Precarious Creativity

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This chapter makes a case for precarity as a historical state of being for marginalized men and women of color in the entertainment industries. As a preface to underscore what follows, I want to recount two recent experiences that make explicit the larger stakes I’m concerned with here. First, at the originating conference for this collection, a key debate focused on the gendered division of labor and how debates about “progress” often obscure the ongoing marginalization of women from the screen media workforce. Scholars made resoundingly astute points about the ways women continue to suffer under the tyranny of patriarchy in the culture industries and articulated many powerful ways in which we—scholars and practitioners—might engage in the struggle for change and equality. Yet what was missing in this conversation was what is often missing from conversations about identity politics: explicitly marking out the white racial identity of the women we were discussing. I spoke up, named the exnomination, and filled in the gap. Women do not all experience precariousness and contingent labor in the same way. Some women have more access to opportunities than other women simply by virtue of their racial identity, and while all women certainly suffer under patriarchal labor regimes, some suffer less and some suffer more. My intervention in the conversation, then, was to insist on the importance of intersectional cultural analysis when discussing women and labor in the entertainment industries, and insist that any intervention we discuss must be attuned to those differences. Because in a conversation where, to crudely paraphrase Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, all women laborers are assumed white and all racial or ethnic minority laborers are assumed male, we can’t begin to address the precarious creativity of women of color without first making them visible in our conceptions of screen media work.
While attending panels about working in the industry at the third annual Austin Television Festival (ATXFest), I encountered another instance when the conversation erased the specific experiences of women of color in the entertainment industries. At the festival, I listened as successful casting directors, staff writers, and showrunners shared their workday experiences in the field. In a panel on working as an assistant, four women—three white women and one ethnically ambiguous woman—described how they each got their start in the business. Each woman had an internship that then led to permanent employment. They further explained that they garnered the necessary skills for their profession not through college but through their work as assistants or in online extension courses. Lastly, and most relevant to this essay, when asked about accessing entry-level assistant positions, each panelist agreed that leveraging existing relationships and networks was absolutely crucial to employment in the entertainment industries. Indeed, even the panelists’ own hiring practices reinforced this “truism.” They discovered new talent through alumni networks, family members, and friends. Reflecting on this panel conversation, I found precariousness to be an inevitable function of their career choice. Yet I also found that the panelists enjoyed the privilege of stabilizing some of that uncertainty for others by hiring those who reproduce their identities and social relations, and thus offsetting precarity for those who are most like them. I mention this example not only because professional networks are largely racially myopic, but also because the reproduction of identities and social relations vis-à-vis networking and mentorship directly serves a racially unjust status quo. In short, its superficial innocence masks a much more troubling reality: to assume that access to creative work simply depends first on “whom you know” and then on being “the best person for the job” ultimately obscures the power structures that systematically exclude men and women of color from availing themselves of similar opportunities for networking and jobs in the first place.

Both anecdotes reinforce a major crux of the discussion that follows. First, discursive maneuvers that reframe racially myopic professional networks and practices as an ideologically benign function of the creative industries raise the precarious stakes for laborers of color—they effectively neutralize arguments about systemic discrimination and inequality by displacing structural concerns in favor of questions about skills and talent. You’re simply good enough to get the job or you’re not. Likewise, much like my opening anecdote suggests, this discourse risks framing genuine concerns about parity and progress as the product of a contemporary moment marked by extreme precariousness for everybody rather than a function of the socio-historical circumstances of a group of workers whose precariousness has been an ever-present condition of their existence. When meaningful conversations about diversity are outside the confines of common industrial logic (that is, it's not a problem that exists), the strategies and tactics people of
color deploy to gain visibility, secure employment, and maintain careers as creative laborers deserve sustained consideration.

