
Below-the-(Hem)line

Storytelling as Collective Resistance in Costume Design

ABSTRACT This article examines the storytelling practices of a particular community of “below-the-line” practitioners: costume designers. Their stories are often written out of media histories that privilege the testimonies of above-the-line (typically male) professionals. This article provides a corrective to these androcentric accounts of media production. Using material gathered from the Costume Designers Guild’s official publication, the *Costume Designer* (launched in 2005), I apply a gendered lens to the examination of trade stories and argue that the stories costume designers tell can be understood as radical acts of “speaking out” against a neoliberal production culture that attempts to silence them. **KEYWORDS** costume design, feminist production studies, neoliberalism, resistance, trade stories

Costume Designers help create characters—we are first and foremost visual storytellers.

—DEBORAH LANDIS, COSTUME DESIGNERS GUILD PRESIDENT 2001–7¹

Costume designers tell stories. Often these stories are about other people—characters in a world they help build. Yet these stories do not always unfold on-screen. This article is about the stories costume designers tell off-camera.

Costume design is an area of cultural production dominated by those often rendered absent in histories of film and television production—namely, women. The following provides a corrective to androcentric accounts of media production that privilege the testimonies of above-the-line (typically male) practitioners.² This masculine bias has not only led to deficiencies in our knowledge of symbolically feminine professional communities, but also fails to provide the appropriate analytical tools and theoretical frameworks to make sense of them. Thus, this article seeks to reimagine and expand existing work by applying a gendered lens to the examination of trade stories and argues that the stories costume designers tell can be understood as subversive acts of “speaking out” against a neoliberal production culture that attempts to silence them.³

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Another overarching aim of this article is to make a case for expanding the discursive field to take into account different kinds of production narratives. For this reason, I wish to stress the value of the material surveyed here for feminist production studies, which has tended to favor ethnographic research in the form of interviews and participant observation.⁴ Indeed, such an approach has clear merit, especially given the centrality of “talking” to women’s histories and feminist historiography.⁵ However, examining the stories that women *write* for their peers opens up new areas of inquiry in production studies. Writing stories, after all, plays a crucial role in community building, particularly for the socially marginalized (see for example the impressive subculture of zine making).⁶ As production studies scholars interested in the sense-making strategies of professional communities, we must take seriously the cultural texts these communities produce, understanding that they become part of a canon—that is to say, they become the official “truths” of a particular community.

Costume Designer is the official magazine of the Costume Designers Guild, Local 892 of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE). It is a free quarterly magazine whose readership includes the more than eight hundred members of the guild (who consist of costume designers, assistant costume designers, and illustrators working in the Los Angeles area).⁷ Unlike most other trade publications, its content is provided by practitioners, not journalists, and created mainly *by* women, *for* women. It is important to note, however, that while costume design is generally considered among the more diverse areas of the creative industries, the overwhelming majority of content in the *Costume Designer* is provided by white, well-connected women in senior positions within the organization. Indeed, membership in the organization suggests a certain degree of privilege insofar as it requires that members have at least one screen credit as a costume designer, assistant costume designer, supervisor, or costumer.⁸ Pattern cutters, seamstresses, dressers, et cetera are not represented in the publication. Nevertheless, the *Costume Designer* is an important example of women’s cultural production in its own right, and the process of writing for it is an example of the kind of creative, political, and affective labor that this article seeks to understand.

In an attempt to capture the nuances of the source material, I want to move away from formalist, structuralist, text-based methods in favor of a discursive approach that takes into account the cultural context within which trade stories are produced. In order to make sense of the stories practitioners tell, one must have a sense of the historically and culturally specific conditions under which they are created. The stories examined here were told by a particular group of

practitioners (costume designers, assistant costume designers, and illustrators) for a specific audience (other members of the guild) at specific points in history (between 2005 and 2010). During this period, the industry witnessed the onset and aftermath of the global financial crisis as well as the contentious 2008 presidential election. Though it is difficult to measure the exact impacts these events had on the industry, it is certainly safe to assume that trade stories, in some way, always respond to the cultural, economic, and political climate in which they are produced.

GENDERING TRADE STORIES

In *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (2008), John Thornton Caldwell observes that, despite its prominence in film studies, narrative theory has rarely been applied to the stories practitioners tell offscreen.⁹ Caldwell addresses this oversight and examines the narratives that circulate in film and television production spaces. In so doing, he identifies consistent themes and patterns in storytelling, organizing these narratives into what he calls “trade genres.” These genres, he argues, perform a number of cultural functions: they help practitioners “weather change” in times of economic uncertainty, yet at the same time they also rationalize the conditions that give rise to this uncertainty.¹⁰ Caldwell’s contributions to the field of production studies cannot be overstated. However, as he himself acknowledges, these genres are not exhaustive and, further, are framed by the experiences of (mostly) male practitioners. By applying a gendered lens to Caldwell’s work, we can identify the limitations of both his taxonomy and classical narrative theory itself.

