-profit screenwriting schools, and for-profit screenwriting schools market themselves specifically as spaces that are more attuned to student needs and interests than nonprofit educational institutions. Letters to the editor could often be found in the pages of *Creative Screenwriting*, creating a space for the magazine's readers to push back against columns or contribute their own thoughts to the publication. Still, digitalization transformed the services explored in both chapters, enabling for-profit screenwriting schools to digitize their curriculum and forcing *Creative Screenwriting* to end operations as an in-print publication.

Moreover, wider participation in media culture does not always result in resistance to dominant power structures. As Chapters 3 and 4 argue, the increasing participation of aspirants as key voices in the how-to screenwriting industry has by and large favored those voices that reproduce inequitable power structures in Hollywood. Pushing The Black List to avoid any affordances that could frame its users as hapless amateurs, emerging screenwriters on the platform policed user behavior and hierarchized aspirants more strictly than the platform itself. Spouting discourses of meritocracy and monoculturalism in an effort to legitimize his expertise

on screenwriting, Carson Reeves and his followers obscure systemic inequities in screenwriting work. In both cases, privileged aspirants collaborated with the commercial how-to screenwriting industry and the broader development industry to reproduce dominant power structures in screenwriting work, securing their privileges—however marginal—in the process.

Beyond screenwriting, the how-to media industries have been transformed broadly by digitalization. Driven first and foremost by commercial imperatives, the how-to screenwriting industry has always been a self-serving intermediary between aspiring screenwriters and development workers. Digital intermediaries like The Black List, WordPress, and Twitter complicate the how-to screenwriting industry further, with platforms restructuring the industries in which they participate (Nieborg and Poell 2018), shifting the balance of power between established companies and independent media makers (Prey, Valle, and Zwerwer 2020). In recent years, scholars have explored the extent to which cultural production has broadly been platformized, with platforms increasingly shaping the economies, forms of governance, and infrastructures that shape cultural production (Nieborg and Poell 2018). Scholars have studied the means by which platforms manage the professionalization of their users (Bishop 2018; Burgess 2012; D'Amato and Cassella 2021; Petre, Duffy, and Hund 2019) and the strategies that creators use to improve their chances to professionalize on platforms (Bishop, 2019, 2020; Cotter, 2019; Duffy, 2020; Klawitter and Hargittai, 2018; MacDonald, 2021; Morris, 2020). Moreover, shifts in platform business strategies, algorithmic content curation, and platform governance are all intertwined (Nieborg and Poell 2018). Future research might more carefully consider the platformization of professionalization in media.

Beyond screenwriting, professionalization platforms have emerged to manage the ambitions of would-be novelists (Ashton and Conor 2016), actors (Fortmueller 2016), music

artists (Hesmondhalgh, Jones, and Rauh 2019), and influencers (Edwards 2022). While scattered studies of these varied platforms have emerged in media industry scholarship, what remains to be written is a systematic effort to theorize the commercialization of advice and professionalization in media industries. As this dissertation has argued of the how-to screenwriting industry in particular, how-to products and services are important sites of study not only because they are frequently used by aspirants as pipelines to professional work or because they serve as paraindustrial spaces for intra- and inter-industrial theorizing but also because they are often the most widely accessible and distributed efforts to grapple with difficult and important questions about the role of cultural production in our communities—questions about who is worthy of cultural production, what cultural production can mean beyond commercial industries, and how creators seeking income for their work should set out to do so.

Of course, how-to media industries are hardly the only source of answers to these questions. It is important to acknowledge that people who set out to make media gather advice from a range of sources—how-to products and services, to be sure, but also friends and family and communities of creators around them online and in their local spaces. Examining the broader culture of screenwriting discourse among nonprofessionals in the United States was beyond the scope of the dissertation, but I raise the point here because a broader study of how-to discourse in the United States might more readily raise questions about the circulation of media production knowledge among nonprofessionals—how our ideas about media production are shaped by more complex and far-ranging beliefs and cultural contexts. Finally, it would be of considerable value to expand the scope of this research further beyond the American context, reflecting more on the role of the how-to screenwriting industry in other countries and in a more transnational flow of film and ideas. I'm most familiar with the American how-to screenwriting industry—its

particular history and structure—but the industry participates in a global flow of ideas and capital, not in abstract isolation.