In this chapter, then, I first establish the stark realities of minority employment in the creative industries before outlining how industry professionals abdicate responsibility for structural problems by reframing the issue as one about skills and talent. Such discourse, I argue, is predicated upon the exnomination of its normative ideological basis. In the second section of the chapter, I draw focused attention to how this discourse affects casting for film and television roles. Here I briefly consider how casting directors reproduce normative identities (and thus limited opportunities for actors of color) in their workaday practices. I then conclude by outlining three strategies racial and ethnic minority performers have adopted to contend with their precarious circumstances, and at what cost. Ultimately, I argue that necessary and meaningful political intervention on behalf of a diverse labor force is displaced by persistent notions of “talent” and obfuscated by the simple need to find work in whatever ways possible.

My analysis draws from interviews with media professionals in industry trade journals, conference panels, social media platforms, and my own fieldwork. I borrow John Caldwell’s notion of industrial reflexivity to reframe the workaday experiences and explanations of these “insiders” as a process of self-fashioning and self-theorizing their own identities and interests within existing structures and categories.

MINORITY EMPLOYMENT: DISMAL DATA AND INDUSTRIAL PUSHBACK

The lack of a diverse labor force in both above- and below-the-line talent is not simply anecdotal. In April 2014, the Writers Guild of America (WGA) released their latest “Hollywood Writers Report,” the organization’s study on the state of diversity in the film and television industries. The report’s findings prompted much debate, and rightfully so, as the data indicated a dismal state of affairs for film and television writers: for instance, minority television writers had increased their share of employment by only 1 percent, and women remained underrepresented by a factor of two to one among television writers. Hollywood’s lack of diversity also extended to directing. In 2014, the Directors Guild of America (DGA) diversity report indicated that of the 3,500 episodes analyzed from more than 200 scripted television programs produced in the 2013–2014 season, 69 percent were directed by white males, 12 percent by white females, 17 percent by minority males, and 2 percent by minority females—a statistic unchanged from the previous year’s study. The numbers are no better in acting, where the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) reported that in 2008, white actors dominated television and film roles (70.7 percent). Rounding out the casting data, African Americans
represented 14.8 percent of television and film roles, Latinos 6.7 percent, Native Americans 0.30 percent, and unknown/other 4.1 percent. Lastly, official statistics for casting directors are more difficult to secure because they are not represented by organized labor to the same degree as other creative professions. They do have a professional society—the Casting Society of America—whose leadership profile follows a pattern similar to employment data collected and distributed by the guilds. Its twenty-six-member leadership team is all white with the exception of one Latino; its gender split is roughly equal.

Such are the data that characterize the premier occupations within Hollywood’s labor force, capturing the degree to which the great majority of feature films and television productions resist multiculturalism. Indeed, despite some small signs of progress (often disproportionately celebrated with self-congratulatory discourses), the film and television industries have yet to initiate any meaningful measures that might correct the staggering lack of diversity in their labor force. In fact, the last time the industry’s exclusionary hiring practices received serious and sustained public criticism was the fall 1999 television season—more than fifteen years ago—when none of the season’s twenty-three new prime-time series featured a single person of color in a leading role. Civil rights organizations and media advocacy groups threatened boycotts and litigation, publicly demanding immediate action from the networks to rectify the troubling lack of minority characters. The public shaming and negative news coverage generated some momentum in favor of minority employment both in front of and behind the camera. Networks immediately began casting people of color in supporting roles across a number of series—a liberal “sprinkling” of multiculturalism to quell the controversy. In a structural attempt at change, many networks created in-house diversity positions—executives charged with the futile task of encouraging television show-runners to increase the number of people of color employed on their productions.