Narrative analysis as it has been adopted in film studies developed from structuralist literary theory; its goal is to reveal underlying structures that recur across a range of narratives. While it does take into account the storyteller (in terms of focalization), it does not assume that the storyteller’s cultural identity affects the telling of the story or the events likely to be told. Nor does this kind of narrative analysis acknowledge the role of stories in constructing the identities of storytellers. Developments within the fields of feminist linguistics and feminist narrative theory, however, have challenged these assumptions. In the 1970s, the burgeoning field of feminist literary criticism began to question the universality of classical narrative theory, arguing that there are gender-specific modes of address in women’s *written* stories that cannot be understood using traditional androcentric epistemologies and methodologies.¹¹ Work in this field has advanced since, and is now enriched by queer and intersectional approaches,

which recognize the important role of stories and storytelling in the cultural production of gendered, racialized, and sexual subjectivities.¹²

In her discussion of macro and micro contexts in narrative storytelling, Anna De Fina argues that storytelling works as a discursive practice that allows local communities (the micro context) to construct and negotiate their positions within macro social processes.¹³ In addition, she calls for this narrative activity to be understood as a “symbolic practice” in which “social groups engage to carry out the struggles for legitimation and recognition in order to accumulate symbolic capital and ultimately greater social power.”¹⁴ De Fina’s work focuses on marginalized ethnic groups and displaced peoples, but the process of storytelling as a symbolic practice is very much applicable within the trade stories examined here. Trade stories do not simply make sense of local professional communities; they also serve to construct and negotiate the storytellers’ identity and position within a wider society. As Caldwell’s trade genres are based on the testimonies of primarily male practitioners, the dominant narratives (re)produced within that community inform and are informed by a particular worldview. Consequently, these genres can fail to capture the experiences of communities already marginalized within the creative industries. Dominant trade genres can also function as a regulatory discourse that contributes to and further rationalizes the marginalization of other groups and narratives. This is most apparent in Caldwell’s discussion of below-the-line trade genres.

According to Caldwell, the narratives produced and circulated in film and television production can be categorized by work sector, and practitioners in these areas are likely to articulate their experiences depending on their position either above or below the production line. For Caldwell, above-the-line workers are more likely to employ “genesis myths” and “paths-not-taken parables,” whereas below-the-line workers tend to recount “war stories” and “against-all-odds allegories.”¹⁵ “Genesis myths” and “paths-not-taken parables” involve the narrators recounting their career histories (focusing on “originating moments and artistic pedigree”), and are more likely to be told in a public context (through the press or in a public setting). Below-the-line trade stories often have an internal orientation that emphasizes experiences shared between practitioners, and function to establish a set of character traits necessary for success—namely, “certitude; physique; and belief.” Furthermore, as the title suggests, “war stories” construct production as “battles” to be won by below-the-line practitioners via individual acts of heroism. These “against-all-odds allegories” provide a space for “cooperative griping about working conditions and lack of respect.” Crucially, these stories also provide the narrator with an opportunity to demonstrate their

“moral character” and how a “triumph of will” helped them overcome various production challenges.¹⁶ However, it is important to recognize the ways in which these below-the-line narratives are organized around a “masculine” value system; that is to say, a premium is placed on activities and characteristics that are traditionally valued in white, heteronormative, ableist, patriarchal society (physical strength, heroism, certitude).

The *Costume Designer*, by way of contrast, forms and is formed by a series of discursive practices that gender the profession along traditionally feminized lines.¹⁷ The magazine is produced by and addressed to a readership presented and imagined as female. As such, the narratives shape, and are shaped by, traditional gender scripts.¹⁸ Consequently, there are notable differences between Caldwell’s trade genres and the stories examined here. These differences manifest not only in terms of subject matter but also in the linguistic strategies that frame the stories. Perhaps one of the most striking differences has to do with the ways in which stories in the *Costume Designer* prioritize “the personal.”

A (WORK)ROOM OF ONE’S OWN: PERSONAL STORIES IN PUBLIC SPACES

Issues previously relegated to the private sphere are afforded legitimacy within the *Costume Designer* and come to the fore in both the Editor’s Notes and the President’s Letters. The columns of the president and the editor, the most senior members of the executive team, are the material expression of the guild’s core values and beliefs and set the agenda and tone of its official publication. They also establish the parameters of acceptable and appropriate content. Both columns are primarily informational (the Editor’s Note introduces each issue’s theme and remarks on particular feature articles, while the President’s Letter reports on key developments within the guild as a whole). However, they typically adopt an intimate, confessional mode of address (they begin with “Dear Friends” and sign off “In Solidarity”) and interweave this informational content with personal experience stories.

The use of personal anecdotes is not politically innocent. These stories perform an ideological function similar to those in the micro and macro contexts examined by Anna De Fina: they construct a collective identity for a specific community in order to increase its social power. As the official publication of the guild, the magazine supports the organization’s central political aim: “to raise the stature of the Costume Design profession within the entertainment community.”¹⁹ Thus, personal experience stories within the *Costume Designer* are part of a strategy to construct a collective identity for the professional community in the pursuit of greater social and economic status. Consequently,

efforts are made to foreground a shared experience of working in costume design; however, since the majority of contributors are white, middle class, heterosexual women, these personal anecdotes speak to a worldview shaped by these identity markers. Given the consistent tone of the *Costume Designer*, and the lack of dissent over its political project during this period, it would seem that those stories told by members from outside this dominant group also work to sustain the guild's effort to promote its collective identity.

In the fall 2008 President's Letter, Mary Rose's report on a budget committee meeting is framed by the following personal anecdote in which her Japanese identity is acknowledged:

I grew up in Japan. In 1953, I came to the U.S., and raised two young children during the Vietnam war with a mother's fear for their future; I especially worried about my son, who in a few short years would become eligible for the draft. As recently as 2004, my daughter, a mother of two young children herself, was sent to Iraq for 18 months to fight this meaningless war. By then, I thought I'd seen enough global happenings affect so many people's lives, what more could possibly surprise me? What happened in October, the collapse of the economy worldwide . . . proved that I was wrong! I could never have anticipated this. "*We all have to tighten our belts!*" is the mantra that we will be hearing from everywhere that we must understand and follow.²⁰

This passage is worth quoting in its entirety, as it exemplifies both the kind of political work personal experience stories perform within the *Costume Designer*, and the rhetorical strategies used to manage difference. Rose's personal experience story acknowledges her Japanese identity in order to stress her achieved assimilation. Given the associations between military service and citizenship, details of her son's eligibility for the draft (and her daughter's actual service in the Iraq War) identify Rose as a US citizen and establish her position within the (imagined) community. But it is her experience as a mother that does the most rhetorical work to minimize national and ethnic difference by foregrounding an assumed shared maternal experience with readers. When describing her worries that her son might have been drafted, Rose "hails" (in the Althusserian sense of the term) her readers as mothers—readers who are expected to understand what "a mother's fear" is.

