Scratching the Celluloid Ceiling: Women's Labor as Technology in the Industrialization of Animation at Disney from 1928-1945

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Title: Scratching the Celluloid Ceiling: Women's Labor as Technology in the Industrialization of Animation at Disney from 1928-1945

Scratching the Celluloid Frame: Women's Labor as Technology in the Industrialization of Animation at Disney from 1928-1945 challenges the pervasive myth that women did not have a pivotal role in animation's industrial development in the United States. By examining how cinematic technologies, labor practices, and social attitudes about women defined—and sometimes subverted—the shape of women's labor in animation, I show that the Golden Age of Animation was also a golden age of women's progress in the industry, arguing that white women made substantial contributions to the aesthetic and technological development of the art form. By naming the whiteness of women working in animation during this period, this project aims to shift conversations on animation's industrial development towards institutional constructions of gender and race that were reified by gendered divisions of labor and occupational hierarchies. This project traces the liminal positions that women occupied in the first twenty years of American animation's industrialization to locate the social, political, and technological influences that drove hundreds of women to the industry in the 1930s but did not lead to its first mainstream female director until 2013.

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A dissertation that bears a single name on the cover betrays the community of people who played a part in its making. Like the animated films that my research examines, this creation was only possible through collaboration and support. There are countless people who have helped shape the person that I had to become in order to complete this project. I see you, and I love you.

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DEDICATION

For Circe. In love and honor of this magnificent journey that we began together.

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1
A Woman's Place

> Women do not do any of the creative work in connection with preparing the cartoons for the screen, as that work is performed entirely by young men. For this reason girls are not considered for the training school.
>
> *—A rejection letter from Walt Disney Productions to Mary V. Ford June 7, 1938*[1]

There is a fairy tale that permeates academic and historical records of the Disney animation studio, more pervasive than the origin story of Mickey Mouse or the legend that Walt Disney was cryogenically preserved in death. It is the story that women did not actively participate in the creative development of the animation industry, except as inkers and painters mechanically tracing cels with artwork crafted by male animators.[2] This fairy tale, unlike the ones that comprised the content of the studio's feature productions, is extensively recounted because it is based in fact: the vast majority of women found their place in the animation industry through the halls of the Ink and Paint Building at Disney. These women formed an assembly line silently turning over thousands of hand-painted cels, forging a collective unknown in the annals of animation history.

The few women at Disney whose achievements were named are the exceptions to the rule of gendered segregation that defined the early days of animation.[3] A woman's place was characterized by her status as a subordinate worker, invariably identifiable by low wages and feminized, "unskilled," labor categorizations.[4] This tired narrative underpins the flippant

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[1] The Walt Disney Family Museum, "Common Misconceptions About Walt Disney."

[2] The term "cels" is short for "celluloid" and refers to transparent sheets used for hand-drawn animation.

[3] This dissertation will explore these women's stories, but for more information on who is commonly recorded in histories of animation, see: Carroll, "Drawing Upon History"; Holt, "The Forgotten Women"; McLane, "the Hidden Women"; Tupper, "History of Women in Animation."

[4] Phillips and Taylor, "Sex and Skill: Notes toward a Feminist Economics."

references to their contributions that are sprinkled across animation anthologies and that frame special issues of *Variety, Vanity Fair*, or *Times* that call out the "forgotten women who helped shape the look of Disney animation."[5] But these women are only "forgotten" because we don't talk about them. And like much of history, the rules that governed women's labor were more complex than they seemed. Inking was not simply a "blind alley" career path, as former animator Shamus Culhane once claimed,[6] nor was it the only role that women filled during the development of the industry. Women's advancement in animation, especially at Disney, ran against a teleological view of history where progress was linear and always moved forward.

This dissertation demonstrates how these discourses operated in the industrialization of animation in the U.S. by examining the aesthetic and technological contributions of (white) women at Disney during the Golden Age of Animation. Through a media and cultural studies-based analysis, this project explores how cinema technology, labor practices, and social attitudes about women defined, and sometimes subverted, the shape of women's labor and careers in animation.

The Women Who Were Forgotten: Feminized Labor as (White) Woman's Work

Women in the burgeoning entertainment industry of the 1920s through the 1950s helped build powerful empires. They labored in their careers—as script girls, secretaries, inkers and painters, and in "service" positions all over studio lots.[7] Their labor launched the titans of the

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[5] Holt, "The Forgotten Women Who Helped Shape the Look of Disney Animation."

[6] Culhane, *Animation*: *From Script to Screen*, 19.

[7] For more information about women working in Hollywood during the Studio Era, see: Cooper, *Universal Women*; Francke, *Script Girls*; Smyth, *Nobody's Girl Friday*; The Walt Disney Family Museum, "Forgotten Disney Heroines: The Disney Secretaries."

entertainment industry that we know today: Universal Pictures, founded in 1912, is the oldest surviving film studio in the United States and the oldest member of the Hollywood "Big Five;" Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), founded in 1924, was recognized as one of Hollywood's most prestigious film studios reaching its peak in the 1930s and 1940s; and Warner Brothers Pictures, founded in 1923, revolutionized the film industry with its patented sound-on-disc system—the Vitaphone. And then there was Walt Disney Studios, also founded in 1923, credited with producing the first feature-length animated film in the United States in 1937—a film that passed through the hands of nearly three hundred women.[8] Now widely studied in film scholarship for their mark on the industry, and household names for their successes in entertainment, these studio empires required the labor of women to manage the details and organization that surrounds creative endeavors. As industry scholar Erin Hill aptly states: "If film historians consider the classical Hollywood era's mode of production a system, we ought to consider women this system's mainstay, because studios were built on their low-cost backs and scaled through their brush and keystrokes."[9] Animation, in particular, offered an exciting alternative to secretarial work and more creative opportunities for women seeking employment during this era.

But these opportunities were not available to every woman; the skills that made women ideal candidates for creative work in animation were steeped in racial bias that equated "femininity" with "white femininity." This version of womanhood was reinforced at every turn, from women's domesticated roles as homemakers, consumers, and mothers to their professional careers in service positions, offices, and light manufacturing. Even in the aspirational model of

[8] Kaufman, *The Fairest One of All*.

[9] Hill, *Never Done,* 5.

the New Woman, the cult of "new womanhood" was promiscuous, fashionable, and white.[10] In fact, the whiteness of women in early animation was so ubiquitous that it is largely unnamed by researchers;[11] the few animation scholars and historians whose work centers on women's labor often prioritize their experiences of sexism in the industry, overlooking the role that intersections of race and class played in defining women's career opportunities.[12] Similarly, histories that explore racial practices in animation, especially at Disney, focus on filmic representations of non-white cultures as opposed to industrial labor practices.[13] This disregard for the cultural privileges that whiteness affords exemplifies Richard Dyer's argument that whiteness is an invisible racial position, and establishes it as the default or normative identity.[14] For most women, regardless of race, fitting into the machine of animation production meant conforming to

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[10] Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics.*

[11] This is not to suggest that women of color were absent from animation history. In fact, there are several noteworthy examples of men and women whose artwork, influenced by their racial position, went on to define the signature style of Disney Golden Age films. (See: Larson, "How Gyo Fujikawa Drew Freedom in Children's Books"; Fox, "Tyrus Wong, 'Bambi' Artist Thwarted by Racial Bias"; Wong, Tyrus. John Canemaker Collection). But historical accounts of these influential artists often name their racial differences as a source of hardship in their life at the studio, and their impact was unorthodox. For more information, see: Broadnax, "The Never-Ending Erasure"; Hurler, "Brenda Banks"; Milligan, "'Immensely Private'"; Sammond, *Birth of an Industry*.

[12] Griffin et al., "Whistle While You Work?"; Holt, *Queens of* Animation; Johnson, *Ink and Paint*; Thompson, "Quick—Like a Bunny!"; Smithsonian Associates, "The Women Who Animated the Movies."

[13] The first black animator at Disney, Floyd Norman, is the exception to this rule. Because of Norman's status as the first (known) black artist at Disney, hired during the Civil Rights Movement no less, there is considerable documentation about his work experiences. (Examples of sources that explore race in Disney films: Bell et al, *From Mouse to* Mermaid; Cappiccie et al, "Using Critical Race Theory to Analyze How Disney Constructs Diversity.") My position in prioritizing the analysis of cultural institutions mirrors that of Shohat and Stam who argue that because historically marginalized groups are often unable to control or regulate their own representations, it is crucial to move past an understanding of the image itself to consider the institutions that disseminate mass media and the audiences that receive them. Shohat and Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*

[14] Dyer argues that whiteness is an invisible or unmarked racial position that is often unacknowledged and perceived as unraced. This fosters a system in which white people are viewed as individuals, while people of color are seen as part of a collective, representing the specificity and particularity of their race. Dyer, 2008.

performances of white womanhood that aligned with broader social and cultural values.[15] Naming the whiteness of women working in animation during this period shifts general conversations on animation's industrial development towards institutional constructions of gender and race that were reified by gendered divisions of labor and occupational hierarchies. By making whiteness strange, we can come to understand it as a notion that is profoundly ideological, and, like labor in Disney animation, is simultaneously represented and erased.[16]

At various points in American animation history, women inhabited a liminal space, their growth cyclical and often unrecognized by the people they worked with and the histories that failed to remember them. This project traces the liminal positions that women occupied in the first twenty years of animation's industrialization in the United States to locate the social, political, and technological influences that drove hundreds of women to the industry in the 1930s but did not lead to its first mainstream female director until 2013.[17] In doing so, this project also reflects my own liminality; throughout its development, I have negotiated and renegotiated my professional identity and occupied many roles—student, fan, researcher, news producer, and finally, animation coordinator. In the past ten years, the boundaries that defined my place in formal academic discourse and informal industrial practice were shifting and overlapping,

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[15] For more information on the history of conforming to dominant racial practices as a tool for social and career advancement in Hollywood, see: Rogin, *Black Face, White Noise*; Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*.

[16] By saying that labor in Disney animation is simultaneously represented and erased, I am gesturing toward the critical aspect of animation that makes it magical: the illusion of life. Mainstream animated films in the United States bring characters and stories to life through the painstaking labor of hundreds of workers—but this labor should not be evident on the screen in the finished product. The work of inkers and painters at Disney makes the art of animation visible, but their efforts in achieving this aim are ultimately invisible. Whiteness as a racial position mirrors this contradiction: it is visible through its status as the dominant ideology and "dominant race," and yet its ubiquity makes its distinctiveness easy to overlook.

[17] Jennifer Lee was the first woman in Hollywood animation to be credited as a co-director on Disney Animation's *Frozen* (2013).

revealing my own unconscious biases at key turns. After years spent researching Disney as an academic, [18] it was my work in animation production that gave me a new appreciation for the women who sought careers at Disney during the 1930s and 40s.

Seeking a career in the entertainment industry forced a redefinition of what I thought creative labor looked like, and how I wanted to engage with it in my own life. By challenging what is thought of as "creative work," I unpack the inherent contradictions that shaped how women were treated by both the animation industry and the men, like Walt Disney, that led it.[19] Identifying the ways in which labor is categorized into gendered and creative binaries[20] creates space for the very boundary-crossing that has come to characterize my professional trajectory and this research, highlighting how women's work in creative industries "travels across and within established (but perhaps, shifting, morphing, even disintegrating) boundaries: home and work; paid work and unpaid work; production and reproduction."[21] By accepting creativity as a "natural" or inherited artistic expression "geared to the production of original or distinctive commodities that are primarily aesthetic,"[22] we see that the work completed by inkers and painters *was* creative work. In some cases, the skills performed in that department would open new opportunities for women to expand into more prominent roles.

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[18] My debut into Disney scholarship took place in 2011-2013 when I enrolled in an undergraduate seminar on Disney and completed an honors thesis that analyzed anthropomorphic Disney films using Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity.

[19] Connor et al., "Gender and Creative Labour"; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, *Creative Labour*; Morgan and Nelligan, "Labile Labour."

[20] i.e. Feminine or Masculine; Creative or "Non-Creative."

[21] Conor et al., "Gender and Creative Labor," 14.

[22] Banks and Hesmondhalgh, "Looking for Work in Creative Industries Policy," 416.

Lillian Disney, for example, helped birth the iconic Mickey Mouse by inking and painting cels in Walt's garage.[23] Her sister Hazel Sewell would later be hired by Disney to oversee the Ink and Paint Department, becoming the first woman ever to lead a major division for any animation studio and the first woman credited as art director for her work on *Snow White* (1937).[24] Dorothy Ann Blank would also make her mark on *Snow White*, researching and writing different versions of the story treatment before creating a detailed map for the animators. Dorothy is cited as the first woman to receive credit for writing a Disney feature-length animated film, and her likeness would be immortalized in the character design for the Evil Queen.[25] Mary Weiser, an industrious supervisor in the Color Model Department studied chemistry so that she could develop better paint formulas for cel animation, making Disney the first and only animation studio of its time to develop its own paints.[26] Mildred Rossi became a lead animator in the Special Effects Department and created the color animation for *Fantasia* (1940). Often uncredited for being the first female animator, Rossi's best-known piece for Disney was the creature Chernabog from "The Night on Bald Mountain"; she would go on to become the first woman to design famous Hollywood monsters in live-action films.[27] The accomplishments of these women, and others like them, are contextualized and examined in further detail throughout this project.