Despite such responses, the momentum produced limited success and short-lived interest. Diversity executives are considered all bark and no bite; without the authority to hire or fire, they lack the power to intervene effectively. They furthermore claim that efforts to diversify personnel require fundamental change at every employment rank within a network, and that change remains a far-off reality. Furthermore, in the NAACP Hollywood Bureau’s 2008 report, the organization stresses that, despite some gains, the primary objectives it negotiated during the 1999 talks have been largely abandoned by the networks. As Vicangelo Bulluck, former executive director of the NAACP’s Hollywood bureau, posited, “The trend definitely seems to be going in the wrong direction.” Indeed, nine years after one of the most public industrial shakedowns, employment data retells the same story each year, which further suggests that even if advocacy groups are still pursuing their diversity agendas, the networks have generated strategies to allow them to opt out.
With less than substantial improvement to its exclusionary hiring practices, the television and film industries have nevertheless become emboldened in their apathy about the lack of diversity both in front of and behind the camera. Report after report citing the dearth of employment for creative labor of color has had little effect on how the major Hollywood players choose to conduct their business. Certainly, it is not in their best interest to admit that racial and ethnic diversity is simply a low priority or an unnecessary distraction. In short, no matter how dismal the employment data, diversity just isn’t a problem for many of those individuals in positions with enough power to do something about it. Instead of direct acknowledgment, they employ discursive stopgaps that redirect conversations about employment into discussions of competence and skill—ironically, as I will outline below, concepts that perpetuate familiar ideological beliefs about racial identity.

For example, in response to coverage of the 2013 WGA “Writers Report,” the anonymous commenter “Heartsick” at Deadline Hollywood expressed frustration at the pressure coming from diversity executives as well as talent agents to racially integrate his writing staff. Describing literary agents calling him to suggest writers of color for his staff, Heartsick recalls asking: “What piece of writing have you read that indicates this person would be right for my show, and the answer INVARIA-

ABLY is: they haven’t read the person, they’re just calling to con me into hiring someone based on irrelevant, invidious categories that should have no place in the employment of writers.”

Heartsick is frustrated with agents who allegedly send him ill-prepared writers of color—a phenomenon he doesn’t attribute to white writers also seeking employment—because they interfere with his ability to identify talent based on how well they “fit” with the creative sensibility among his writing staff, a criterion that in his mind transcends racial difference. One can only imagine how many Heartsicks exist in the Hollywood hierarchy. But here’s the critical point: if diversity was an organic industrial practice implemented in staffing hires based simply on postracial notions of fit, talent, and worth, then by extension Hollywood would be a much more hospitable place for ethnic and racial minorities.

Commentators on Deadline are not the only industry-minded folks maintaining that anonymity is the only way to honestly respond to these shameful data-filled reports. One of the more recent trends on Twitter is the emergence of Mystery Hollywood. The “Mysterys,” as they label themselves, are anonymous industry workers/insiders who claim they hold enough clout in the industry that revealing their personal identities would wreak havoc on their professional lives. Mysterys’ racial, ethnic, and gender identities remain unclear unless their Twitter handles or avatars make explicit such differences. The juxtaposition between how Mysterys occupy the socially mediated space as exnominated white and/or male identities and the manner by which they self-fashion personas as successful entertainment industry laborers using the Twitter platform to “tell the truth”
Strategies for Success?

anonymous creates some complicated spaces of navigation for a person of color follower. Consider a small section of a Twitter screed by a Mystery account called “DevelopmentHell Exec (DHE)”: “Am I the only one sick of hearing about the plight of women in the film and TV industry? It’s 2014. Just do something awesome, you’re in. Or how bout just making GOOD FILMS? Women-centric, men-centric, alien-centric, muppet-centric, Wall-E-centric. Whatever. Quality > politics.” Similar to Heartsick, DHE’s Mystery account allows him to speak his truth about the manner by which diverse employment is discussed in Hollywood. It also allows him to free himself from the focus on employing different kinds of gendered and racial bodies to instead focus on the abstract and apolitical notion of “good work” that cares not about the body from which that work is produced. For DHE, the data suggesting how far white women and men and women of color lag behind white men in all facets of the industry is representative not of a racist structure but of natural selection, sifting out those who create “quality” work from those who are unqualified for the business.

Regardless of how many popular press articles, pie charts, and data graphs consistently demonstrate that marginalized bodies are not allowed opportunities to prove they can produce quality work, the ideological frames perpetuated by the likes of Heartsick and DHE dissociate the structural racism from common industry practices. Creative talents are rewarded with access and opportunity, regardless of the racial or ethnic identity of the worker. The few minority workers who do enjoy some success function as evidence that the best talent does indeed rise to the top. Yet such discursive logic obscures that Hollywood is an industry built around relationships, networking, internships, and apprenticeships—a classed set of practices from which people of color are systemically excluded.