In her subsequent President's Letter (winter 2009), it becomes clear that Rose's story resonated with readers, prompting her to provide a follow-up response:

A surprising number of members asked me about my daughter. "Is she OK? Is she back from Iraq?" . . . For those compassionate and concerned members,

I wanted to share a report of Joan's post-Iraq life. My husband Gordon and I were in Grand Forks, N.D., for the holidays where the snow was 24 inches deep and the temperature was minus 14. We went to the University of North Dakota (NDSU) to watch Joan Aus receive her long-awaited PhD in Education, along with our now 17- and 11-year-old grandsons, and her very devoted husband, Jon standing by. As a wife and mother and teaching full time, she continued to work on her interrupted doctorate dissertation while under tremendous pressure from the newly enacted "Stop-Loss" policy hanging over all those good men and women who had already served.²¹

The second installment of this autobiographical anecdote continues the work of the first insofar as it fosters the intimacy and familiarity established in the earlier letter. What's more, its rhetorical structure also proposes that Rose and her readers have a shared value system that recognizes not only personal experience narratives as valid (and valued) modes of expression, but specifically those personal stories related to motherhood and a maternal experience.

Stories related to motherhood are a regular feature within the *Costume Designer*, yet they do not represent a diversity of experience (they universalize an experience of motherhood that is typically white, middle-class, and heteronormative). Often the motherhood motif appears as shorthand to draw parallels between maternal (domestic) labor and the affective labor associated with costume design. This regularly takes place in the form of a traditional metaphor, for example the use of the term "baby" to represent a project and the attendant care or work that the task requires (for example, "Sharon [will] take the reigns [*sic*] as sole editor of the *Newsletter*, her first CDG baby").²² Similarly, the term "family" is invoked to represent the dynamics of working with a crew ("My crew are my extended family"), and the duty of care associated with their management.²³

The motherhood motif is employed symbolically to make sense of the kinds of work associated with costume design, but its mobilization also blurs the boundaries between domestic and professional labor. Take for example Deena Appel's spring 2009 editor's note: "Hello from Portland OR. Well, this is the true test of your editor. Mother of an under 2 year old, on location, designing a feature film and producing this spring issue. Somehow we Costume Designers always get it done, don't we?"²⁴ Here, motherhood appears as an additional task on the list of Appel's professional responsibilities. Motherhood, then, is not just an identity that Appel claims alongside her

professional identity, but they are one and the same—motherhood is (re)configured *as* work.

Appel's fall 2010 interview with designer Debra McGuire performs a similar discursive function insofar as it retrieves motherhood from the domestic (private) sphere and situates it within the professional (public) sphere. In the exchange below, motherhood is viewed as a desirable criterion in their line of work:

I [Appel] was surprised to hear her [McGuire's] perspective on hiring a crew. "I always hire my moms first" was what she told me. . . . As a mother myself (who worries if the next producer is "family friendly"), that really struck a chord. "One of the reasons why I love hiring parents is because they understand how to prioritize and manage time more efficiently."²⁵

Constructing maternal experience as valuable for the workplace provides a rhetorical counterpoint to dominant narratives that situate motherhood as a barrier to progression.²⁶ This is not to suggest that the stories completely reconstruct motherhood and the workplace as naturally compatible bedfellows. Indeed, McGuire goes on to reflect on the difficulties that ensue when the domestic and the professional occupy the same work space:

Many of our children were born during shooting. . . . [There were] doggie beds under the desks for babies. . . . The trailer [was] an obstacle course of toys. I believed then, as I do now, that real spiritual work takes place in the everyday goings on and in the way we treat each other so I always encourage "real life" coming first.²⁷

McGuire's anecdote serves to remind readers that work spaces are not naturally hospitable, and indeed that additional labor is required to facilitate mothering identities within the world of (paid) work. However, the anecdote also suggests that despite these difficult conditions, motherhood is a valued experience within the costume design community. For McGuire, accommodating working families is a question of moral responsibility born out of her belief that domestic labor is "spiritual work."

McGuire's belief in family-oriented work environments was shaped by her negative experiences working on the set of *Friends* (a job she began four days after giving birth):

The director asked me to leave the stage with my baby basket saying that a soundstage was no place for an infant. . . . Working while raising children is an incredible challenge. I always had to work and leave my children.

In retrospect, I suppose that's why I insist on children being part of our work life whenever possible.²⁸

Within the examples identified above, motherhood is employed in myriad ways. It is a metaphor used to describe the work undertaken by costume designers; it is an apposite reference point used to draw comparisons between the kinds of affective labor both roles (costume designer and mother) demand; and it is a narrative device that establishes a shared set of values. This narrative should be understood, therefore, as central to the sense-making processes at work in the pages of the *Costume Designer*. However, it should also be noted that this activation of motherhood as a narrative device serves as a regulatory discourse excluding those for whom white, middle-class, heteronormative motherhood is neither available nor desirable.