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[23] Apgar, *A Mickey Mouse Reader*.

[24] Johnson, *Ink and Paint*, 56.

[25] Johnson, *Pencils, Pens, and Brushes*, 5-8.

[26] Johnson, *Ink and Paint*, 105.

[27] For more information on Mildred Rossi: Barco, "The Forgotten Woman"; Carroll, "Drawing Upon History"; Johnson, "The Shape of a Girl & Her Monsters."

Before the rise of women working in animation at Disney, the industry at large benefitted from the singular talents of Margaret (MJ) Winkler and Lotte Reiniger. Winkler began her career as a secretary to motion picture magnate Harry Warner before founding her own distribution company at age 26, becoming the most successful distributor of animated shorts from the late 1910s through the early 1920s. Her roster included Pat Sullivan's "Felix the Cat" and Walt Disney's "Alice Comedies" and "Oswald the Lucky Rabbit."[28] Winkler's business would be transferred to her husband Charles shortly after they married and she became pregnant with their first child.[29] Lotte Reiniger advanced animation from Germany, becoming the foremost pioneer of the silhouette style. She is best known for writing and directing *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* in 1926, which holds the title of the first animated feature ever released.[30] She is less known for her early development of the multiplane camera on this film, a tool later expanded and refined by Ub Iwerks in 1933.[31]

The multiplicity of women's labor—as entertainers, as activists, as mothers, and as wives—built the foundation of the entertainment industry in the 1920s and 1930s and sought reform in that same industry in the 1940s and 1950s. Centering women in the formation of media empires and the efforts to reform them presents a more nuanced and, I would argue, accurate historical view. Women played an active role in building and shaping the film industry, despite oppressive onscreen portrayals that often objectified and devalued them. The contributions of

[28] Canemaker, *Felix: The Twisted Tale of the World's Most Famous Cat.*

[29] For more information on MJ Winkler: Cook, "Margaret J. Winkler."

[30] For more information on Lotte Reiniger: Guerin and Mebold, "Lotte Reiniger."

[31] For more information on Reiniger's work on the multiplane camera: Sergeant, "Before Walt Disney, there was Lotte Reiniger."

their labor must be acknowledged, studied, and theorized to uncover gaps in historical understanding. Even if these explorations uncover "unpredictable, uncomfortable, or unsettling" evidence, we have an obligation to examine that evidence and reshape our histories.[32] By revisiting popular narratives that bring history to the foreground, this dissertation intervenes in the endemic of institutional gatekeeping in creative industries that obstructs academic rigor and historic progress.

Women in Animation: What We Think We Know

The catalog of academic scholarship on women's labor in the American animation industry is limited compared to the volumes that have analyzed Disney films, representations, histories, industrial practices, and even Walt Disney himself.[33] The scarcity of women's histories is more pronounced due to the abundance of texts that examine animation as a field of study, especially at Disney. The Disney Studios is a compelling topic because of its cultural impact and reach, with scholars like Henry Giroux pointing to the studio as a site where "children [learn to] understand who they are, what societies are about, and what it means to construct a world of play and fantasy in an adult environment."[34] Researchers have taken up critical analyses of the Disney

[32] Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 201.

[33] Academic research on Disney surged during the late 1990s-early 2000s. A cursory glance at the field yields significant results (See: Barrier, *The Animated Man*; Bell et al., *From Mouse to Mermaid*; Canemaker, *Before the Animation Begins, Paper Dreams, Walt Disney's Nine Old Men, The Art and Flair of Mary Blair, The Lost Notebook;* Cline, *A Lot to Remember*; Ghez, *The Hidden Art of Disney* (a series); Giroux, *the Mouse That Roared*; Pallant, *Demystifying Disney*; Peri, *Working with Walt*; Sammond, *Babes in Tomorrowland*; Smoodin, *Disney Discourse*; Susanin, *Walt Before Mickey*; Telotte, *The Mouse Machine*; Wasko, *Understanding Disney*; and Zornado, *Disney and the Dialectic of Desire*). Notably, the foremost non-profit advocacy group for promoting gender equity in animation, visual effects, and gamin— Women in Animation (WIA) — wasn't founded until 1993.

[34] *The Mouse that Roared*, 84.

studio's corporate business model,[35] films,[36] and worldwide influence on childhood[37]—indicated by its participation in "a $200 billion-a-year advertising industry, which sells not only its products but also values, images, and identities that are largely aimed at teaching young people to be consumers."[38] The studio as a site for cultural analysis becomes even more relevant in the contemporary digital age, where media corporations have fast access to their consumers and respond to their criticism in turn by writing more progressive and culturally diverse narratives into their films.[39]

Bound within the interdisciplinary web of Disney scholarship are competing ideas about the studio's namesake. Walt has been called "the ultimate problematic fave,"[40] gesturing to a polarization in how he is portrayed across academic, industry, and fan communities. He is simultaneously the inebriated antisemite hurling demands at his employees and the affable personification of the American Dream. Walt is an iconic figure with legendary status shrouded in misinformation—some of which was by design. The image of the benevolent patriarch was a cultivated one; his "Uncle Walt" persona entered the public sphere, appearing on television and in the press to help sell the company's brand. It eventually became a responsibility that he loathed.[41] But entertainment journalist Sarah Milner helps us understand that somewhere beneath

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[35] Smoodin, *Disney Discourse*; Wasko, *Understanding Disney*.

[36] Bell et al., *From Mouse to Mermaid*; Cheu, *Diversity in Disney*.

[37] Giroux, *The Mouse that Roared*; Sammond, *Babes in Tomorrowland*; Zornado, *Inventing the Child*.

[38] *The Mouse that Roared*, 3.

[39] See: *Moana* (2016); *Coco* (2017); *Encanto* (2021).

[40] Milner, "Walt Disney is the Ultimate Problematic Fave."

[41] Gabler writes: "[Disney] had created the studio; then the studio, with his complicity, created him, making him, he fully understood, as much a commodity as a man — the very sort of diffident, genial, plainspoken, unprepossessing, and childishly enthusiastic character who would have produced Walt Disney movies." Walt would say, "I'm not

the conspiracy theories about cryogenics, holograms, and antisemitism there is the truth: Walt Disney was a complex man who was capable of both great *and* terrible things, but he changed the course of history in the process.[42] Milner shows that popular discourse—especially from the studio—mythologizes the company namesake, airbrushing over his faults in the decades following his death and causing us to retreat farther from the real complexity of the human man that he was.[43]

My position on Walt Disney the man reflects Milner's, and this project derives from a breadth of research that accounts for the competing impressions of Walt that is circulated through interviews with artists, personal anecdotes, corporate communications, and pervasive rumors. I am interested in the intermingling of public and private discourses throughout this research and draw attention to the areas where these boundaries are blurred, including in records about Walt Disney himself. If anything, Disney discourses have shown us that the public perception of inimitable figures like Walt are historically contingent, revealing the socio-cultural and business priorities of the time. This information is invaluable in situating popular histories—especially those that attempt to carve new space for marginalized identities—and invites readers to celebrate the good, condemn the bad, and learn for the future.

The rise of production studies and "women in Hollywood" texts in the early 2000s continued to overlook this industry sector despite its cultural stamina and long-term association

Walt Disney anymore. Walt Disney is a thing. It's grown to become a whole different meaning than just one man." *Walt Disney Triumph of the American Imagination*, 287.

[42] "Walt Disney is the Ultimate Problematic Fave."

[43] Ibid

with children's entertainment (or, perhaps, because of it).[44] The lack of scholarly work on women in animation production reflects the ideological barriers that hindered their career growth in the 1930s, demonstrating how their underrepresentation in the industry translated into an underrepresentation in academic scholarship. Where women have often been relegated to the margins of film history, the women who worked at Disney have barely appeared in the footnotes.

Conducting research about an emerging field presents unique challenges;[45] gaps in early documentation combined with the institutional gatekeeping of Disney can limit access to archival materials and thereby control the "official" narratives that emerge. Early women's contributions were frequently underreported because they did "women's work," which was, by definition: "insignificant, tedious, low status, and noncreative."[46] Records of such achievements were reappropriated as studio successes or locked in private studio archives. Few scholars have been granted access to these materials, often resorting to a combination of private collections, formal analysis, and personal interviews.[47] As the next section will detail, these limitations directly inform my strategy for reading the sources widely available to scholars against the grain.

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[44] Animation's generic association with childhood frames it as a "domestic" field, linking it to soft studies or "women's issues" which may contribute to its underrepresentation in cinema studies. In other words, the scholarship in this field is limited by the very same sexism this project analyzes.

[45] While academic scholarship continues to overlook women's central role in American animation, popular history books have gained momentum since 2017. (See: Holt, *Queens of Animation*; Johnson, *Ink and Paint*; Zee, *Women of Walt Disney Imagineering*). Renowned animation historian Mindy Johnson recently discovered the earliest surviving hand-drawn animated film entirely directed and animated by a woman. The expansive collection of Bessie Mae Kelley, a female animator who worked at Bray Studios in 1917/18 debuted at the Academy of Motion Pictures Museum in 2022. Johnson, "Research."

[46] Hill, *Never Done*, 5.

[47] The Walt Disney Company's protection over their company legacy—and by extension, their original artwork and source material—is conspicuous. The language used to describe accessibility discourages inquiry ("Preserving our legacy is something we take very seriously"; "carefully safeguarded"; "most treasured items from Disney's fabled history." The Walt Disney Company, "Preserving the Legacy: The Walt Disney Archives.") However, there *is* published research that leverages original studio archival materials. The most authoritative example is Neal Gabler's official biography, *Walt Disney: Triumph of the American Imagination*. Gabler was reportedly the first writer to be given complete access to the Disney archives, and was able to do so outside of the confines of Disney Publishing

In Her Own Words: Materials and Methodologies

Using an interdisciplinary approach that combines cultural and production studies models with historical research and formal analysis, *Scratching the Celluloid Ceiling* examines the contributions of white women to the aesthetic and technological development of animation at Disney, asking that we reconsider what we think of as "creative" labor to find an inroad for foregrounding women in animation history. When women's labor is trapped in unrecorded or forgotten histories, it is easy to assume that women were inconsequential to (or absent from) major industrial developments. Because women's contributions to a film production were often deemed less important than their male colleagues, studio archives seldom kept the materials related to their work. In the rare circumstances when they did, accessing those materials posed additional challenges.

The Walt Disney Studios, in particular, is deeply protective over its corporate legacy and reputation. Accessing the archives is limited to studio personnel, and original primary sources outside of the Animation Research Library (ARL) can only be found in personal collections and anecdotes. These narratives live in the minds and hearts of the women who experienced this history—and in the memories of their loved ones. Their stories emerge in the oral histories, journals, and personal correspondence passed down through generations.

The last ten years have witnessed a proliferation of coffee table and popular press books that spotlight the careers and accomplishments of women in Disney animation. While the Disney

subsidiaries (although it is worth noting that while not owned by Disney, the parent company of Gabler's publisher, Knopf, is owned by Random House—who had an established partnership with the Disney company for years publishing children's books based on studio favorites). As I will discuss later in this chapter, other publications that emerged directly from studio archives are largely produced and distributed by Disney Publishing Worldwide and researched by employees that work in the Animation Research Library. (See: Canemaker, *Before the Animation Begins*, *Paper Dreams, The Art and Flair of Mary Blair*; Cline, *A Lot to Remember*; Johnson, *Ink and Paint*; Kothenschulte, *The Walt Disney Archives*; Thomas and Johnston, *The Illusion of Life*).

studio archives were beyond my reach during my work on this project, I have located women's stories in these unconventional places. By using a combination of fan-sourced archives[48] and popular history books,[49] I show that scholars can bypass institutional firewalls and retrieve primary source materials from communal spaces. While these tools inevitably take on the biases of their creator, researchers can read between the lines to understand how Disney animation workers operated in racialized and gendered systems of creative production. When taken in tandem with traditional academic publications and archival research, we can use these popular texts to recreate a more complete picture of the internal production cultures of protected institutions. Triangulating among the various forms of formal and informal discourse in this study reveals insights into internal production cultures that can help us contextualize the subjective realities of the people who worked within them.[50]

In doing this work, I acknowledge my own epistemological position as a white woman, a media scholar, and a production employee in the industry that I am researching. For most of this dissertation's writing, my position more closely resembled the women I was researching than my academic colleagues. In many ways, production management (my current professional role) is an evolution of feminized work in the animation industry; I am well-equipped to recognize the myriad of undocumented tasks and details that contribute to an animated film and possess a greater appreciation for the complexity of drawing a clear throughline between production and

[48] The Dix-Project is an excellent site that features a collection of primary texts, organized into a comprehensive database that mimics more traditional academic search engines. Jake Friedman's Babbittblog is another great tool for historical anecdotes and primary resources; research that was curated on babbittblog eventually coalesced in Friedman's book, *The Disney Revolt*.