CASTING DIRECTORS: PRECARIOUS LIMBO GATEKEEPERS

By the very nature of the career, casting is an overlooked and underresearched component of the filmmaking process. To claim success, the casting director must identify such high-quality talent that his or her part in locating the actors is effaced in favor of an assumption about the process as organic and natural: the actor “just fits” the role. Put simply, good casting happens when no one notices the casting director’s work. Even casting directors themselves elide the skills and expertise required to do their jobs well—in my conversations, they repeatedly claim they “just know it” when they meet the right person for the part. It’s much more likely that casting practices parallel the sort of creativity described by Keith Negus: “Creative practice is not approached as inspirational and radically new, nor as something that everybody does in a kind of everyday creative way. Instead, ongoing cultural production involves working with recognizable codes, conventions and
In other words, casting is not an exclusively intuitive, inspirational, or mystical act. Rather, it is a learned and socialized professional skill. Instead of knowing the right actor when you see her, casting directors understand that the “right” person must adhere to the standardized codes, conventions, and expectations of the industry they service. Casting directors know how to practice their trade because they were trained by other casting directors; identifying the right person is a learned and learnable skill and constitutes the knowledge capital shared among professional networks. A number of current casting directors who spoke with me were trained by the greats—the Marion Doughertys, the Ellen Lewises—and frequently compare this relationship to graduate education.

Casting is a freelance occupation. Casting directors establish careers—and financial sustainability—from job to job. This precariousness further enshrines and reproduces the standard codes and conventions that define the “right” person for the role. Radical or nontraditional casting techniques jeopardize the trust casting directors must maintain with producers and other professionals in their network, especially for casting directors who are young or new to the profession. Indeed, at an ATX Fest panel on casting, Jen Euston, casting director for *Orange Is the New Black*, said that it was only after she became an established casting director with ongoing and recurring work that she could walk away from a job because she disagreed with the creative vision of the producers or the network bosses. She described this privilege as an outcome of a long and arduous career—a freedom she earned that isn’t available to everyone in her profession. This anecdote underscores how the precarious nature of casting (indeed, much creative work) keeps most professionals tethered to the same ideological frames as those from whom they must gain employment. Learning casting conventions and reinforcing the status quo increase a casting director’s chances for success, but these requirements limit access and opportunity for those individuals who fall outside established codes.

My ongoing research project has been to track mechanisms the film and television industries have promoted as strategies that occasionally allow individuals—like casting directors—to circumvent the racial myopia of professional networks and practices. After spending time observing and interviewing casting directors about the ways they can or cannot incorporate diversity into their workaday practices, I identified colorblind casting as the most prominent contemporary strategy to improve diversity in the postracial era. Colorblind casting is the process of excluding racial identities from character descriptions, a tool to increase the number of racial or ethnic actors in front of the camera by ensuring the role is open to (literally) any body (type). While my earlier research investigated how colorblind casting informed the decisions of casting directors and how the practice affected onscreen representations, in what remains of this chapter I turn to the place of agency for actors as they navigate an industry and its gatekeepers, all operating under race- and gender-blind assumptions disconnected from the systemic
obstacles designed to exclude specific individuals and representations from common business practices. Racial and ethnic minority actors are forced to play along with this game to secure employment in an industry that is always already characterized by chance, instability, and insecurity. Accordingly, actors of color are doubling down on their precariousness. As they turn to strategies to circumvent these obstacles, we find not minority groups engaged in collective resistance against systematic exclusion but individual minority actors availing themselves of whatever strategies will increase the odds in their favor, ultimately (and unsurprisingly) establishing a set of practices that not only reinforce normative white ideals by exnominating the racialization conventions of the “right fit” for whatever jobs are available but also reproduce subtle tactics of antiblackness through disavowing racial discrimination as an industrial reality. I explicate this dual process in the discussion below by identifying three strategies that help actors of color circumvent their precarious careers. These strategies are blindcasting, ambiguously raced performance, and universal discourse.