It is not simply the omnipresence of motherhood that feminizes the professional identity of costume designers within the magazine, but also the *performance* of storytelling and the framing of personal experience stories. In her work on conversational storytelling, Barbara Johnstone identifies significant differences in the ways that women and men tell personal experience stories: "On the most general level the women's stories tend to be about community, while the men's tend to be about contest."²⁹ Crucially, the men in her sample consistently told stories in which they were the sole protagonists, while the women told stories about other people. According to Johnstone, the stories told by men were "about events in which skill, courage, honor, or sense of humor was called upon and successfully displayed." If women relayed tales of success, it was attributed either to the support of a particular group or to sheer luck—never to individual skill.³⁰

Applying Johnstone's argument to Caldwell's trade genres and the stories associated with below-the-line practitioners helps elucidate how trade genres exhibit characteristics associated with masculine modes of storytelling. "War stories," for example, offer practitioners an opportunity to display the character traits of "physical perseverance and tenacity."³¹ Moreover, these stories are underscored by the classical myth of heroism whereby the narrator's resourcefulness allows them to overcome a challenge. Indeed, parallels can be drawn between Johnstone's and Caldwell's findings. Both identify similar tropes in personal experience narratives (the display of skill, courage, tenacity, honor, certitude), but whereas Caldwell argues that the nature of these stories is informed by their context and work sector, Johnstone suggests that they are part of a discursive strategy that has to do with the careful construction and management of hegemonic masculinity.

Stories from the *Costume Designer* demonstrate characteristics associated with feminine modes of storytelling. For instance, in Appel's Editor's Note, her successes at publishing the magazine on time despite being on location with a one-year-old are not attributed to skill. Significantly, she cannot explain how she managed to overcome these challenges. Instead, she gives the impression that successfully multitasking is nothing exceptional to her—it is a skill all costume designers appear to have. Similarly, McGuire's personal experience story about the director who removed her from the soundstage does not function as a tale of contest from which she emerges victorious. McGuire's story, like other stories in the *Costume Designer*, do not operate as an arena in which the narrators establish their individualized status. Rather, they establish a community.

Similar claims related to the gendering of storytelling and conversation have been made by Deborah Tannen in her (albeit speculative and anecdotal) work on “rapport talk” and “report talk.” Tannen suggests that “report talk,” coded as masculine, privileges the communication of information; its social function is to establish and maintain status through direction and demonstration of expertise. “Rapport talk,” coded as feminine, seeks to establish friendship, provide support, and build solidarity. Tannen's work has rightly been contested for its failure to adequately consider the relations of power, and for reifying fixed, binary identities. However, it is possible to view “rapport talk” as a performance that contributes to the discursive production of idealized feminine identity. Such a reading allows for this practice to be contested and appropriated for political ends. The following considers the political possibilities of “rapport talk” as a resistive strategy.

THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL: RESISTANCE IN STORYTELLING, STORYTELLING AS RESISTANCE

Dissatisfaction with labor conditions is a feature in both Caldwell's below-the-line trade genres and the trade stories surveyed here. Frustrations with a “do more with less” culture are central to the *Costume Designer*, but what differs is the way that the journal's trade stories become a crucial part of a *collective* resistance strategy. For Caldwell, “war stories” and “against-all-odds allegories” are about *individual* acts of heroism. Yet the masculine tradition of telling stories in which the narrator is the hero also serves as a platform to demonstrate the practitioner's competence, a strategy that can be easily co-opted to support a neoliberal agenda. In creative industries, neoliberal economic policies such as monopoly control and the decentralization of labor play out on the bodies of workers, requiring them to accept responsibility for their own professional and

personal security. That is to say, neoliberal production cultures demand productive, competitive subjects who can triumph as individuals in the face of adverse working conditions.³² These “ideal” workers, then, should view a lack of resources, insecurity, and hostile labor conditions as the bedrock of creativity. Therefore, the danger of the “war story” and the “against-all-odds allegory,” as Caldwell suggests, is that “the complaints coded into [them]—about harsh working conditions, worker character, and creative triumphs of the will—may also reinforce opportunistic business practices that will ultimately make labor conditions worse, rather than better.”³³

By way of contrast, the trade stories under discussion here focus on collectivism over individualism. Even in its infancy, the *Costume Designer* recognized the challenges industry workers face and promoted collaboration as a key defensive strategy. For instance, the inaugural issue introduced a column, entitled “Collaborations,” that would become a recurrent feature.³⁴ In its early incarnation, the interviews in “Collaborations” focused on directors and producers and their attitudes toward costume design. The column performed ideological work insofar as it attempted to redress a symbolic power imbalance between above-the-line and below-the-line practitioners, employing linguistic strategies to reimagine the relationship as mutually constitutive. In the fall 2005 issue, Appel interviewed director Nancy Meyers, whom she introduced as a “distinguished collaborator.”³⁵ This use of equalizing language was part of a strategy to (re) value the costume designer’s role. Appel’s line of questioning encouraged her respondent to acknowledge the significant contributions of costume design to the creative process. For instance, she asked: “With the actors in the center of every frame, where do you see the costume designer’s place of value in relation to the production designer, cinematographer and editor?” Her final question, “Do you think that there are still barriers for women in this industry?” couches the entire discussion within a context of gender discrimination. Significantly, she does not ask if there are barriers for women in Meyers’s position, but instead she asks about “*this* industry,” a catchall term that includes costume designers and highlights the connections between above-the-line and below-the-line labor. Meyers’s use of a rhetorical question in her response—“Unfortunately, yes. But what else is new?”—suggests the potential for shared experience, and creates a sense of solidarity.