[49] Johnson, *Ink and Paint*; Friedman, *The Disney Revolt*; Holt, *Queens of Animation.*

[50] To convey clarity regarding where I am ascertaining my sources, I will cite all primary texts acquired through a secondary publication as "found in" or by crediting the secondary text entirely, if paraphrasing. Any citations that directly cite archival documents, trade periodicals, and interviews have been located exclusively by me.

reception. While the technical skills associated with producing a dissertation have undoubtedly served me in my role as an animation coordinator, the truth is that I may not have had this career at all if it wasn't for this project. My tour of the Disney Animation building was the first time I ever considered going into film. That work was for "the creatives," and being creative did not come easily to me. This line of thinking revealed my own biases about what creativity had to look like in film production. Now, I understand that I employ creativity almost every day—to navigate difficult conversations, find innovative solutions to problems, and build systems for tracking information and creating efficient workflows.

Animation production is an ever-evolving industrial art form that responds to sociocultural and political shifts as well as technological advancements and changes in creative leadership.[51] Working within such a system is a collaboration between the individual and the cultural forces—industrial, economic, and social—that act upon them. As a result, my research builds upon the foundation laid by Erin Hill, who argues: "women's work must be viewed from the perspective of both the system—the structures that produced gendered understandings of labor—and the individual—the experiences of workers themselves and how they negotiated, resisted, and otherwise co-created their professional identities."[52] Such a framework for research marries the established practices of cultural and production studies scholars like John Caldwell, Miranda Banks, and Vicky Mayer[53] with the recent proliferation of commercial animation history books that have used personal anecdotes to bring new light to women's stories.

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[51] For examples of how animation studios have innovated and adapted to new technologies as a strategy for product differentiation, see: Langer, "The Disney-Fleischer Dilemma."

[52] Hill, *Never Done*, 10.

[53] Caldwell, Banks, and Mayer, *Production Studies*; Caldwell, Banks, and Mayer, *Production Culture*; Mayer, *Below the Line.*

Mindy Johnson made enormous waves with her seminal book *Ink and Paint: The Women of Walt Disney's Animation*, a nearly 400-page history of Disney's Ink and Paint Department pieced together through unfettered access to the ARL as well as information from private collections, artist interviews, and trade publications. Published by Disney Editions in 2017, Johnson's book is an invaluable resource for the research and analysis presented in this project—but like anything that has been granted unprecedented access to the Disney archives, it is subject to distortions. Johnson's history of ink and paint presents a sanitized picture of studio life, a "Disneyfied" version of the company's history.[54] While it shines a light on the unacknowledged contributions of the women who worked there, the book also overlooks the systematic ways that the studio reinforced racist, sexist, and classist power dynamics. Still, Johnson's work has propelled her status in industry trades, swiftly transforming her into the face of female empowerment for Disney historical research and winning acclaim from some of animation's most notable scholars and historians. As a result, this text should be examined for what it is: an impressive, extensively researched history of ink and paint brimming with newly discovered materials and images. I utilize Johnson's research to access these discoveries, reading *Ink and Paint* as a significant primary text that offers unparalleled access to the secrets of the archives, but one with an unreliable narrator.

Nathalia Holt published *Queens of Animation* shortly after Johnson, which shifts the focus from ink and paint by offering a creative interpretation of women's struggles to fit into nontraditional roles at the studio. Holt pieces together narratives from private collections and correspondence to paint a picture of the personal and working lives of the few women who breached the male-dominated Animation Building. Loosely presented from the perspective of the

[54] See: Oxford Reference, "Disneyfication."

women she is writing about, Holt's text reads like a piece of creative nonfiction attempting to interpret how these women experienced studio life during the 1930s-50s. Her book is an accessible entry point for people beginning to research—or even those with a casual interest in—the social, cultural, and political influences that shaped the environment of the Disney Studio during this period. The anecdotes that Holt presents are most useful when understood as evidence of how particular women perceived their position in the studio's occupational hierarchy, as well as the outside influences in their lives that guided the choices they made during their employment.

While "The Truth"[55] about how women affected animation's industrial development does not exist, there are ideologies that became true for me in this journey: When we fail to recognize the importance of personal narratives, we unwittingly perpetuate an information system that has consistently privileged white male voices and undermine the ways that marginalized people have had to write themselves into history. For all women working in industries where they have been historically marginalized, the past is also present.

Of the scholars who have published peer-reviewed research on women in Disney, Kirsten Thompson's essays on color most successfully integrate labor and technology in a way that connects the past with the present; I use elements of this work as a model for my own approach. Thompson's research examines the material histories of color animation and what they can teach us about gendered distributions of labor. In her essay "'Quick—Like a Bunny!' The Ink and Paint Machine, Female Labor and Color Production" Thompson focuses on the relationship

[55] Hill, *Never Done,* 5.

between color, labor, and gender in the Ink and Paint Department with an emphasis on the material representations of paints, pigments, inks, and other color tools in cel animation production.[56] She argues that Disney's use of color in films such as *Snow White* (1937) and *The Reluctant Dragon* (1941) exceeded its function of realism to foreground "color's materiality as magical, indeed transgressive," arguing that color becomes linked with older philosophical traditions in which it is "constructed as marginal, dangerous or trivial."[57] The emphasis on the materiality of paints and color spectacle is represented in both "Colourful material histories: The Disney paint formulae, the paint laboratory and the Ink and Paint Department" and "Animating Ephemeral Surfaces: Transparency, Translucency and Disney's World of Color" where Thompson draws connections between the material processes of cel and digital animation. In the former, Thompson analyzes the physical instruments of the color development process (such as mills, formula cards, and letdowns),[58] arguing that the material production of color was central to Disney's on-screen representational practices and indicative of distinct eras of Disney animation aesthetics. In "Animating Ephemeral Surfaces," she analyzes the tensions between color's materiality and transparency in Disneyland light shows. These tensions signal a particular form of "corporeal transformation in which movement, light and colour enlivens individual bodies and screen spaces." Thompson argues that despite their procedural differences, the commonalities in

[56] Thompson, "Quick—Like a Bunny!"

[57] Ibid

[58] Mustard mills were often utilized as tools for grinding paint pigments, while formula cards refer to the documentation for color formulas maintained by ink and paint artists. Letdowns are "the adjustments in colour that compensated for the loss of light when photographing layers of cels." In other words, rules for shade variation to produce the best color consistency when accounting for multiple layers of celluloid in an image (Thompson, "Colourful material histories," 48).

the treatment of color, light, and detail inextricably link the classic cel and contemporary digital processes.

Thompson's transhistorical and transmaterial approach to color relates the labor of women at Disney in the 1930s with the labor of women in the animation industry today through common technologies. The next chapter of this dissertation explores the relationship between color, cosmetics, and the feminization of inking and painting by leveraging Thompson's significant research on the material and emotional properties of color. Her attention to the emotional current that drives color creation informs my examination of the department as a pseudo-domestic space that privileged characteristics of white femininity associated with New Woman iconography. Thompson's peripheral analysis of the women who worked closely with color pigments paints a more comprehensive image of women's daily tasks in the Ink and Paint Department. Thompson's work highlights the original intent of my project: to understand the contemporary moment in animation. This dissertation ultimately evolved as a historical one for many reasons, but a major reason was that the present moment directly connects/points to the past.

Scope: Uncovering the Pentimenti of Disney's Innovative Women

Women working in the industry cite animation's historical legacy as a key reason for the lack of equitable representation in creative roles.[59] While animation is not unique in its

[59] Data from the 2019 report from the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative showed that of the three groups of participants surveyed (Early Career Women, Decision-Makers, and Animation Guild Members) all three groups cited the historical legacy of the industry as a reason for exclusion. Among the three groups, an average of 39% saw a masculine culture exists in animation directors, while 29% identified a masculine culture in general employment. Smith et al. "Increasing Inclusion in Animation." See also: Maddaus, "Judge Allows 9,000 Women to Sue Disney for Pay Disparity."

discrimination against women, it has fostered an environment where men—particularly white men—are entrenched in all areas of the industry. Although the animation industry has witnessed major inroads in appointing women to positions of power, such gains continue to favor whiteness. According to a 2019 report from the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, women of color constitute only five percent of animation's leading positions compared to white women, who occupy roughly half of the executive roles and fully half of the most powerful positions in film animation companies and studios.[60] One of the unique impediments facing women of color that participants named was the "negative consequences that emerge from being a 'token,' including feelings of isolation."[61] Further still, while white women dominated production careers, the last twelve years of animated filmmaking saw only 3% of women working as directors and 7% heading creative departments such as story, animation, and art.[62] A "male-dominated and masculine culture" was cited as a barrier to inclusion, along with the perception that "the industry view of women is less valuable, and that women are perceived to be less interested in the field."[63] Despite the positive trends that the quantitative data reveals, the lived experiences of women working in the industry today gesture toward many of the same challenges women faced during its inception.

The cultural attitudes that shaped women's labor at Disney during the 1930s and 40s are the pentimenti[64] informing the obstacles that women in the industry face today. Because of this,

[60] Smith et al. "Increasing Inclusion in Animation." (For more information about the initiative: USC Annenberg, "Annenberg Inclusion Initiative").

[61] Ibid

[62] Lauzen, "Employment of Behind-the-Scenes Women on Top Grossing U.S. Films in 2022."

[63] Smith et al. "Increasing Inclusion in Animation."

[64] Elizabeth Bell uses the analogy of pentimento—the presence of an earlier trace or form beneath layers of paint on a canvas—to structure her analysis of Disney's animated women in her article "Somatexts at the Disney Shop." Bell

the scope of this project is transhistorical in nature: an examination of a current issue through a historical lens. The analysis put forth does not account for every era of animation history in the United States; it does not even account for every era of animation development at the Disney Studio. The historical breadth of my research is limited to the Golden Age of Animation at Disney, as the era that experienced the most aesthetic and technological advancements under the leadership of Walt Disney himself. To positively diversify in leadership roles, we must revisit the stories told about American animation's industrial development. By reframing animation's history as racist and sexist systems that limited access to the industry, we can evaluate the women who succeeded within these systems (or transcended them) and invite a new future.

The Golden Age of Animation has emerged as one of the most prolific periods for women at Disney in animation history when analyzed for the quantity of women employees and their distribution throughout the studio pipeline.[65] Walt's position as the industrious leader during this timeframe is critical to understanding the studio's culture and, by extension, the professional options available to women. Although film productions necessitate the collaboration of hundreds, if not thousands, of workers, some Disney historians have shown that the early history of Disney Animation Studios is largely the history of Walt Disney himself.[66] Numerous

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examines the semiotic layering of women's bodies in Disney animation, unpacking the "somatic, cinematic, and cultural codes" that accumulate to shape the audience's perception of womanhood. (Bell, *From Mouse to* Mermaid, 108-109). The metaphor of the pentimento feels appropriate in my own analysis that unpacks these accumulated layers in order to understand how women's contributions during the industrialization of animation inform their presence in the industry today.

[65] Holt, "The Forgotten Women"; Zohn, "The Women Animators and Inkers Behind Disney's Golden Age."

[66] This sentiment is most explicitly represented in Neal Gabler's biography *Walt Disney: Triumph of the American Imagination*. Gabler frequently draws parallels between Walt's childhood experiences, parental upbringing, and desire for community in his discussions of how Walt structured production operations at the studio. Other scholars and historians frequently reference the impact of key life events on Walt's managerial style and artistic vision, such as the death of his mother and his brief experience living in Marceline Missouri. See: Bell et al. *From Mouse to Mermaid*; Giroux, *The Mouse that Roared*; Zornado, *Disney and the Dialectic of Desire*.

biographers suggest that the studio's growth under Walt's leadership was enmeshed in his personal journey to satisfy a longing for the familial connection that his childhood lacked and which informed his paternalistic managerial style. For example, Disney historian Neal Gabler shows that "the ease and informality at the Disney studio had never been accidental or incidental. It was essential to Walt Disney," arguing that, "In the very organization of the studio and in the means of production, he was creating an environment, the establishment of which was in its way every bit as important a mission for him as the cartoon feature itself."[67] As this project will uncover, Walt's own complex relationships with the women in his life helped fashion the opportunities for women working at the studio, and subsequently inform the roles that they would occupy in animation for decades to come. Although most of these relationships were not fixed, continuously shifting in response to social and economic conditions within the studio and society, they reflect the complex and sometimes personal factors that affect decision-making at the highest levels. Some women *would* enjoy upward mobility at the studio under Walt's leadership, at least until his death, the aftershock of which would set women's progress in animation back decades.[68]

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[67] Gabler, *Walt Disney: Triumph of the American Imagination,* 240.