**STRATEGY 1: BLIND CASTING**

The physical embodiment of visual difference rather than a qualitatively meaningful representation of difference, blind casting is an illusion of equality and parity in casting. In other words, it functions as a form of diversity you can count rather than a notion of diversity that accounts for the nature of the roles or content. Blind casting thus operates as a way to increase diversity in physical difference without investing in any associated cultural differences. Colorblind casting logic is useful to guilds like the Screen Actors Guild (SAG-AFTRA). Because the guild has no authority over or investment in the form or quality of the employment (that is, the guild does not regulate content), it cares less about the nature of the role than about counting that role as an employment gain for their members. Colorblind casting logic thus offers an easy method to assuage dual concerns: it makes available more job opportunities for the least employed sectors of the guild’s membership and imbues those job opportunities with an air of “respectability” because of the way colorblind logic evacuates any cultural specificity in its operating logic in favor of normative whiteness.

Yet, underpinned by neoliberal race logic, colorblind casting deploys a universal, “we are all the same” rhetoric that only superficially addresses the issues of diversity, employment, and racial representation in television and film. Its resolution relies solely on visible difference. Blind casting thus forces minority actors who desire employment to input cultural differences and output a standardized form of whiteness. Moreover, that this input/output practice has become so commonsensical makes acknowledging its existence a bit of a conundrum. Colorblind logic holds that race is no longer a meaningful barrier to accomplishments, so
pointing out continuing injustice as a consequence of racist structures is now, in fact, a racist act. When I make visible the dissonance that occurs when blind casting places an actor of color in a narrative context that, say, isolates him or her from a larger community of color, I am the racist for making a fuss over what Stuart Hall calls “matter out of place.”\textsuperscript{17} Rather than identifying how this process erases a community’s socio-historical specificity, the logic requires that we celebrate its evacuation of race as an issue at all. Diversity matters now only inasmuch as the networks (and guilds) can count the representation of visible difference.

Yet identifying “matter out of place” is one way to observe the failure of the blind casting strategy. If blind-casting roles for actors of color ultimately normalizes them to the degree that they become culturally illegible, the same effects can reveal the dangers of such an enterprise. When writers do not consider racial difference and history as part of their character’s backstory, they too often succumb to a set of unintended racially troped pitfalls. Consider the blind-cast role of the Black character Bonnie Bennett—a witch—in CW’s \textit{The Vampire Diaries (TVD)}. Bennett, whose original surname in the book series, McCullough, was changed to Bennett as a consequence of the casting decision, is a central character in the televised series. According to the original material, Bonnie McCullough is a fair-skinned redhead. Yet Bonnie Bennett signifies as an African American teenager. While it is a laudable effort on the part of the network and its executives to diversify \textit{TVD}’s ensemble cast, the failure to adjust the character’s backstory to account for the long history of racialized imagery of Black women and witchcraft opens the series to a number of accidental pitfalls. In the series, Bonnie belongs to a family of witches who historically served as slaves to the lead actors. Continuing in the tradition, Bonnie’s servitude to her white friends results in her sacrificing her life for theirs. Finally, unlike Bonnie’s female counterparts, who are immersed in teen sexuality and coupling—a vital convention of the teen drama—Bonnie is rarely paired with a love interest. Instead, her sole devotion is to those she serves. Collectively, these tropes raise troubling historical associations with Black representation and further perpetuate the sort of symbolic violence against Black female bodies that blind casting’s postracial ethos is intended to counter.

Despite the pitfalls, blind casting remains a viable option for employment when few other promising opportunities exist for actors of color. Moreover, because the parts are written normatively, many actors themselves celebrate the opportunities as “respectable” alternatives to race-specific casting calls, which often perpetuate troubling stereotypes.