While questions of place have not been a primary focus in this dissertation, the digitalization of the how-to screenwriting industry raises questions about how the how-to screenwriting industry structures the participation of aspirants around the world. Both New York Film Academy and The Black List promote themselves as American services for a global consumer base of aspiring professionals: NYFA welcomes and encourages international students to use their degree programs as surefire forms of access to Hollywood work worlds, and The Black List promotes its platform as a space where screenwriters from around the world can collaborate with development workers from around the world under the aegis of the site's centralized standards of quality. Because NYFA positions Hollywood at the center of a global film culture, and because The Black List relies on script readers drawn from the American film industry, both services project American industrial needs, beliefs, and practices onto a global community of aspiring screenwriters. In the process, as with NYFA's satellite campus in Nigeria, the American how-to screenwriting industry profits from its efforts to Americanize media production knowledge even in spaces where alternative forms of media production and commercial filmmaking have already flourished.

One tension I struggled with throughout the process of writing this dissertation is whether or not the commercial how-to media industries are best understood as pre-industrial pipelines to professional work or more flexible structures of intermediation between nonprofessional screenwriters and professional development workers. Of course, the answer can be (and often is, with this sort of question) "both." But, I think it's worth reflecting on how media scholarship *should* frame the how-to industries to best appreciate their critical value. On the one hand,

commercial how-to screenwriting products and services do typically promote themselves as pipelines to industry work, and aspirants often use them as such. They are flawed, mangled, and often ineffective pipelines, but they are pipelines nonetheless, if only because they are so persistently constructed that way in both scholarship and everyday understanding. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 all examine the how-to screenwriting industry as a pipeline to screenwriting work in different ways, exploring the stratification of screenwriting higher education, the digitalization of screenwriting professionalization, and the efforts of aspiring screenwriters to construct their own (profitable, self-serving) pipelines to professionalization and screenwriting expertise.

At the same time, framing the how-to media industries as contact zones between nonprofessionals and development workers raises what I think are valuable questions about alternative intermediaries. As Chapters 1 and 4 explored, the how-to screenwriting industry's primary investment in profit doesn't prevent it from playing a meaningful role in the construction of a screenwriting culture—a community of creatives whose aspirations extend beyond careers toward spiritual, even patriotic dimensions. Chapter 5 examined the media activism of Thuc Doan Nguyen in part to reflect on her work as its own form of intermediation between aspirants and development workers. While Nguyen arguably conceives of her campaigns as pipelines to industry careers for those they benefit, the fact that her activism is resolutely noncommercial demonstrates that the profit motive driving many how-to services encourages their commitment to reproducing media power within the commercial film industry. If, as Chapter 5 argued, media workers set out to construct structures of intermediation between aspirants and gatekeepers that enabled pressure to flow upwards within hierarchies, not simply downward toward aspirants, more decentralized and equitable communities of nonprofessional screenwriting might more readily emerge.

Likely this dissertation will do little on its own to bring about such a future. After five years of reading, research, and writing (and rewriting), it is difficult for me to think of this project as anything more than the sum of my personal struggles and a means to document sufficient expertise for a doctorate. Wherever my research goes next, I have no doubt that it will devote as many words to questioning and contradicting the arguments made in this dissertation as it does to building on them. If there is a core to my argument that, in retrospect and with the benefit of feedback, I will carry with me and would draw out for readers, it is that the how-to screenwriting industry profits from its efforts to standardize and legitimize distinctions between those who are worthy and those are unworthy of cultural production. Attached to an industry that systemically excludes women, people of color, and those without the financial means or social capital to work their way into the industry's insular production cultures, such efforts to naturalize the dominant standards of worthiness are sexist, racist, and classist.