[68] Mary Blair is the most prominent and tragic example of this. Blair enjoyed professional opportunities and artistic freedoms that were not available to most men working for Disney at the time—let alone most women. Her play with color and patterns inspired the artwork for some of Disney's most successful Silver Age films (1950-1967) and would lead Blair to other creative projects for Disneyland. However, her success was in many ways tied to Walt, so much so that after he passed away in December 1966, she was never given another assignment for the studio. Canemaker, "The Art and Flair," 99. Also see: Holt, *Queens of Animation*.

Organization

This dissertation is loosely structured in two parts: the first part (chapters one and two) defines the Disney Studio of the 1930s as a gendered and racialized space, establishing the historical context and organizational logic of my research. The second part (chapters three and four) examines the wide-reaching effects of collapsed boundaries between public and private life at the onset of WWII and the influence that this obfuscation had on studio culture at Disney. I show that gendered anxieties were amplified during this period of industrial growth, where the restructuring of studio labor corresponded to the restructuring of physical space.

Chapter Two: Coloring Outside the Lines examines the cultural influences that developed associations between women and "unskilled" labor, specifically white, middle-class, and college-educated women who filled white-collar roles in clerical occupations. This version of white womanhood was first introduced through New Woman iconography at the turn of the century and is overrepresented in American images of womanhood writ large. Characteristics that were associated with the New Woman linked beauty, cleanliness, and sexuality to ideological constructions of "women's skills." These associations facilitated women's access into the industry through the Ink and Paint Department, which provided an avenue for creative advancement once they got there. This chapter demonstrates that women made innovative and creative contributions to the aesthetic development and sophistication of color animation by leveraging their "domestic talents."[69]

Chapter Three: Women on the (Assembly) Line explores the effects of *Snow White's* monumental success on animated filmmaking and the subsequent redefinition of industrial

[69] McDowell, "Life Without Father and Ford," 404.

processes. Disney implemented Fordist methods to accommodate larger scales of feature production and minimize costs. This assembly-line model of animation was physically realized in the layout of the new Burbank Studio and segregated employees along professional and gendered lines, limiting women's access to "creative" spaces. Analyzing private and public representations of space through studio maps and promotional tours,[70] Chapter three argues that these spaces were gendered, impacted production efficiency, and influenced social relationships between male and female employees. The tensions that emerged from this organizational system ultimately led a majority of studio employees, regardless of gender, to strike for more equitable pay and labor recognition, successfully negotiating a contract that continued to position women beneath men in the studio hierarchy.

Chapter Four: Women on the (Picket) Line shows that the increasing presence of women in the workforce against the backdrop of World War II compromised the well-established boundaries that limited women's animation labor. At Disney, women pushed past physical and ideological constraints to secure creative careers in male-dominated departments as story artists, modelers, in-betweeners, and even, animators. Their presence in these spaces stirred insecurities in male employees around job stability and gender identity that both influenced how they treated their female colleagues and, I argue, formed the underbelly of the animation strike. Chapter four looks at how women at Disney resisted the exploitation of their labor and the consequences they faced when their careers brought them into traditionally male-dominated spaces and away from the feminine domain of ink and paint.

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[70] The studio maps analyzed in this chapter have been acquired through a combination of popular historical texts (Cline, *A Lot to Remember*; Johnson, *Ink and Paint*), fan sourced archives (Ballard, "Disney Brothers Studio," and "The Walt Disney Studios [Burbank]"), and entertainment magazines (Beck, "The Ropes at Disney").

Finally, this dissertation's epilogue, Tale as Old as Time, provides a snapshot of "a woman's place" at the Disney Animation Studio during its centennial year. The story of women's labor and the feminization of that labor in the Hollywood studio system remains relevant today. This perceived feminization of labor has limited gender integration in media industries and has even influenced the ways that women workers discuss their labor or align themselves with various areas of production. While opportunities for (predominantly white) women have expanded and inroads towards gender equality have been made,[71] women of color still represent a margin of animation employees and have become especially vulnerable due to the proliferation of labor outsourcing. This epilogue draws together the cultural threads of gender, labor, and technology to unpack recent conflicts over labor exploitation and sexism in the industry.

[71] Women in Animation is a professional industry organization founded in 1993 to support female-identifying and non-binary animation workers. One of their central missions is "50/50 by 2025" where they advocate for equal representation for women in creative roles. See: Women in Animation, "50/50 by 2025."

2
Coloring Outside the Lines

> The fact that women like cute things is a lesson I also learned in another phase of my education about the gentle sex—the studio. Women, for example, like Donald Duck for reasons quite opposite to the interior logic of us poor males. Men like the Duck because he never lacks a snappy comeback and has more spunk than a Southern Association umpire. To the women, Donald is cute. That's supposed to explain everything and generally does—to women.
>
> *—Walt Disney, "What I Know About Girls," Parents Magazine 1949*

In a feature written for *Parents Magazine* in January 1949, Walt stated that what he knew about "girls," he learned from raising daughters. Riding on the passenger side of his daughters' sexual maturity,[72] Walt observed with an apparent detached amusement that the feminine spirit was far from gentle and restrained, proclaiming: "I never knew females could be so aggressive!"[73] His eldest daughter, Diane, corroborated this sentiment in an article written for *The Saturday Post* in 1956, where she recalled the moment that she realized what her father did for a living and promptly asked for his autograph. She said Walt often replayed that scene with glee, arguing that he "had fought for recognition at home…When [he] finally got it—even if it was from a six-year-old—it was a Triumph."[74] After all, he attested, "a man has to put up a fight when he's surrounded by females."[75]

Diane claimed that Walt had gone into his "surrounded by females" routine many times, often liking to "pretend that he's victimized at home because he's the only male in residence." But this singularity that Walt experienced was not unique to his domestic life; the halls of the Ink

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[72] In this article, Walt credits "school bus education"—that is, the information that parents learn while driving their children to and from school—with providing him "an education in the healthiest and most important natural interest [he] can expect a daughter to have—the unfolding of her interest in a life mate."

[73] Walt Disney, "What I Know About Girls."

[74] Diane Disney Miller, "My Dad, Walt Disney," 25-27.

[75] Walt Disney, "What I Know About Girls."

and Paint Building at the Disney Studio were so crowded with women that the male animators often called it "the nunnery."[76]

In this example, Walt uses his relationship with his daughters to frame his knowledge about women, establishing a dynamic through which he primarily relates to women through a domestic, or paternalistic lens. His studio becomes a space where professional boundaries are crossed, overlapping personal relationships, skills, and environments. Scholars and studio employees have repeatedly commented on the fraternal atmosphere of pre-strike era Disney, with one reporter calling the Hyperion Studio: "Walt's big happy family."[77] Some likened it to paternalism, citing Walt's direct involvement in his employees' personal affairs, while others attributed it to Walt's longing for a community that would allay his loneliness.[78] But even the language used to describe these relationships as "fraternal" or "paternal" demonstrates that they were inherently gendered. To the men at the studio, he was "Uncle Walt"; but to the women, Walt was a pseudo-paternal figure, resulting in a power dynamic that saw women as forces to be regulated and contained.

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[76] Multiple scholars have confirmed this association, though the environment of the Disney Studio during the 1930s and 40s more closely resembled a college campus than it did a convent. (See: Gabler, *Walt Disney: Triumph of the American Imagination*; Johnson, *Ink and Paint*; Zohn, "Coloring the Kingdom."; Sito, *Drawing the Line*).

[77] Gabler, *Walt Disney: Triumph of the American Imagination*, 240.

[78] Walt tried to discourage fraternization between the men and women at his studio. Gabler reports that "an informal policy forbad mingling between male and female employees," though, according to animator Jack Kinney, animators would sign into nearby hotels with ink and paint artists under the pseudonym "Ben Sharpsteen," aka their supervisor and antagonist (240). They called this "dipping their pen in the company ink." (Friedman, *The Disney Revolt*, 48). Erin Hill also addresses Walt's disapproval of heterosociality, arguing that the move to the Burbank Studio gave Walt the opportunity to discourage male/female relationships (*Never* Done, 81). Walt reportedly disapproved of a relationship that developed between Marjorie Belcher (the young dancer who modeled for the animators during the production of *Snow White*) and Art Babbitt (a high-ranking animator who had established a reputation as a "playboy"). Walt was protective of Belcher and insisted that she called him "Uncle Walt" (Friedman, "Marge Champion, Disney and Art Babbitt").

From his primary school years and his service in the American Red Cross during World War I to his pilot entry into the animation industry, strong women have been at the heart of Walt Disney's story.[79] Disney's life has been colorfully illustrated with the brushstrokes of women who have built his professional empire and his family, painting a picture of womanhood whose labor transcends the boundaries of work and home. But Walt's paternalism is exemplified through the ways that he describes his interactions with women, attributing his knowledge of "the gentle sex" to "a close family life together," and crediting his daughters and his wife with providing an education in "a feminine world"—aka, his domestic world. A seemingly simple comment, this is just one example of a larger trend of Walt blurring the line between professional and domestic spaces at the studio during the 1930s.

Through an analysis of original interviews, archival materials, and existing recorded narratives, this chapter situates women's labor at Disney during the 1930s within the broader framework of Hollywood's industrial logic. I show that the catalyst for women's advancement in the animation industry was their early involvement in developing and refining color technologies. Women had to negotiate the sociocultural and economic forces that defined and restricted their industry mobility. As a result, my analysis considers the contributions of individual working women alongside the systematic organization of animation labor. In this chapter, I ask: Did the animation industry reproduce or subvert broader cultural ideologies around gender and race through their production practices? How did women leverage their so-

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[79] The Walt Disney Family Museum in San Francisco features women who had a profound influence on Walt's childhood and early career, such as: Aunt Margaret (who supplied Walt with drawing pads and coloring utensils), Daisy A. Beck (Walt's primary school teacher who "instilled a permanent sense of wanting-to-do rather than having-to-do"), Harriet Alice Howell (a canteen worker that Walt befriended while volunteering at the Red Cross during World War I), and Margaret Winkler (Disney's first film distributor). Information about these women can also be found in the chapter titled: "The Women of Walt's World" in Mindy Johnson's *Ink and Paint*.

called feminized skills to make substantial and lasting contributions to the aesthetic and technological development of the animation industry?

This chapter's first objective is to show how the Disney Studio of the 1930s was a gendered and racialized space. In doing so, I draw on the important work of media historian Erin Hill to show that "women's work"[80] was an ideological classification imposed on certain skills by virtue of the sex and power of the workers who performed them.[81] The feminized labor that constituted women's work developed out of domestic responsibilities, emphasizing a woman's perceived natural ability to complete detail-oriented, systematic, and repetitive tasks; at the same time, these tasks were designed so they could be tackled by *any woman*, so if or when a woman left her professional role to start a family, she could easily be replaced. Here, I use the work of Richard Dyer and David Roediger to show the centrality of whiteness in shaping studio culture and the New Woman.

Applying this framework to the gendered distribution of labor at Disney, I show that the Ink and Paint Department enabled women to access the animation industry by performing a particular kind of work—*white women's work.* However, the studio's partnership with Technicolor in 1932 and the subsequent production of *Snow White* (1937) enabled women opportunities to innovate new systems and technologies for color animation. This chapter concludes with a case study on the career of Hazel Sewell—the first woman to head a major Animation Department in the United States—to demonstrate how intersections of race, womanhood, labor, and literal color facilitated women's advancement.

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[80] Hill, *Never Done*, 5.

[81] Phillips and Taylor, "Sex and Skill: Notes toward a Feminist Economics."

The intersection of gender, race, and class is critical to understanding women's experiences, and any examination of gender conditions must recognize the complex interplay between these identities. While Hollywood studios employed white women, immigrants, and people of color across the industry, there is limited information about the lower-level workers who supported the seamless functioning of studio operations, including janitorial and service staff. The Disney Studio's relationship to its own racial history is fraught; its racial practices are inconsistent, simultaneously upholding systems of oppression and promoting cultural inclusivity. As a result, this research examines the impact of racial identity on women's access to the animation industry and defining their subsequent roles. My work traces the lines that connect gender with race and class to understand how labor opportunities for women in 1930s Hollywood were conceptualized and re-conceptualized with each new wave of socio-cultural and technological progress. But it is important to note that when I am referring to "women" at Disney during this period, I am almost exclusively talking about "white women," or, women who conformed to culturally sanctioned standards of white femininity.