The “Collaborations” feature continues to be a crucial strategy in the magazine’s solidarity project, and indeed, it has adapted over time to become more rhetorically effective. In 2007 it was revamped and reintroduced in the “form it was always meant to take.”³⁶ The revised format rejects the hierarchical

one-on-one interview in favor of a roundtable approach in which directors, producers, and costume designers contribute to a group discussion on their experiences of the production process. In the fall 2007 issue, Appel brought together James Mangold (director), Cathy Konrad (producer), and Arianne Phillips (costume designer) to reflect on what they identify as a “uniquely” successful partnership. Following their exchange, Appel concludes that a successful collaborative relationship is born out of “mutual respect, appreciation, and loyalty.”³⁷

Appel’s closing remarks echo the sentiment (and vocabulary) of Richard Sennett’s 2002 book *Respect: The Formation of Character in an Age of Inequality*, in which he laments the systematic erasure of mutual respect by neoliberal economic policies and practices.³⁸ Practicing mutual respect and appreciation is encouraged throughout the *Costume Designer* via the use of “rapport talk.” The stories regularly remind readers of the value of empathy and community building, and warn against the dangers of an individualized, self-interested mode of working. Thus, “rapport talk” is part of a political strategy. Indeed, the dominant narratives in the *Costume Designer* draw from a kind of feminist praxis that recognizes the importance of respect, solidarity, and kindness in resisting neoliberal production cultures and effecting change.

SOLIDARITY AND COLLECTIVE AUTHORSHIP

The spring 2008 issue marked a departure in terms of format for the *Costume Designer*. It was the first issue to include a feature article focusing on one specific costume designer—in this case, Marlene Stewart. In the Editor’s Note, Appel explains that the magazine has heretofore deliberately avoided singling out specific designers because “we are a Guild of peers and this magazine should represent us all.” She goes on to clarify that guild solidarity is not being rejected, but that the reasons for devoting a feature to Stewart alone are validated by industry neglect: “It seems it’s now time to shine a light on some of our veteran members who work constantly and impeccably and yet never seem to get the attention they deserve. Designers with eclectic resumes, who simply disappear into their work.”³⁹

The issue of visibility (or lack thereof) presents a potential paradox that must be carefully managed in the trade stories. On the one hand, the ability to disappear into work is a measure of success for a costume designer. Deborah Landis puts it thus: “A Costume Designer’s work must have *no signature* and *no identifiable style*. Because we serve the story, and not ourselves, a recognizable style would be as destructive to the character as it would be to the career of the Costume Designer.” However, this kind of skillful invisibility (necessary for

character and narrative purposes) can be detrimental to a costume designer's working conditions, as Landis also acknowledges: "Costume Designers are so proficient at this disappearing act and so modest about taking credit, that the public and the industry believe that costumes design themselves. We were on the brink of self-obliteration and redundancy."⁴⁰ Consequently, strategies have been developed to address this seemingly antithetical requirement to be simultaneously visible and invisible, and trade stories have become a tool to work through this tension. Marlene Stewart is constructed as the ideal subject, appearing to have successfully managed the profession's central tension. Appel writes:

I have to thank [Stewart] profusely for giving me so much of her time, while in the middle of prepping a huge film and nursing a bad cold. While admitting that she intentionally does not pursue self-promotion, Marlene was so open and generous in this process, all the more reason that she's so deserving of this attention.⁴¹

Stewart's generosity is also remarked upon in the main feature when she and Appel discuss the career trajectories of her assistants (many of whom subsequently become designers). When asked if she minds working with an assistant who "wants to be a designer," Stewart responds:

I've worked with many talented people. I suppose I am fairly egalitarian, in that I am not worried about my assistant having access to directors and actors. I always feel that everyone brings something to the table. I suppose the only trait I am uncomfortable with is if an assistant is overly ambitious and uses a project to promote themselves rather than the overall success of the department.⁴²

These comments support an important theme that was established early on in the *Costume Designer*: that collaborative authorship is the most effective way to claim cultural legitimacy. As such, any successes should be enjoyed collectively. As Appel suggests in her fall 2006 Editor's Note, individual success as a designer also represents the guild's collective achievement:

When I joined the CDG in 1990 . . . I didn't know a single designer . . . and couldn't imagine that I ever would. There's only one of us on any given project. And after all, we're competitors. Right? How that climate has changed. We've paved the way for designers as friends and support team. I can now pick up the phone and call my fellow designers for crew recommendations and even the taboo deal memo questions that once kept us all in the dark. We understand that together we are stronger. Every designer's

breakthrough, deal or precedent, honor or published interview, moves every single one of us forward.⁴³

Both Stewart's comments and Appel's Editor's Note value success (and by extension visibility) when it is in the service of the entire community, rhetoric that works to subtly undermine hypercompetitive and individualized discursive models.

Though highly regarded in the more masculine value systems Caldwell documents, competition is approached with caution in the magazine. Even the competitive element of the guild's annual awards is carefully packaged as a celebration of *everyone* in the field, not as recognition of an elite few. In the inaugural awards issue, Landis's President's Letter, titled "Going for the Silver," reads as follows:

Dear Friends, Competition is not for me. Whether it's tennis or scrabble, I'm there for the fun of it. The CDG Awards is first and foremost a joyous celebration of the art of costume design and a cheerful appreciation of Costume Designers. It is a party held annually in your honor. Leaving with a prize is nice, but come to relax and enjoy the evening with friends and colleagues. We are all lucky winners on February 25.⁴⁴

Reiterating the collaborative tenor of the journal, the awards are thus framed primarily as an opportunity for collective visibility.⁴⁵