\textbf{STRATEGY 2: RACIALLY AMBIGUOUS PERFORMANCE}

A second strategy deployed by underrepresented groups to circumvent the industrial barriers to employment is self-fashioning as a racially ambiguous actor.
Recalling the earlier statistic from SAG-AFTRA, racially unknown/other actors accounted for 4.1 percent of all roles in 2008. The category “racially unknown/other” designates actors who did not select a racial or ethnic identity on the surveys SAG-AFTRA sends to identify the racial and ethnic makeup of its membership. According to interviews with guild representatives, members opt not to self-identify because they fear it will relegate them to the limited roles intended for a particular racialized group. Implicit in this trend is the practice of “passing” among those actors who believe they can be cast in roles with a racial identity other than their own.

For instance, the biracial identities of Jessica Szohr from CW’s *Gossip Girl* and Rashida Jones from NBC’s *Parks and Recreation* remain “unmarked” in these texts and others in which they appear. Similarly, Troian Bellisario’s racial ethnicity is ambiguous enough to allow her to pass as just one of the (white) girls in ABC Family’s *Pretty Little Liars*—even though reading her body suggests there is something “not quite white” about her character. Beyond indeterminate racial identities, racially or ethnically ambiguous performers find themselves cast as multiple races and ethnicities. Blair Redford’s ambiguous look allowed him to be Latino for ABC Family’s *Switched at Birth* and American Indian for ABC Family’s *The Lying Game*. While the logic behind this strategy might increase an actor’s employment opportunities by expanding the number of types through which his or her look is interpreted, it also privileges (oftentimes racist) assumptions about the look of a given racial group.

Racially ambiguous performers also amplify colorblindness’s insidious power. As a strategy, it not only makes race something that is “unseen” but detaches racialized bodies from their socio-historical contexts. In other words, the actors function as empty signifiers in that their bodies can be read by audiences in multiple ways, and they can be placed in infinite settings without being tethered to a reality rooted in the socio-historical specifics of their racial and cultural experiences. Furthermore, racial ambiguity allows the network to claim diversity without engaging with the concept beyond superficial (physical) differences.

**STRATEGY 3: UNIVERSAL DISCOURSE**

The final strategy I want to discuss is one that, unlike the first two, is applicable to a variety of laborers in the film and television industry. It concerns distributing and marketing film with predominately Black casts that are also written, directed, and/or produced by Black creative talent. From films like *The Best Man Holiday* (2013) to *Think Like a Man* (2012), and *Think Like a Man Too* (2014) to the *About Last Night* (2014) remake, publicity and advertising largely frame these films within a universalist discourse—one designed to assure (white) mainstream audiences that the experiences onscreen are both “human” and “relatable” even though the
characters may not look like them and elements remain that are, in fact, quite culturally specific. Consider the promotional strategy for *Think Like a Man*. According to a 2012 *Vulture* article, while Black producer Will Packer devoted a large portion of his marketing and advertising budget to flying the cast to events with large numbers of African Americans in the audience, he deployed an alternative strategy to draw white audiences. Here he relied heavily on “crossover” comedian Steve Harvey—who hosts the daytime game show *Family Feud* and wrote the film’s source material—as the movie’s messenger. “Packer has deployed Steve Harvey . . . to sell the ‘everybody’s welcome!’ message to the general public, sending him out to tub-thump . . . on CBS’s *This Morning* and ABC’s *The View*, shows that Packer explains, ‘don’t necessarily over-index with African Americans.’” Moreover, to target white women, Packer and his team stressed the romantic comedy conventions of the film via a television campaign that, according to one former studio marketing head, looked “like classic Romantic Comedy 101. In fact, it looks like a Nancy Meyers movie, with black people. Which is fine. . . . All it has to be is funny, and make it clear that the concept has no race.” Yet at what cost comes this universal rhetoric? Extra labor taken on by the actors and producers during these press junkets and promotional events to sell the film as fitting for “all” is expected from marginalized bodies if they desire to reach a mainstream audience. Films with predominately white casts are not expected to sell their films (domestically at least) as universal and relatable because they always already operate within the normative and authentic standards by which we judge the human experience. Similar to blind casting, the burden falls on the person of color to perform his or her “sameness” as a mechanism to ensure that the preferred demographic is not alienated from the production. As Packer asserts, “There is a process to get those audiences. It starts with making a film like this, which is broad, smart, and one where there’s no cultural or ethnic specificity that would not be relatable to mainstream Americans.” Black cast films, then, are not a niche production; they are the benign reflection of a large, multicultured world that poses no threat to liberal sensibilities and consumption practices.