This chapter focuses on the "pretty girls"[82] at Disney who were hired to trace and color to examine the feminization of inking and painting in the early U.S. animation industry. Women's longstanding association with clerical work, plus the gendered expectations of beauty and domesticity, rendered them ideal candidates for the burgeoning Ink and Paint Department. I argue that women's labor in the early 20th century was not just about *work* but about *housework*;

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[82] Women at the studio were often described in relation to their looks. Mindy Johnson has claimed that prior to research for *Ink and Paint*, "There was this myth of pretty girls tracing color and that was all anybody knew about it." (Schmidt, "'Ink & Paint' is a Celebration…") In an interview with Vanity Fair, animator Volus Jones confirmed: "We used to fraternize out on the little lawn in front of the studio, and look at the pretty girls" (Zohn, "Coloring the Kingdom").

I name the home because it was the location where women sharpened their "natural talents" and where their economic value was defined.[83] When Walt Disney sought to produce the first feature-length animated film in the United States, women were hired en masse to provide the studio with a surplus of cheap labor at a time when production was ramping up, enabling Disney to finish the project on a reasonable timeline at a semi-reasonable cost. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) would recast the landscape of the American animation industry and shift the gender dynamic of its workforce, creating small ripples that would become waves in the years to come.

The women who worked in ink and paint at Disney were keystone contributors to the medium's development, many of whom could pursue this career because of their conformity to standards of white femininity. While I focus on their history, it is not my goal to suggest that only white women are central to the story of animation's labor development.[84] By writing about the inkers and painters at Disney during the 1930s, I follow in the steps of scholar Dana Frank by "crudely and erroneously begging the question of who is 'white' by imposing current definitions backward onto immigrant Europeans, who would not in many instances be considered or consider themselves 'white' at the time."[85] Instead, I argue that the women in ink and paint at Disney were the backbone of animation's technological development during an era of rapid change, and their conformity to gendered social expectations allowed some enterprising women

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[83] Phillips and Taylor, "Sex and Skill: Notes toward a Feminist Economics."

[84] Brenda Banks was one of the first Black women to become a professional animator in the United States. She is best known for her (largely uncredited) contributions to Ralph Bakshi's indie features, as well as popular television icons like *Looney Toons, The Simpsons*, and *King of the Hill* (See: Hurler, "Brenda Banks."; Milligan, "Pioneering, 'Immensely Private' Animator Brenda Banks"). Gyo Fujikawa was a prolific Japanese American illustrator and children's book author who worked for Disney as a promotional artist before moving to New York in 1941 (Larson, "How Gyo Fujikawa Drew Freedom…").

[85] Frank, "White Working-Class Women and the Race Question," 82.

to advance through the ranks, leaving a window open for others to follow. Naming their whiteness enables us to explore the ways in which white privilege became institutionalized in animation and the role that white working-class women had in sustaining it.

Reimagining Creative Labor

Through this project, I ask that we reconsider what constitutes "creative" labor. By definition, creativity implores the production of something new: producers, directors, writers, and animators are just a few of the industry roles that fall into the easy categorization of creative work.[86] But women labored across studio lots in administrative positions or light manufacturing, completing the necessary, albeit repetitive tasks, required to successfully produce a motion picture. They engaged creatively with these tasks and one another to maximize their efficiency and solve pervasive problems. In her book *Never Done: A History of Women's Work in Media Production,* industry scholar and historian Erin Hill argues that the accomplishments of Hollywood's leading male creators were made possible through the routine administrative tasks completed by the network of women who worked beside them. Hill identifies the history of women's work as one that is more often overlooked than truly absent, arguing that recognizing women's labor as an essential structural element to the success of the film industry's early development can shed light on the continued obstacles toward equity that women face today. Hill also shows that women's low status in studio hierarchies contributed to their absence from film histories. In other words, women's forced absence from executive and creative roles codified their invisibility. The immaterial labor (developing new organizational systems, staving off co-

[86] These labor categorizations also fall within the criteria of "above the line" work, as opposed to the so-called non-creative labor of "below the line" workers. Mayer et al., *Production Studies*.

worker's sexual advances, and managing the home) taken in tandem with the material labor (sewing, stenography, or painting cels by hand) forms the nucleus of women's creative work in mainstream filmmaking at this time.

While many historical accounts of the film industry tend to overlook or marginalize the role of animation, Hill strives to acknowledge and connect the working conditions of women across all sectors of Hollywood, including those who "merely" colored in penned lines. Hill makes several references to Disney's famous "ink and paint girls," gesturing towards the ways in which animation's use of feminized labor is incongruent with her analysis of Hollywood's larger structure. According to Hill, the working conditions of Disney's all-female Ink and Paint Department during the 1930s more closely link it to "light manufacturing": the women who worked in the costume departments as seamstresses or embroiderers, in editorial departments as cutters, and in photography departments as lab workers. In what Hill calls a "curious reversal of the correlation of women with paper planning and men with physical production," Disney's "girls" were integral players in the material creation of animated films.[87] Women were hired to defray the cost of creating the first feature-length animation in the US "by carrying out the *actual* production, applying the paint that would show up onscreen to animation cels that had only been penciled in or planned by [male] animators."[88] Hill's analysis recognizes the creativity and specialized skill that inking and painting necessitated. This serves as an important foundation for establishing the Ink and Paint Department as a creative space and demonstrating how some women used their creativity to define the standards for color cel animation in Hollywood.

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[87] Hill, *Never Done,* 80.

[88] Ibid

However, in animation discourses, the labor of ink and paint artists was traditionally viewed as mechanical and almost administrative, aligning their work and social status, with the thousands of women in clerical fields.

Women in the United States were introduced to administrative tasks, or clerical work, as early as the nineteenth century when they were called upon to mitigate labor shortages during the Civil War. While they comprised less than three percent of the workforce in 1870, by 1920 white women constituted nearly fifty percent of the clerical industry, a number that would rise to eighty-eight percent of secretarial roles by 1928.[89] Hill shows that women's longstanding association with clerical work contributed to the feminization of administrative roles in the developing studio system, demonstrating that "women could be found in nearly every department of every studio, minding the details that might otherwise get in the way of more important, prestigious, or creative work (a.k.a. men's work)."[90] From secretaries to script girls, costume designers, librarians, and research personnel, women were at the helm of organizational tasks that required a surplus of labor at an affordable cost. If the classical era of Hollywood is praised as the quintessential period of industrial development, then Hill argues that women were the cornerstone of that system, bearing the weight of their physical and emotional labor on their "low-cost backs."[91]

Walt Disney's own relationships with the women in his life were contradictory and complex. In the same article in *Parents* magazine from 1949, where Walt explained that "To the women, Donald is cute," he says raising his daughters "as individuals and encouraging them to

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[89] Johnson, *Ink and Paint,* 12.

[90] Hill, *Never Done*, 5.

[91] Ibid

think for themselves was a far more satisfactory way of bringing them up than by trying to regulate every step of their conduct with an elaborate set of rules." This contradiction exposes Walt's capacity to see women as unique individuals who are nevertheless bound to the prevailing social codes of their sex—codes that fiercely regulated what kind of women could move freely through the world.

As women forged their own place in the American animation industry, many used their individual talents to make indispensable contributions to the art form. Their history has only recently been shared by historians such as Mindy Johnson and Nathalia Holt, whose contemporary and groundbreaking publications have resurrected these stories, bound in volumes that serve as excellent coffee table pieces or on collector's shelves but seldom cited in academic publications. Although women are the protagonists of their research, neither Holt nor Johnson account for race or class. Where a gendered analysis of animation's development was advanced, race dropped out. Instead, feminist animation scholarship has curated a history of white women's stories, presenting a supposedly universal record from a female lens without acknowledging those who were missing from the room.

Drawn by Men: The New (White) Womanhood

We cannot talk about women's labor when we really mean *white* women's labor. Even in a predominantly white studio like Disney, race is never absent; to ignore the prevalence of whiteness is "to redouble its hegemony by naturalizing it" and to risk minimizing the violence that is enacted when we exclude marginalized communities from the room.[92] Whiteness as a

[92] Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness,* 3-6.

cultural construct has long been synonymous with "ordinariness," increasing its power by establishing it as the default subject position. Writing off racial homogeneity as a symptom of the period, or not acknowledging it at all, without being critical of the political underpinnings of the choices that led to it only fortifies its centrality. Rendering whiteness invisible allows for its ubiquity and its reproducibility. But by making whiteness strange, we can attempt to dislodge its centrality and strip it of its authority in dominant discourses and spaces.[93] Dyer and Roediger problematize whiteness by standing against it as the dominant ideology and reasserting its racial distinctiveness.[94] We can participate in this mission by considering how our growing U.S.-based cultural ideas around professionalism, cleanliness, and beauty during the 1930s reinforced standards that supported white sovereignty or by looking at the ways in which racial stereotypes secured discriminatory practices. Occupational segregation ensured that most women of color could not get white-collar jobs in sales or clerical work, except in communities of color.[95] Whether or not a woman entered the labor force and where she was able to find work was often racially predetermined.[96]

"The New Woman" came to prominence during the 1890s as a moniker for describing "middle to upper-middle-class women who were engaged in educational, political, and occupational pursuits outside the home."[97] The turn of the twentieth century saw dramatic shifts in feminine ideals as women challenged the limitations imposed on them by patriarchal social

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[93] Dyer, *White,* 10.

[94] Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness,* xv.

[95] Frank, "White Working-Class Women and the Race Question," 89.

[96] Frank, "White Working-Class Women and the Race Question," 88.

[97] Sharot, "The 'New Woman,' star personas, and cross-class romance films in 1920s," 74.

norms and demanded new freedoms. This emerging form of womanhood constituted a new identity for white women trying to create a space for themselves in public life that would be widely debated in print media and circulated on film. A First Wave feminist icon for her aspirations of independence, the New Woman was nevertheless restricted by her race and class identity. Whether she took the form of Charles Dana Gibson's infamous "Gibson Girl"[98] or John Held Jr's iconic "flapper,"[99] two things were certain: she was white and drawn by men.

The American New Woman is key to understanding how race, gender, and class coalesced to create an idealized womanhood that invited some women into public occupations while excluding others. Women in the early twentieth century sought meaningful work and economic independence, but for even white women, or ink and paint girls at Disney, this work was temporary. While there was an uptick of women in the workforce during World War I and II, historians have indicated that the wars did not result in permanent increases in female labor;[100] women's work continued to be seen as temporary work. Although women were able to leave their family homes earlier to pursue education and a career in the appropriate sector, most were expected to eventually abandon their careers to raise a family. In the short term, this assumption curtailed women's opportunities for economic advancement and hindered their potential growth in the workforce; in the long term, it contributed to exploitative double standards that prevented women from obtaining careers and wages that would allow them to forgo marriage altogether.[101]

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[98] "…tall, distant, elegant, and white, with a pert nose, voluminous upswept hair, corseted waist, and large bust" from Patterson, *The American New Woman,* 3.

[99] "…gangly, pliable female figure who could dance the Charleston, pull the cork on a bottle of liquor during Prohibition. Or crack up a car with equal nonchalance" from Patterson*, The American New Woman,* 4.

[100] Freedman, "The New Woman: Changing Views of Women in the 1920s," 388.

[101] Ibid, see also: Sharot, "The 'New Woman', star personas, and cross-class romance films in 1920s America," 75.

On the contrary, the low pay, in tandem with the rampant and unchecked culture of sexual harassment for wage-earning women, could be seen as logical grounds for returning to the more traditional practices of motherhood.[102]

New Woman-driven marketing and consumption provided an opportunity for women from all walks of life to appropriate a different identity, and purchasing these goods demonstrated their commitment to the demands of bourgeois culture.[103] This also meant sanctioning racist advertisements that furthered colonialism. As soap became an increasingly gendered product, associations were made between "cleanliness" and "whiteness." Companies traded in crude racial stereotypes to advertise soaps and toiletries, suggesting that they were necessary contributions towards the "civilizing" of colonized people by "whiten[ing] the skin of people of color."[104] Strong associations were fostered between cleanliness, socio-economic status, and whiteness. Where genuine upward mobility could not be achieved, it could at least be performed by purchasing the right products.

Advertising trends shifted away from showcasing a product's merits and instead focused on appealing to the anxieties and desires of the female consumer, which demonstrated a growing concern with their looks.[105] "Hair-free underarms," "The *only* secret of a beautiful complexion," and "Rouge you can't detect"[106] are just a few of the taglines that gesture towards the social expectation that women should be preoccupied with every detail of their outward appearance.

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[102] See: Grand, "The New Aspect of the Woman Question"; Maloni, "Dissonance Between Norms."

[103] Patterson, *The American New Woman*, 19.

[104] Jones, *Beauty Imagined: A History of the Global Beauty Industry*.

[105] Patterson, *The American New Woman*, 19.

[106] *Photoplay Magazine,* 1920.