Similar discursive strategies are employed in the 2009 awards issue, though this time the event takes place in the aftermath of the market crash and thus requires additional sensitivity. In Appel's Editor's Note, she reminds readers that the primary value of the awards ceremony for costume designers is to increase visibility of the profession as a whole: "We take pride in *spreading the wealth* to designers and their collaborators on both large and small screens. It's no secret that the Costume Designers Guild stands by our motto: 'Behind every costume is a Costume Designer.'⁴⁶ The competitive element of the awards ceremony is once again diminished—this time with humor. Jack Benny's famous quote, "I don't deserve this award, but I have arthritis and I don't deserve that either," appears in a stand-alone text box adjacent to Appel's note. The humor is tempered, however, by Appel's sobering conclusion: "We understand that many of you were hit hard by the economic mess known as 2008. With the spirit of hope and change in the air, we do hope you can find a way to join us for a glorious evening to toast and celebrate your peers and colleagues." But both the humor and the empathy are part of a strategy that de-emphasizes the importance of individual achievement in favor of collective

success. Appel's Editor's Note, therefore, encourages feelings of mutual respect and appreciation for peers who are identified as crucial to a successful working environment. In addition, it also implies that altruism and kindness might serve as an antidote to the potentially divisive effect of the market crash.

The recession's devastating effects on the labor market increased competition for employment and thus posed a threat to the solidarity the guild had worked so hard to foster.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, the *Costume Designer's* trade stories continued to practice the "rapport talk" characteristic of its earlier issues. While many of the executive director's letters between 2008 and 2010 acknowledge the scarcity of work (particularly on the West Coast), readers are frequently reminded of the importance of community and collectivism. Oppositional and individualized styles of "report talk" (characterized by Tannen as traditionally masculine) are identified as unproductive responses to the increased competition for work. When introducing the aforementioned special feature on Debra McGuire in the fall 2010 issue, Appel's Editor's Note discouraged readers from engaging in unsupportive, competitive language:

Why a feature on Debra McGuire? It occurs to me that there's always someone. A Costume Designer who's on everybody's lips and I'm not talking about a smile. Someone whose name conjures up much discussion and eye rolling and gossip, "Where did HE come from? He came out of nowhere." "She MUST have a publicist!" "What is her background? Does she have *any* training?" "How is he getting all these Emmy nominations when his period work isn't even accurate?" Sound familiar? These are just some of the rumblings of many of us when discussing (or actually questioning) another designer's success. I'll admit it. I've been guilty too. . . . "She's taking all the jobs" was often the complaint about Debra McGuire. True . . . she works a LOT. True . . . a lot of designers aren't working. But if my recent foray into the land of TV is any indication, it's a wonder anyone can cobble together enough of an income to survive.⁴⁸

Her final comments point to the dangers of this kind of talk: that it distracts from the wider problem of poor remuneration in TV costume design, the real issue worthy of attention. As the remainder of her introductory note makes clear, to focus negative attention on an individual obscures the more pressing structural issues, be they lack of employment opportunities or inadequate pay:

In the past few years, I've had reason to contact Debra for one thing or another and I'm always struck by her graciousness, kindness and willingness to help. It made me realize that maybe we're all a little too judgmental about

one thing or another and it's important to remember that there's always more to the story and the person than the gossip implies.⁴⁹

Appel's introduction also serves as a reminder of the value of kindness, which, as with respect, can be understood as a radical act and a political strategy. Although the concept of kindness may suffer from an image deficit, perhaps due to its association with the devalued feminine domestic sphere, recent work in the social sciences has acknowledged its importance in the pursuit of social justice. According to Sue Clegg and Stephen Rowland, kindness is "subversive of neo-liberal values" insofar as it cannot be prescribed, measured, or regulated.⁵⁰ Their argument has been adopted by feminist scholars who argue that kindness is a crucial strategy for "resisting imperatives of competition and individualism."⁵¹ The radical political possibilities of kindness are espoused in the *Costume Designer's* feature article about McGuire:

Working in Michigan over the summer, Debra had the good fortune to connect with other CDG Designers and Assistant Designers all on location in the area. Some she knew personally and some she met for the first time. "With several like-minded artists in one room it was a bit of a love & respect fest. The meeting just reinforced the need to stay united. It appears that our work as Designers in this industry will become more difficult as the years progress. It is important that we not judge or speak unkindly about our peers but instead, try to share our knowledge with each other and support each other."⁵²

It is clear that kindness plays a crucial role in the guild's political project of building community and solidarity, which in turn provides the best defense against divisive neoliberal production cultures.

DOING STORYTELLING, DOING FEMINISM

The introduction to this article set out three objectives. The first was to apply a gendered lens to trade stories; this involved both seeking out stories told by people(s) previously written out of or overlooked in production histories. The second was to expand the work of John Thornton Caldwell by exploring the cultural functions of these alternative trade stories, and in so doing revise and reimagine the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning his research. The final objective was to stress the value of sources like the *Costume Designer* that advocate for alternative labor models based on community, solidarity, and collaboration. By way of conclusion I want to elaborate on the importance of the *Costume Designer*, the storytelling it "does," and what it means for feminist production studies.

In *Storytelling in Everyday Life: Performing Narrative* (2004), Kristin Langellier and Eric Peterson argue for a “communication approach” to storytelling.⁵³ Such an approach shifts focus from the story content to the performative “doing” of storytelling. Extending this logic to *written* storytelling performances means considering both the embodied experience of writing (the affective pleasures and frustrations) and the materiality of the text. The affective pleasures of writing for the *Costume Designer* are well documented within the text itself. Contributors frequently declare their “passion” and “love” for writing stories. For some, this pleasure is generated from the embodied experience of writing, as is the case for Audrey Fisher: “Associate editing the CDG magazine allows me to indulge one of my first loves and keeps up my writing chops. I appreciate the creative outlet and the opportunity to learn more about our colleagues and their designs.”⁵⁴ For others, pleasures in writing come from the belief that sharing stories is important work (and it is work). J. R. Hawbaker observes: “Our Guild members are storytellers, on screen and on the page, and I am only to [*sic*] happy to contribute to a magazine that narrates their stories.”⁵⁵