Universal discourse underscores the historical precariousness of minorities in the creative industries whose labor always existed under this double bind structure that equates success with being both similar to and different from the normative order. Such a double bind recalls how Clyde Taylor defines the mode of Black film production in early cinema as one of “unequal development,” that is, a phenomenon that exists where there is “an exploitative/dependent relationship that ultimately results in a more powerful society drawing from the less powerful selected goods and resources without regard for what the loss of those resources will mean to the exploited.” According to similar logic, universal discourse insists that for creative laborers of color to participate in the film and television industries, they must embrace a rhetoric of sameness that not only elides their unequal professional
footing but also encourages them to lose any sense of socio-historical specificity. Yet what must it mean to be a minority worker who, to find employment, must not only cross over to mainstream filmmaking but also disavow elements of his or her own racial identity to remain gainfully employed? Unequal development epitomizes precarity. It considers the minority worker—whose skills are utilized and borrowed, or more specifically, appropriated, for a variety of purposes—always operating on a conditional and probationary basis. Once the current diversity zeitgeist ends, so does the work.

I would extend the universal discourse to branding and would draw attention to how showrunner Shonda Rhimes, most recently described as a “revolutionary,” tells the story of how when she looked at an invitation for an award ceremony at which she was to be honored and saw that she was described as the most powerful Black female showrunner, she scratched out the modifiers Black and female. While I understand her desire to not be limited or constrained by those modifiers if she, in fact, is the most powerful showrunner of any description, her rationale that white men do not have to name themselves is based in structural power and an inherent specialness that allows them to be ex-nominated. They don’t have to be named because it’s common sense. Thus though Rhimes’s refusal to take the modifier may for her be an insistence to transcend, the rhetoric ultimately reinforces the very whiteness implicit in industry. Further, while her strategy attempts to upend the “unequal development” of being considered successful only in relation to other Black female television producers—of which there is one: Rhimes—as opposed to being placed in contention with the predominately white male showrunners, by shrugging off those identity modifiers Rhimes reinscribes herself in a universalist posture. A posture that ironically makes racial difference a type of pathology one needs to be cured of, thus reinvigorating the very tenets of unequal development she hopes to quash.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this essay I tried to illustrate different ways that various creative laborers at various levels of access navigate precarity—from the anonymous (white) gatekeepers who stress that precarity is not a diversity issue but only an issue for those who lack the necessary skills; to the casting directors who find themselves stuck in a precarious limbo with insufficient power to break the status quo despite unparalleled access to diverse pools of talent; to actors of color whose precarious existence means they must strategically plan to circumvent the system even if those strategies benefit individuals at the expense of collective forms of resistance. Ultimately, the uncertainty of employment forces all these groups into their own strategies and tactics of negotiation. And while employment and maintaining one’s livelihood is the point, the danger of such precarious livelihoods is that oftentimes
survival takes precedence over all other factors—including the need for cultural resonance and specificity. That precarity results in the maintenance of a white heteronormative status quo is not shocking, but demands that future research consider the historical and discursive ways creative men and women laborers of color have survived in spite of the uncertainty as a guidepost for understanding issues of labor at all levels.

NOTES


4. Ibid.

5. It should be noted that white males directing decreased by 3 percent in contrast to the year before, while minority males increased by 3 percent, although the study cites that the increase can be attributed to a higher number of episodes directed by Tyler Perry, who solely directed episodes for his three television series.


14. Based on the pattern of Mystery account titles, the assumption is that unless modifiers are in place that suggest otherwise, the owners of said accounts are white males.


18. For evidence of this trend, look at the press junkets for the films and note how often the actors stress that these are movies “for everybody.”

20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.