Meeting the standards of white feminine beauty aesthetics invited aggressive advertising strategies that targeted female consumers who sought to conform to new social ideals. Women traded in their more traditional associations with "self-denial, abstention, modesty, demurity, simplicity, meekness, prayer, [and] remorse" for "short hair, use of cosmetics, smoking, short skirts, and flamboyant dancing."[107] Many working girls adopted John Held Jr's flapper image, which was just as much an expression of class aspiration as it was a statement of personal freedom.[108] Advertisers presented stylish clothes and cosmetics as a means of empowerment and self-improvement, framing them as necessary ornaments for obtaining a career in white-collar work. The New Woman had become a caricature of her former feminist self: a hollowed-out symbol of class, independence, and beauty that could be acquired through fashion and cosmetics. The New Woman was a new commodity.

The New Woman was also, in essence, a bait-and-switch, offering temporary liberation in exchange for gender and class conformity. Women's longstanding associations with beauty, caregiving, and cleanliness permeated their professional and personal lives, contributing to the notion that they were naturally more attuned to detail and organization than their male counterparts. Prevailing social codes demanded that women subscribe to the "cult of true womanhood," securing their economic inferiority to men by reinforcing the expectation that they were "pious, submissive, thrifty, and domestic."[109] These characteristics equated women's work with frivolity and rendered their expertise disposable. This practice was legitimized by women's

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[107] Rice Burroughs, *The Girl from Hollywood,* 6. See also: Sharot "The 'New Woman', star personas, and cross-class romance films in 1920s America," 74.

[108] Sharot, "The 'New Woman', star personas, and cross-class romance films in 1920s America," 75.

[109] Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics: African American Women's Activism in the Beauty Industry.*

work in the clerical sector, and at the height of industrialization, employers had already made the case for women's suitability for "cheap, disposable labor."[110] So, when the labor demands of early animation studios exceeded the capacity of their artists, women were sought out to complete the undesirable and "unskilled" tasks.

Pretty Girls Who Trace and Color

Early articles about the Ink and Paint Department reduced women's artistic talents to the tracing of male animators' drawings. Instead, reporters prioritized the girls' "perky appearances" or "darling figures" in lieu of the extremely detailed work that they completed. But the talents of these women extended far beyond tracing and coloring. The techniques that were developed and applied in the Ink and Paint Department at Disney required artistic mastery and innovation never before seen in animation. The inkers did not merely "trace" lines. Rather, they created shaded lines that provided a new sense of depth and dimension to each character. Inkers had to anticipate the motion of the animator's line and recreate the smooth, tapered drawings perfectly; what appeared as a discreet detail on paper would be magnified on the big screen. Painters learned to "float" their paints onto the back of inked celluloid to achieve opacity and minimize the risk of scratches and streaks. This was especially challenging because of the quality of paint that the studio used during color development; the early paints used were primarily intended for other purposes, such as houses or furniture, contributing to constant production delays and quality control issues. These technical skills were and still are often overlooked in media coverage of Walt Disney's accomplishments. Even in a department where enterprising women were at the forefront of aesthetic innovation in color, critics trivialized their talents, illustrating

[110] Hill, *Never Done,* 20.

the markedly feminine domain of ink and paint as one brimming with “pretty girls” who could trace and color.[111]

As this chapter argues, women were considered ideal candidates for ink and paint because of their feminized domestic skills and association with white feminine beauty aesthetics. Studio write-ups described the department as one built on “tedious and detailed work” that was deemed “best suited for women” as they were “considered more sensitive to detail than men, having demonstrated the ability to do more finished types of work.”[112] Even today, historians like Mindy Johnson have concluded that women were a “logical” fit for this role, gesturing towards the deeply engrained gender ideologies that can even invade feminist scholarship. Johnson cites Disney painter Jean Erwin[113] to validate these claims, saying the work was “too tedious for a man.” Erwin states: “They’ve tried men, doing inking and painting. But you need a lot of patience. You find very few men with that patience that a woman had to do that.”[114]

As Erwin suggests above, the labor of inking and painting was not always considered a feminine skill. Before there were “inkers” and “painters,” studios hired male employees known as “blackeners” or “opaquers.” Blackeners were often hired into animation studios on the East Coast before the advent of color, and, like inkers, they were responsible for “tracing” animators’ drawings onto cels using fine nib pens and india ink. Blackening, however, was considered a necessary steppingstone towards becoming an animator, and despite their apparent

[111] Schmidt, “‘Ink & Paint’ is a Celebration…”; Zohn, “Coloring the Kingdom.”

[112] Johnson, *Ink and Paint*, 13.

[113] Jean Erwin worked for Disney from 1940 until 1979. She was in ink and paint for three years before being promoted to assistant supervisor in 1943 and paint supervisor in 1946.

[114] Johnson, *Ink and Paint*, 56.

incompetency, male blackeners were rewarded with a fast promotion to the next position.[115] Animation scholar Leslie Cabarga outlines the standard pipeline, saying: "The young artist interested in getting into the business would first become an opaquer, graduate to inking, inbetweening, to assistant animator and finally animator. If he was especially talented, he might work up to head animator."[116] On the contrary, for many women, inking was the highest creative opportunity afforded to them. Further, they often had to complete this detailed work under strenuous conditions. Women's labor was timed, and those who worked accurately and quickly had the most secure jobs. Anecdotes abound about the working women who received the lowest pay grade in the industry while their supervisors, like Dorothy "Dot" Smith, paced the rows of Disney, encouraging fast work with phrases like "Come on now, quick—like a bunny!"[117]

The rigorous monitoring of quality work in Disney's Ink and Paint Department contributed to the fierce regulation of women's bodies. From simple tasks like controlled breathing to ensure steady lines to physical ailments like aching shoulders, eye and back pain, and extreme fatigue, the labor of ink and paint leached the boundaries between women's professional work and personal lives. According to painter Grace Bailey: "Some of the girls couldn't smoke or drink coffee—it would make them shaky."[118] Rae Medby, Evelyn Coast, and Jeannie Keil agreed; Keil noted that in order to ensure that her work was steady, she refused to "bowl, smoke, or drink," because she was worried that her hands would shake.[119] These concerns

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[115] Johnson, *Ink and Paint,* 52.

[116] Cabarga, *The Fleischer Story,* 18.

[117] Baldwin, "Interview by Rita Street."

[118] Johnson, *Ink and Paint*, 101.

[119] Johnson, *Ink and Paint,* 115.

were especially prominent among top inkers. Inking was a premium assignment, and it could take over a year before you were considered a competent inker. Most women could paint, but not everyone could ink. In the realm of female employment at Disney, becoming a "premium inker" who was trusted to work on complex scenes and detailed special effects was as close to animation in its prestige as one could achieve.[120]

With the Ink and Paint Department providing the primary entry for women at Disney during the late 1930s, it became a competitive position to obtain. Women who were hired into ink and paint had to demonstrate meticulous attention to detail and excellent fine motor skills, showcased through examples of their penmanship. As the complexity of the films grew, so did the competition and the challenges that potential candidates would face. In May 1935, the Ogden Standard Examiner reported that the studio received an average of twenty applicants per week, most of which were rejected; by 1936, the pool had swelled to hundreds of applicants.[121] Women who applied for other artistic positions at the studio were swiftly redirected. A standard rejection letter read:

> All inking and painting of celluloids, and all tracing done in the Studio, is performed exclusively by a large staff of girls known as inkers and painters. This work, exacting in character, calls for great skill in the handling of pen and brush. This is the only department in the Disney Studio open to women artists.[122]

Letters such as these were increasingly distributed after Disney gained popularity, owing to the success of Mickey Mouse and the Silly Symphonies. Generic letters based on presumed gender either directed inquiries toward specific departments or discouraged them from seeking employment altogether. According to Mindy Johnson, animator Marc Davis was initially

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[120] Ibid

[121] Johnson, *Ink and Paint*, 98; 66.

[122] Barrier, *The Animated Man*, 130.

rejected by the studio, based not on an evaluation of his talent, but on his assumed gender. Davis' rejection letter was addressed to "Miss Marcia Davis," and said that Disney was "not hiring women at the present time" and that "they would let 'her' know if and when they decided to hire women because they liked 'her' portfolio very much."[123] Two years later, Marc applied at the studio in person and was hired on the spot, remaining a lead animator for over thirty years and achieving legendary status as one of Disney's "Nine Old Men."

As we will see in chapter four, women eventually found success in more sophisticated divisions of the Disney animation studio.[124] The skills they refined in the Ink and Paint Department paved the way for them to pursue careers in special effects (especially as airbrush artists), story development, character design, and even animation. When it came to women's advancement in the industry, technology was key to their progress. Animators always used the same instruments when drawing, but for the inkers and painters, the tools were constantly changing. The women in the department were actively involved in innovating new solutions for pervasive problems, especially during the industry-wide shift to color animation. [125]

Coloring the Kingdom

When color came to the studio, it arrived under the jurisdiction of ink and paint. The introduction of color required more administrative support and creativity, but the explicit

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[123] Johnson, *Ink and Paint,* 99.

[124] By the end of production of *Snow White*, women could be found in story development, animation, character modeling, and special effects. For more information on these roles, see: Canemaker, *Paper Dreams* and *Before the Animation Begins*; Thomas and Johnston, *The Illusion of Life*.

[125] Mary Weiser is a great example of a woman who leveraged developing technologies in animation (like color) to advance her creative skills and her professional career, eventually becoming a supervisor in the Paint Lab. Johnson, *Ink and Paint*; Weiser, "Method of Creating Depth and Texture Effects in Animated Cartoons" and "Pencil Composition."

alignment of color with emotion made it seem like a logical realm for women. Having established a reputation as an innovator of new technologies after the success of *Steamboat Willy* (1928), Disney acquired an exclusive contract with Technicolor. Color production was one of the few fields in which women were allowed to participate in developing emotional arcs in stories. During story development, color supervisors, who were mostly women, determined the set colors for each character. This meant considering not only what would look good on screen, but also what would (emotionally) enhance the narrative. These supervisors worked closely with Natalie Kalmus, Chief of Technicolor's Color Advisory Service, on all Technicolor films. A remarkable and groundbreaking woman in her own right, Kalmus would eventually be known as a genuine auteur for her influence on color film design. For Kalmus, color was rich with cultural connotations and symbolic associations that made it a prime vehicle for delivering essential information about story.[126]

Color's associations with spectacle and fantasy naturally complimented the animated medium. As the mystery and allure of live-action cinema waned, animation's ability to imbue drawings with life kept audiences in its grasp. But Kalmus' philosophies on color also emphasized the central role of emotion in developing its narrative power. She writes:

> We must study color harmony, the appropriateness of color to certain situations, the appeal of color to the emotions. Above all, we must take more interest in the colorful beauties that lie about us – the iridescent brilliance of a butterfly's wing, the subtle tones of a field of grain, the violet shadows of the desert, the sunset's reflection in the ocean.[127]

Kalmus' manifesto illustrates that color production was perceived as emotionally driven, detail-oriented, and laborious work. It represented a major new technology for the female painters to

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[126] Dalle Vacche, *The Color Film Reader*, 31.

[127] Dalle Vacche, *The Color Film Reader*, 25.

adopt, and it offered new problems at every turn. But color would also bridge the gap between the "menial" tasks of ink and paint and the "creative" work of story and animation. By positioning women as leaders in color development, Disney opened a pathway for more women to seek employment in the Story Department, and eventually as animators.

Material evidence of women's direct impact on the creative development of the animation industry does not emerge until 1935 when Disney painter Mary Weiser volunteered to pursue a chemistry degree.[128] Weiser sought out information about color, light, dyes, and pigments, employing this knowledge to establish the first laboratory ever to manufacture paints specifically for cel animation. With this innovation, opportunities arose for other women at Disney to receive chemistry training and to participate in the research, experimentation, and development of new paint formulas for the studio.[129] Mary Weiser and her team of women expanded the department's color selection from 80 shades to over 1,500 shades, demonstrating one example of the many ways that women amplified their creative legacy.[130]

As color became the industry standard, prospective inkers and painters were expected to have an art background and were often recruited directly from art schools.[131] This shift further limited the opportunities for diverse women to enter the field; only the women who had access to higher education would be eligible to apply.[132] Candidates were required to demonstrate a strong

[128] Johnson, *Ink and Paint.*

[129] Thompson, "Colourful Material Histories."

[130] See: Johnson, *Ink and Paint*; Thompson, "Colourful Material Histories."

[131] Zohn reports that in 1934 Walt recruited women into ink and paint for *Snow White* by sending solicitation letters to art schools. ("Coloring the Kingdom.") The studio also had an informal partnership with the Chouinard Art School, where they recruited some of their top talent including Mary Blair.