I have argued that these stories can be read as feminist acts of resistance against a neoliberal production culture. But it is not just the stories that play a part in this project. Documenting, disseminating, and archiving these experiences is also “doing” political work. These written stories’ material form has symbolic significance. In her work on zines, Alison Piepmeier demonstrates the importance of materiality that such publications have in establishing personal connections and building communities. She details how a zine’s material form (paper) and its method of distribution (sent via post) establish a connection between author and reader that cannot be replicated in the digital world. Signaling the profound possibilities in such modes of circulation, she notes that “a tangible object transforms an imagined relationship into an embodied one.”⁵⁶ Piepmeier’s observations point to the significance of the *Costume Designer*’s materiality as it engages with its readers. That the journal exists in physical form and is delivered to members via the post re-creates the sensory experience that Piepmeier suggests is crucial to community building.⁵⁷ Indeed, the summer 2010 issue made explicit the value placed on the magazine’s material form. In her President’s Letter, Rose voiced her fears of a future where the magazine circulates only as digital content on the website. Her concerns, however, are assuaged as she recalls readers’ demands to reintroduce a printed CDG directory:

This speculation took me back to 2003. . . . The Executive Board discussions at the time were centered on discontinuing the CDG directory. The concern was that in the age of the internet, our directory had lost its

usefulness, and that producers and directors were focused on their computers and not interested in a printed directory. And so the CDG directory met its death. In 2007, a newly elected CDG Board heard the call of many members asking for the directory to be resurrected. That combined with the fact that our fabulous magazine publishers . . . agreed to completely finance the directory . . . made it a win-win proposition.⁵⁸

Thus, the form of the journal and its method of delivery both complement and serve as an example of the political work undertaken on the page.

Miranda Banks argues that feminist production studies has a responsibility to “interrogate power and cultural capital, femininity and feminism in production communities frequently overlooked in media industry research.”⁵⁹ Texts like the *Costume Designer* are important spaces in which a kind of feminist work is being done. As scholars, archivists, and activists, we have a responsibility to critically interrogate and preserve this kind of activity and to understand the contexts of its production.⁶⁰ As feminist scholars, we have other stories to tell. We must recover these histories and curate these narratives. We must recognize the pockets of resistance wherever they occur—in personal experience stories or in acts of kindness—as legitimate acts of “doing” politics. ■

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NOTES

1. Deborah Landis, “President’s Letter,” *Costume Designer*, Fall 2005, 9.
2. The line to which the terms “above-the-line” and “below-the-line” refer is the horizontal line on a budget sheet that distinguishes the creative talent from the technical costs.
3. The term “neoliberal production culture” is used throughout this article to capture the ways in which neoliberal values such as individualization and entrepreneurialism characterize creative work and are reproduced by creative workers. For a more extensive discussion of this phenomenon see Angela McRobbie, “Clubs to Companies: Notes on the Decline of Political Culture or Speeded-up Creative Worlds,” *Cultural Studies* 16, no. 4 (2010): 516–31. See also the introduction to Vicki Mayer, *Below the Line: Producers and Production Studies in the New Television Economy* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2011), for a general overview of the impact of neoliberal trade policies on film and television production.
4. See for example Julie D’Acci, *Defining Women: Television and the Case of Cagney and Lacey* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Elana Levine,

“Towards a Paradigm for Media Production Research: Behind the Scenes at *General Hospital*,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 18 (2001): 66–82.

5. Feminist historians have long observed that women’s experiences are systematically written out of history, and that therefore oral histories are central to capturing their narratives.

6. I would even go as far as to draw parallels between zines and the particular trade paper under discussion, insofar as the latter occupies a liminal space between amateur and professional publication: it is amateur in the sense that its content is provided on a voluntary basis, with no financial compensation for the contributors. For a comprehensive discussion of zines and their role in community building see Alison Piepmeier, *Girl Zines: Making Media, Doing Feminism* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

7. While hard copies are received by members, the magazine is also accessible electronically on the Costume Designers Guild’s website, <http://costumedesignersguild.com/magazine/>.

8. The credit must be for a motion picture, television project, commercial, or music video for commercial release.

9. John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 37.

10. *Ibid.*, 68.

11. See for example Nancy K. Miller, “Emphasis Added: Plots and Plausibilities in Women’s Fiction,” *PMLA* 96, no. 1 (2008): 36–48.

12. See for instance Robyn Warhol and Susan S. Lanser, *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2015); Homi K. Bhabha, *Nation and Narrative* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

13. Anna De Fina, “Who Tells Which Story and Why? Micro and Macro Contexts in Narrative,” *Text & Talk* 28, no. 3 (2008): 421–42.

14. *Ibid.*, 423.

15. He includes an additional category for “non-signatory” and “unregulated” occupations—this includes all roles not subject to guild agreements, such as agents, accountants, personal assistants, et cetera.

16. Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 47, 38, 40, 43, 38.

17. These discursive practices are imbricated within broader historical discourses that code certain professions as feminine. Garment construction in particular has long been viewed as “women’s work.” See Mercedes Steedman, *Angels of the Workplace: Women and the Construction of Gender Relations in the Canadian Clothing Industry 1890–1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

18. Evidence of this can be found not only in the kinds of trade stories but also in the paid advertising that funds the publication. Kotex, the feminine hygiene product, is a regular advertiser.

19. <http://costumedesignersguild.com/about-cdg/overview-history/>, accessed September 29, 2017.