Some of the concepts featured in this dissertation—reverse encouragement (Chapter 1), gatekeeper lore (Chapter 3), and the emerging screenwriter (Chapter 4)—triangulate the means by which the how-to screenwriting industry naturalizes its distinctions. Through reverse encouragement, the how-to screenwriting industry sets out to reconcile ideas that are apparently contradictory and yet foundational for anyone who perceives a screenwriting career to be attainable: (1) that nearly everyone who pursues a career in screenwriting will fail and (2) that those who gain entry into careers often have significant privileges to advantage them, but (3) that all those who are truly worthy of screenwriting careers will nevertheless achieve them provided they work hard enough, suffer a great deal, and do so without complaint. Through gatekeeper lore, how-to screenwriting services complicate and expand on precisely what it means to 'work hard enough.' Namely, that it means working in a particular direction (whichever direction the

industry seems to be headed at its most profitable centers) and with a particular taste culture in mind (the tastes of development workers as interpreted by gatekeeper experts). Those aspirants who commit to these beliefs and ideals, who give themselves and their creative practices over to the needs of the industry as refracted through the how-to screenwriting industry, become worthy of emerging screenwriter status and, in turn, distinct from the broader swath of amateurs.

Is there a how-to screenwriting industry that could resist these profitable delusions—an activist paraindustry that could rival the commercial one for its influence on the beliefs and habits of aspiring screenwriters? Like Thuc Doan Nguyen, I am skeptical about the intentions and impact of any how-to enterprise that profits from aspiring professionals. Nourished by profit and weakened by the lack of it, the how-to screenwriting industry has winnowed its avowed beliefs about screenwriting down to those that secure the financial patronage of the broadest base of customers: skewed and exclusionary beliefs that make continued and sometimes exorbitant financial investments a reasonable down payment for a career that will more than repay any fee a how-to company might charge. It will always be easier for how-to companies to sell aspirants the promise of a career than to sell them an alternative—something yet to be built, anything new.

That said, a potential space to foster an alternative how-to industry is nonprofit higher education. What would the antithesis of NYFA or LAFS be? As Banks (2019) argues, even non-profit media production programs are typically pre-industrial in their careerist approach to media production education. For Banks, this is something media scholars can lean into—an opportunity to shape the film industry from its apparent margins, instilling critical perspectives in the media professionals of the future. To Banks' point, media scholars with influence over media production curricula have an obligation to acknowledge and interrogate the systemic inequities that structure work in the media industries. But media production educators have an equally

important opportunity to dissociate media production from commercial industrial practices altogether, foregrounding production cultures and lifelong creative practices that already exist beyond the commercial media industries.

For example, screenwriting courses even in nonprofit degree programs are typically devoted to teaching students industrial formatting rules and storytelling principles, with examples drawn almost exclusively from commercial films—and feature-length films at that, despite the fact that short-form filmmaking is the overwhelmingly dominant format for student and amateur film projects. A screenwriting course more resistant to reproducing media power might encourage students, despite some likely grumblings, to experiment in new directions: with new screenplay formats (prose scripts, storyboards as scripts, scripts of nonstandard length), new production hierarchies and workflows (scripts written collaboratively by cast and crew, or improvisationally during production), and new endpoints (scripts that would never be made, could never be made, or which serve as blueprints for a production culture rather than a film). Such a screenwriting course might feature nonindustrial—even noncommercial—films as their primary points of reference or present students with trajectories for screenwriting/filmmaking practices that don't require industrial careers.

Ultimately, my hope for such an education would be that it broadens rather than constrains the futures that students perceive as possible for screenwriting as a lifelong practice. As someone who grew up immersed in how-to screenwriting products, writing this dissertation has been in part an effort to deprogram my own beliefs about how best to answer the question that fueled the advice columnists of Chapter 1: why do we write? I still don't have a definitive answer, and my purpose in interrogating the how-to screenwriting industry has been in part to disprove the possibility of one. Creative work is work, and it deserves payment for those who

choose to charge for it. But it can also be a gift, or a practice that repays itself, or a form of work that involves some other form of remuneration than waged work. Examining the motivations that lead the how-to screenwriting industry to claim otherwise, drawing out the absurdities and contradictions in its narratives about screenwriting, this dissertation has sought to open up a discursive space where such alternatives can be taken seriously, newly imagined, and more widely enacted.

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