[132] Requiring an advanced degree has both race and class implications; access to institutions of higher education was (and still is) not equitable and assumes a level of financial stability and leisure time that was not afforded to everyone.

understanding of color, perspective, depth, and shape, and many were still evaluated based on their handwriting—a decidedly "feminine" trait.[133] However, women's proven expertise with color cosmetics made them favorable leaders in color development. In addition to the studio demands for formal art education, the "new women" at Disney had mastered the daily routine of white feminine beauty aesthetics. Veteran Disney animator Frank Thomas shared rumors that Snow White received her naturally rosy hue from the use of actual cosmetic rouge.[134] According to studio lore, one innovative painter suggested applying blush to Snow White's cheeks instead of the standard cel pigments, which were harsh and challenging to diffuse. When Walt demurred, claiming that it would be too difficult to achieve consistency, the painter assured him that she and her colleagues wouldn't find the task so insurmountable—after all, women had been performing the same routine on themselves for years!

This tale has been contradicted again and again, but importantly gestures towards the deeply imbedded feminine routine of cosmetic use and its application in painting animation cels. The women of ink and paint painted their own faces every morning so they could arrive at the studio and paint Snow White's face, eventually learning that you could create a soft blush with just a cotton-wrapped pencil or rose-colored dyes.[135] But what this tale of Snow White's rouge succeeds in, beyond spinning an interesting narrative about feminine skills in practical application, is obscuring the real labor of the inkers who resolved the issue of micro-color diffusion. The labor of these women is not shared as an example of technical expertise but as a

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[133] Johnson, *Ink and Paint*.

[134] Thomas and Johnston, *The Illusion of Life*.

[135] For more information on this aesthetic technique, see: Johnson, David "Not Rouge, Mr. Thomas!" For details regarding Mary Weiser's patents: Weiser, "Methods of Creating Depth and Texture in Animated Cartoons" and "Pencil Composition."

story about grooming. In this oral history, women were not transgressive or innovative, they were domestic.

Women's cleanliness and attention to detail kept them gainfully employed at Disney during the 1920s, but color invited a new emotional depth to storytelling that would provide a window for advancement into higher creative roles in the 1930s. The adoption of color cinematography enabled a drastic advancement for women entering the field of animation and facilitated the most expansive industry growth thus far. But women's emotional labor and personal connections to the studio seem to underwrite their inclusion. Before there were corridors lined with inkers and painters, there was only a garage on Kingswell Ave where Walt and his brother Roy led a tiny staff through animating his first series, *The Alice Comedies,* as well as the earliest Mickey Mouse shorts. It was here that Walt first employed Hazel Sewell, a friendly neighbor who would occasionally feed the starving artists and assist with their earliest productions. Sewell would also become Walt's sister-in-law when he married Lillian Bounds in 1925.[136]

Hazel Sewell was one of many women who positively directed Walt's life and propelled his career in animation. Sewell made groundbreaking contributions to the studio, to animation, and to women in Hollywood. She is a complicated figure whose unique position as family and employee afforded her opportunities that were not generally available to women at the time. In turn, she established a new standard of animation production that would ripple throughout the industry and create a path for other women to enter film production.[137] She was also an indispensable figure in facilitating the introduction of color to the studio and is the first woman at

[136] Ancestry.com, "Hazel Mae Bounds at Lillian Bounds Wedding to Walt Disney."

[137] The Walt Disney Family Museum, "Important Women in Disney History."

Disney to receive screen credits, listed as the art director on *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.*[138]

Hazel Sewell: "A working mother at an unusual time."

There are several critical reasons that underscore why Sewell's labor at Disney offers an important case study in this research. As Walt's sister-in-law and a long-term employee at the studio, Sewell is a clear example of overlapping professional and personal/domestic boundaries. Her story offers invaluable insights into the rare opportunities that were available to her as relative but would not have been afforded to other women during this time. Additionally, Sewell is an underrated and often unacknowledged figure in animation history that set the pace for animation's industrialization, establishing a sophisticated division of labor that led to the specialization of core techniques.[139] Through the choices that she made about who would perform this labor, Sewell created a space for women in animation. However, Sewell's influence in women's advancement is contradictory and complex; on the one hand she leveraged her position as Walt's sister-in-law and studio manager to establish a space for women in a creative industry that was safer and better paid than some of the popular alternatives. On the other hand, by doing so she reinforced gender stereotypes and power dynamics that ultimately limited women's ability to ascend production ranks.

Sewell was not formally employed by Disney until 1927 when Walt primed the studio for the increased production of *Oswald the Lucky Rabbit* cartoons, but her contributions began much earlier. While some of her work constituted the literal act of inking cels, most of her early labor

[138] Johnson, *Ink and Paint*, 56; See also: *Film Daily,* Jan-Mar 1939.

[139] "Studio Personnel" *Film Daily Yearbook*, 1932.

was domestic. Sewell was a friendly neighbor who frequently invited the starving artists over for a home cooked meal. She would occasionally assist with the blackening in their films and offered recommendations for new studio hires. It was at Hazel's recommendation that the brothers hired Kathleen Dollard—the first employee of the Disney Brothers Cartoon Studio. Dollard was officially hired as a blackener for the *Alice Comedies*, but she often supported her bosses beyond the reach of their small studio, exceeding the requirements of her job description. As the sole employee, Dollard put in long hours and completed administrative tasks outside of the realm of blackening without additional compensation. Like Sewell, she too is rumored to have prepared homecooked meals for the artists. Dollard gained access into animation production through her personal relationship with Sewell, and while the blackening and administrative tasks that she completed had a material impact on studio productions, the invisible work of managing her relationships with Sewell and the Disney brothers was central to her initial success. Although emotional work is rarely seen as "work," often classified in the realm of "soft skills," Dollard and Sewell's relationship with the Disney's would become a fulltime job. For Dollard, in particular, her professional work coupled with her homecooked meals offered an enticing combination, and it wasn't long before Walt asked her to marry him (she declined), exemplifying collapsed boundaries between work and courtship.

The boundaries between work and courtship would blur again when Disney hired Hazel Sewell's sister, Lillian. Lilly moved to Hollywood to live with Sewell and was hired as a blackener because of her professional training in stenography, but it wasn't long before Disney pursued a romantic relationship with her. This time, Walt's proposal was successful; when he and Lillian were married one year later, their union cemented the overlap of professional and domestic labor for both Lillian and Sewell. When Walt lost the rights to create the Oswald

cartoons to his producer Charles Mintz, he employed his most loyal animator, Ub Iwerks, to begin development on a new character in secret. Iwerks began work on the iconic Mickey Mouse but couldn't complete his breakout short alone. In the garage of his home on Lyric Avenue, Disney installed three benches for a makeshift studio where Lilly and Edna Disney (Roy's wife) and Hazel Sewell singlehandedly inked and painted Iwerks' drawings onto cels. With the finished project coming in at just over 6 minutes, the women inked approximately 541 feet of footage, roughly 8,644 frames. In the development of *Plane Crazy* the work of creating an animated film was housework.[140]

Sewell established trust with Disney that opened doors for her otherwise unavailable to women at the time. When Disney moved into the studio lot on Hyperion Ave, he hired Sewell as a manager to oversee the blackeners. As the animated form became more intricate, so did her responsibilities. Sewell was the first woman to establish and run a major division within the animation industry.[141] As the head of tracing and opaquing, she elevated the artistry of cel animation and led the transition into color cinematography, establishing a division of labor that cultivated talented artists who specialized in one area of the finished product.[142] This method predates Disney's assembly-line method in the 1940s by nearly a decade. This organizational structure meant establishing a division of labor that created separate departments for ink and paint, allowing for techniques to be refined and for accuracy checkpoints to be instituted. During her employment, Hazel managed color tests, hired and educated new staff, troubleshooted

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[140] Apgar, *A Mickey Mouse Reader.*

[141] Johnson, *Ink & Paint,* 56.

[142] *Film Daily Yearbook 1932*, "Studio Personnel."

materials, and managed vendors and inventory.[143] The number of women employed in Hazel's department drastically increased as the studio saw more success—from the early days of working in Walt's garage with no more than twenty employees to the hundreds of staff members that Hazel managed during *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* until her departure in the late 1930s.

Snow White was Hazel's last, and most renowned, project for the Disney Studio; yet, despite her overwhelming influence she is rarely included in records of the film's history. Production notes for *Snow White* indicate that Hazel's opinion was cited numerous times,[144] particularly in establishing the color palette for key characters. Hazel oversaw the production of roughly 362,000 cels, the creation of 1,500 shades of paint, and the management of approximately two hundred and forty-four inkers and painters.[145] *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* marked a historic moment in filmmaking, not only as the first feature-length animated film to be produced and released in the United States, but as the first to credit a woman with the prestigious title of 'art director.'[146] But her work on *Snow White* came with a cost. Shortly after finishing production, Sewell suffered from stress-related distress that caused her to take a short leave of absence from the studio, during which Walt docked her pay. Sewell was so devastated by the lack of support by the studio head, her brother-in-law, that after eleven years of employment, she tendered her resignation in May 1938.[147]

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[143] Johnson, *Ink & Paint,* 56.

[144] For more information on Hazel Sewell: The Walt Disney Family Museum, "Important Women in Disney History"; Johnson, "A Transformative Trailblazer"; "Hazel Mae Bounds Sewell."

[145] Johnson, *Ink & Paint,* 56.

[146] *Film Daily,* Jan-Mar 1939.

[147] Letter from Hazel Sewell to Walt Disney, May 12, 1938, in Gabler, *Walt Disney: Triumph of the American Imagination.*

Hazel Sewell was not the first, and would not be the last, studio employee to experience Walt's "moodiness."[148] *Snow White*'s success led to an industry-wide increase in feature animation production that led to exponential growth. The studio adapted Fordist systems of production to manage its large scale of employees and work, maximizing efficiency while minimizing cost. At Disney, this system was materially represented in the layout of the new Burbank Studio, creating a large-scale assembly-line that fostered deep resentment among the employees. A permanent rift emerged in the community that Walt had painstakingly built and the tensions galvanized studio workers from all ranks to demand fairer wages, more equitable treatment, and labor recognition.

[148] Davis, "The Dark Prince and Dream Women," 220.

3
Women on the (Assembly) Line

> Typical of so many gallant American girls and women today . . . these girls have given up personal ambition so as to back up their fighting men. But they are none the less feminine for all their efficiency. Keeping lovely is very much a part of their everyday living—on their jobs, and off!
>
> —*Ponds Advertisement in PhotoPlay Magazine, May 1945*[149]

The years that followed the landmark success of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) ushered in major shifts in American society that would have a lasting effect on the social organization and feminization of certain types of labor. Feature-length film took hold of the animation industry and studios that wanted to remain competitive were required to ramp up production. This meant that more women were hired into animation across the industry, but predominantly into sectors that were perceived as women's work; in other words, the tedious organizational or detail-oriented positions that called for the domestic and emotional skills that men avoided. And, as noted in chapter two, women who did not embody the culturally prescribed standards of white feminized beauty aesthetics and class experienced limited access to employment. At the same time, there was a palpable air of anxiety surrounding the threat of the war overseas, which had a very tangible impact on global box office receipts and profitability.[150]

Women soon found themselves occupying roles that were once inaccessible—in chemical plants, transportation, community services, and even, animation. But for all the "gallant American girls and women" who kept society functioning on the brink of war, their efficacy was only as highly valued as their appearance. Even with the multiplicity of women's labor taking shape one thing remained a constant in white collar spaces: a core tenant of their job, regardless

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[149] *PhotoPlay Magazine*, "These Engaged Girls are All War Workers! You are Needed Too!"

[150] Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination.*

of their title, was to be beautiful and on display. Women's growing association with low-paying, detail-oriented work, and the industry's desire for increased production at a low cost were inextricably linked. And because studio organization mirrored wider societal ideas about innate feminine qualities and women's natural "talents," their suitability for that work was typically accepted by their male peers. Even after America's entry into WWII enabled some women to explore new opportunities that were vacated by enlisted men, their success continued to be measured by their ability to be seen as feminine, or as the 1945 Ponds' advertisement phrased: "lovely."

During this period of incredible growth and ingenuity that has since been classified as the Golden Age of Animation,[151] women were a keystone of the industry and subsidized the scale of technological innovation, especially at Disney, with their meager paychecks and their physical bodies. Women who were hired as inkers and painters were adapted into the animation pipeline as tools for maximizing output and studio profit, often represented in uniform rows of desks with women hunched over cels, carefully and mechanically tracing[152] the animator's drawings. While early leaders in animation, like John Randolph Bray, had defined elements of industrial production that studios would adopt for improving consistency and efficiency such as celluloid, registration pegs, rotoscope, and specialized below-the-line roles like inbetweening or ink and paint,[153] Disney scaled up these technologies with the production of *Snow White* in the 1930s and re-organized them in the 1940s.

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[151] Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons: American Animation in its Golden Age*.

[152] As discussed in the previous chapter, the art of inking cels was more complex than "tracing" animator's drawings. However, for the sake of simplicity, I will sometimes refer to inking as "tracing," especially when analyzing the physical representation of women's work which *appears* to be tracing.