20. Mary Rose, “President’s Letter,” *Costume Designer*, Fall 2008, 8.

21. Mary Rose, "President's Letter," *Costume Designer*, Winter 2009, 6.
22. Deena Appel, "Editor's Note," *Costume Designer*, Fall 2007, 4.
23. Quoted in Deena Appel, "Who Is Debra McGuire and Why Does Everybody Hate Her?," *Costume Designer*, Fall 2010, 19.
24. Deena Appel, "Editor's Note," *Costume Designer*, Spring 2009, 4.
25. Appel, "Who Is Debra McGuire and Why Does Everybody Hate Her?," 19. This segregation of public and private and the location of motherhood as belonging to the private is based on the cultural understanding and tropes of white, middle-class motherhood. Black mothers have long disrupted this binary insofar as they are often engaged in waged labor. See bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman* (New York: South End, 1981); Patricia Hill Collins, "Shifting the Center: Race, Class and Feminist Theorizing about Motherhood," in *Mothering: Ideology, Experience and Agency*, ed. Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang, and Linda Rennie Forcey (New York: Routledge, 1994), 45–67; Dorothy E. Roberts, "Racism and Patriarchy in the Meaning of Motherhood," *American Journal of Gender and Law* 1, no. 1 (1993): 1–38.
26. Motherhood is an uncomfortable reminder of the structural inequalities within a job market designed to accommodate the "rational economic man."
27. Appel, "Who Is Debra McGuire and Why Does Everybody Hate Her?," 19.
28. *Ibid.*
29. Barbara Johnstone, "Community and Contest: Midwestern Men and Women Creating Their Worlds in Conversational Storytelling," in *Gender and Conversational Interaction*, ed. Deborah Tannen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 69.
30. Barbara Johnstone, *Stories, Community and Place: Narratives from Middle America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 66–67. We must be cautious about generalizing the results given the geographical specificity of her sample, which is drawn from Fort Wayne, Indiana. However, this local community is informed by wider societal expectations of gender.
31. Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 40.
32. Jim McGuigan, "The Neoliberal Self," *Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research* 6 (2014): 232–33.
33. Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 46–47.
34. Deena Appel, "Collaborations," *Costume Designer*, Fall 2005, 22–23.
35. *Ibid.*
36. Deena Appel, "Collaborations," *Costume Designer*, Fall 2007, 28.
37. *Ibid.*
38. Richard Sennett, *Respect: The Formation of Character in an Age of Inequality* (London: Penguin, 2002).
39. Deena Appel, "Editor's Note," *Costume Designer*, Spring 2008, 4.
40. Deborah Landis, "President's Letter," *Costume Designer*, Spring 2006, 6.
41. Deena Appel, "Editor's Note," *Costume Designer*, Spring 2008, 4.
42. Quoted in Deena Appel, "A Designer in Focus," *Costume Designer*, Spring 2008, 15.
43. Deena Appel, "Editor's Note," *Costume Designer*, Fall 2006, 4.
44. Deborah Landis, "President's Letter," *Costume Designer*, Winter 2006, 6.

45. Evidence of this discourse being internalized by readers can be found in Sandy Powell's Academy Award acceptance speech. She was coined the "blasé Oscar winner" by *New York* magazine after claiming in her speech that she felt "greedy" for winning a third award, and decided to dedicate this one to "the costume designers that don't do movies about dead monarchs or glittery musicals . . . [and therefore] don't get as recognized." Powell wrote to the editor of the *Costume Designer* to ensure that her peers understood the "sentiment of her speech," which was, of course, to recognize their work and point to a bias that exists in awards culture.

46. Deena Appel, "Editor's Note," *Costume Designer*, Winter 2009, 4, my emphasis.

47. Significantly, this effect was felt most acutely by women.

48. Deena Appel, "Editor's Note," *Costume Designer*, Fall 2010, 4.

49. Ibid.

50. Sue Clegg and Stephen Rowland, "Kindness in Pedagogical Practice and Academic Life," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 31, no. 6 (2010): 719.

51. The Res-sisters, "I'm an Early Career Feminist Academic: Get Me Out of Here? Encountering and Resisting the Neoliberal Academy," in *Being an Early Career Feminist Academic*, ed. Rachel Thwaites and Amy Pressland (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 275.

52. Appel, "Who Is Debra McGuire and Why Does Everybody Hate Her?," 20.

53. Kristin M. Langellier and Eric E. Peterson, *Storytelling in Everyday Life: Performing Narrative* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004).

54. Audrey Fisher, "Contributors," *Costume Designer*, Winter 2008, 9.

55. J. R. Hawbaker, "Contributors," *Costume Designer*, Spring 2008, 6.

56. Piepmeier, *Girl Zines*, 82.

57. The value of print culture, and the affective responses it can generate, is recognized by one contributor in particular: "I trained as an illustrator for print (publishing) so when the CDG began the magazine, I was pleased to be asked to illustrate for it. I love working in film, but I have to admit, I missed seeing my work in print!" Robin Richesson, "Contributors," *Costume Designer*, Winter 2008, 9.

58. Mary Rose, "President's Letter," *Costume Designer*, Summer 2010, 6.

59. Miranda J. Banks, "Gender Below-the-Line: Defining Feminist Production Studies," in *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, ed. Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John Thornton Caldwell (London: Routledge, 2009), 88.

60. Indeed, archiving has long been recognized as a feminist issue, but the ephemeral nature of digital culture means we should attend to it with some urgency. As Carrie A. Rentschler and Samantha C. Thrift observe, "The ephemeral acts, artefacts and cultural infrastructures generated by feminist-identified movements and practitioners often get lost in the official and popular records." See Carrie A. Rentschler and Samantha C. Thrift, "Doing Feminism: Event, Archive, Techné," *Feminist Theory* 16, no. 3 (December 2015): 249.