[153] Sammond, *Birth of an Industry,* 64.

However, a byproduct of rapid industrial growth met with meager pay and uncredited labor is social unrest. As studio employees increasingly found themselves overwhelmed and underpaid a call for labor reform swept through the industry; this began as early as 1935 when Sadie Bodin, an inker from Van Beuren Studios, was fired on the grounds of her "bad attitude" after meeting with union representatives.[154] Bodin made history as the first person ever to picket an animation studio—with only her husband joining her on the line. This action set a precedent in the industry. Employees at Fleischer Studios won the first union contract in animation after striking for five months in 1937. The Walt Disney Studios would soon be forced to confront their own disputes in an event that historians have called "the civil war of animation."[155] And while on the surface the details of their discontentment were unremarkable,[156] I will show that the anxieties surrounding labor recognition and job security that fueled the 1941 Disney animators strike were deeply gendered.

The second half of this project examines the wide-reaching effects of collapsed boundaries between public and private life at the onset of WWII and the influence that this obfuscation had on studio culture at Disney. If the animator's strike was in fact a civil war, the fire was not lit by an artist's decision to join or abstain from the picket line, but by the friction between competing values and representations of women's labor in private and public spaces. Examining where and how women showed up in studio documentation during this period,

[154] For more information about Sadie Bodin: Halley, "The Great Animation Strike." Also see: Sito, *Drawing the Line: The Untold Stories of Animation Unions from Bosko to Bart Simpson.*

[155] Sito, *Drawing the Line: The Untold Stories of the Animation Unions from Bosko to Bart Simpson.*

[156] As we will explore in the next chapter, the union reported that its main bargaining objectives were: increased pay for all workers (but especially inkers and painters), film credits, and more reasonable hours (similar to other animation strikes that had already taken place).

provides insight into (1) the types of labor women were invited to perform and (2) the tension between gender-segregated labor and the assimilation of that labor in the production pipeline. Job segregation and social hierarchies took on a spatial dimension at the new Burbank Studio; meanwhile, the formation of labor organizations such as guilds, societies, and even, unions, heightened the divide between male and female employees while simultaneously generating new divisions amongst women. These divisions were exacerbated by the "Disneyfication" of studio life at Burbank through promotional videos like *The Reluctant Dragon* (1941), which masked employee discontent and served audiences a contrived and artificially staged vision of both the production process and the employees who worked in it.

Chapter three examines the crystallization of a Fordist-assembly-line model of animation production that developed in response to what Walt called the "years of confusion, swift expansion, [and] reorganization"[157] that accompanied the success of Snow White. This organizational system is realized in the physical layout of the newly articulated campus, which fostered a culture of sexism and segregated departments along gendered lines by physically isolating most women employees from advanced creative processes. The spatial organization of the Burbank studio lot categorized and limited women's labor, establishing a social hierarchy that was rooted in gender and class. Gendered boundaries around production roles, previously implied, became more explicit on private and public studio maps and in press campaigns. Filmed studio tours used for promotional purposes during this period highlight the disparity between Disney's utopic vision of the studio's working culture and the lived experiences of the women and men he employed, an incongruity that would directly contribute to one of the most prolific strikes in animation history.

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[157] Disney, "Growing Pains," 38-39.

Chapter four builds on this analysis to show that, despite the gendering of skills and the physical separation of labor, a small number of women *were* hired into the male-dominated fields of story development and animation as early as 1937 and made lasting contributions to the studio and to the advancement of women in the industry. Against the backdrop of WWII and women's increasing presence in the workforce, the boundaries that defined a woman's role in animation—and in society at large—became penetrable. Advertisements boasted taglines like: "America at war needs women at work" and "Women and girls must take their places," dismantling commonplace ideas about what "a woman's place" could be.[158] At Disney, this crack in the glass ceiling stirred insecurities in male employees around job stability and gender identity that influenced their treatment of female colleagues and formed the underbelly of the animation strike. Chapter four examines these women's stories in greater detail, looking at how women at Disney resisted the exploitation of their labor and the consequences they faced when the spaces they occupied, and the spaces created for them came into conflict. Through an analysis of studio maps and filmed studio tours in chapter three, and union paraphernalia in chapter four, I show that women's progress at Disney was both literally and figuratively confined by the dominant cultural ideas about white femininity.

[158] *Ponds Advertisement in PhotoPlay Magazine, May 1945*.

Growing Pains: Lessons in Production from the First Disney Feature

Prior to the release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, critics derided the film as "Walt's Folly," because of the studio's significant financial investment in a product that many believed audiences would be unable—or unwilling—to sit through. At the onset, Walt predicted the feature would cost around $250,000 to produce; however, Disney ultimately borrowed a staggering $2.3 million from the Bank of America over the course of two years,[159] spending as much as $20,000 a week[160] during peak production. Production lasted for nearly three years due to significant aesthetic and financial challenges, with most of the animation delayed until the final year. This delay contributed to a feeling of heightened tension within the studio as artists reacted to the demand for increased speed and attention to every detail of their drawings. As they approached the fall before the picture's release, the studio was operating twenty-four-hours a day in rotating eight-hour shifts,[161] often including weekends, and were instructed to overlook some of the subtler details in their drawings that "[would] be complete enough for the Inking of this fast action."[162] Despite the challenges, the investment of time and money was evident in the finished product. The resulting film showcased the collaboration of six hundred artists on a quarter-million drawings in which two hundred years' worth of labor hours were invested.[163] And their labor to the studio paid off: in less than six months after its release, with $6.7 million in receipts, *Snow White* surpassed Al Jolson's *The Singing Fool* as the highest-grossing

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[159] Gabler, *Walt Disney: Triumph of American Animation,* 283.

[160] Gabler, *Walt Disney: Triumph of American Animation,* 265.

[161] A standard workday at Disney prior to *Snow White* was 8:30am to 5:30pm Monday through Friday, with occasional half days on Saturdays.

[162] Gabler, *Walt Disney: Triumph of the American Imagination,* 264.

[163] Gabler, *Walt Disney: Triumph of the American Imagination,* 273.

American film to date by nearly $2 million.[164] It was a breakthrough moment for character animation and Walt was rewarded with an honorary Academy Award in 1938 for the film's cultural impact.[165]

But for all the film's technical achievements, the true "folly" that *Snow White* revealed was the studio's haphazard and unorganized production practices, with one Disney historian going as far as to say Walt had been "flying blind."[166] The twelve buildings that made up the Hyperion studio lot sprawled across five acres, spilling down the street into adjacent apartment buildings, bungalows, and offices. The studio lacked a formal organizational chart, relying instead on Walt's "hunches,"[167] which were at times contradictory. For instance, Walt assigned some artists on *Snow White* to specific characters (Art Babbitt to the Queen, Grim Natwick to Snow White), and others to specific scenes, causing unnecessary confusion among the staff while posing challenges to continuity.[168] The system for pay incentives was equally inconsistent. By 1934, the studio had implemented a bonus system that graded each animator's drawings on a sliding scale based on the quality of the finished work against the number of feet completed, a method that was not as objective in practice as it suggested. Although it purported to benefit the best and most efficient employees, it was often subject to Walt's ad hoc adjustments, who believed animators needed to be amply rewarded to produce their best work. Animator Ward Kimball

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[164] Ibid

[165] Ibid

[166] Gabler suggests that this approach translated into their marketing practices as well, saying: "If they had been flying blind in making the feature, they were also flying blind in promoting and distributing it." *Walt Disney: Triumph of the American Imagination,* 270.

[167] Gabler, *Walt Disney: Triumph of the American Imagination,* 240.

[168] Gabler, *Walt Disney: Triumph of the American Imagination,* 235.

recalled: “Some sort of magic light would shine over the studio… and all of a sudden you might get a raise.”[169] Moreover, the payout system was structured such that the promised bonuses would only become available to employees *after* the film was successful, implying that the staff would be rewarded only if the film was well-received.[170] Despite the obvious flaws, the bonus system resulted in an immediate, albeit short-lived, efficiency increase. However, with the industry-wide shift to feature production and the studio’s desire to release a film every year, Walt would need to tighten up operations. The move to Burbank provided the opportunity to do just that.

The Penthouse, The Nunnery, and The Morgue: Mapping Sex Segregation on the (Real and Imaginary) Studio Lot

The acquisition and development of the Burbank lot signified the routinization of a highly specialized pipeline that transformed animation production into a machine and artists into tools. Buildings were arranged into a motion picture assembly line, allowing for a “smooth and efficient production flow.”[171] Each one was equipped with state-of-the-art features that sought to address common issues for that area of production, such as control over the atmospheric humidity to regulate paint drying conditions on cels, or an underground tunnel system for transporting artwork during inclement weather. The studio would be the first of its kind,

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[169] Gabler, *Walt Disney: Triumph of the American Imagination,* 244.

[170] Walt and Roy allocated 20% of the earnings that they bought back from Ub Iwerks into a trust for employee bonuses on *Snow White*. The money would stay with the studio to finance the project and would only be distributed to employees “if and when the feature is finished and pays its way out.” Gabler, *Walt Disney: Triumph of the American Imagination*, 244.

[171] Garity, “The New Walt Disney Studio,” 8.

meticulously designed for animation production,[172] and would surpass *Snow White* as Disney's largest technological investment to date, costing around $3 million to build and directly funded by the film's revenue.[173]

The Burbank studio represented Walt's commitment to growth, designed to support the capacity of two feature-length films in simultaneous production; but above that, it represented a decision to enhance the Disney brand by taking promised resources away from the laborers that made the investment possible. As *Snow White* continued to surpass box office expectations, studio employees anxiously awaited their promised profit-share bonuses.[174] Meanwhile, the industry's conversion from one that released seven-minute shorts to one that was dedicated to producing seventy-minute features occurred almost overnight, forcing hundreds of employees to be "trained and fitted into a machine for the manufacture of entertainment which had become bewilderingly complex."[175] Walt acknowledged this mechanization in the 1940 edition of the Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers, stating: "The plant was becoming more like a Ford factory, but our moving parts were more complex than cogs—human beings, each with

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[172] "There were no existing buildings or utilities to hamper the planning and in this respect the new plant is probably unique in the history of motion picture studios. A detailed study was made of the studio's needs, and then, practically without restriction, a plant was built to fill those needs." Garity, "The New Walt Disney Studio," 7.

[173] Gabler, *Walt Disney: Triumph of the American Imagination.*

[174] There is conflicting information about the *Snow White* bonuses. Gabler states that Walt was eager to deliver on his promise that everyone at the studio would benefit from the film's success, demanding that the bonuses be paid, which were expected to amount to around three months' salary. Jake Friedman's account features a less-than-eager Walt who deflects questions about the bonuses. However, Friedman's account does generally agree with the amount, stating: "On June 28. 1938 the *Los Angeles Examiner* had announced that Walt Disney would distribute 20 percent of *Snow White's* earnings to his eight hundred employees, each bonus representing about twelve weeks' wages." However, Friedman also asserts that Studio leadership avoided publicizing a delivery date or amount for the bonuses and claims that compared to what artists were used to receiving on the short subjects, the bonuses were "a pittance" and did not compensate for the hours of overtime worked to get the picture to final (*The Disney Revolt,* 128).

[175] Garity, "The New Walt Disney Studio," 38-39.

his own temperament and values who must be weighed and fitted into his proper place."[176] Through this industrial language, Walt underscores the studio's shift toward mass production, transforming artists into wheels and art into factory management.

The analogy that Walt makes between the studio (or "plant") and a Ford factory is not new for contemporary scholars; Disney's production methods during this transition period are often referred to as exemplars of Fordism. Esther Leslie calls the Burbank Studio "a 24-hour factory of distraction production" and credits Disney with leading an industry-wide transformation, stating that "many companies [following Disney] divided the labour of animation and standardized the output."[177] Yuriko Furuhata names Disney a "vanguard of animation production," arguing that "Disney's animated films were nothing but the 'after-images of the work process' so thoroughly mechanized and regimented under the Taylorist-Fordist mode of production."[178] And others, like Jordan Gowanlock, use Disney production methods as a foil to the more flexible style of studios like Pixar. Gowanluck engages Nicholas Sammond in arguing that Disney, like other early industrial animation studios, "sought to emphasize the unpredictable liveliness of creativity at their studios while also demonstrating their ability to control and manage that unpredictability through Taylorist and Fordist industrial management techniques that promoted regulation and efficiency."[179] This tension between unpredictable creativity and absolute control resurfaces again and again in Disney's promotional tour videos.

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[176] Disney, "Growing Pains," 36-37.

[177] Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands,* 134.

[178] Furuhata, "Rethinking Plasticity," 26-27.

[179] Gowanlock, "Animating Management," 62; Nicholas Sammond, *Birth of an Industry,* 91-92.

Disney's integration of Fordist industrial methodologies allowed the studio to control its production techniques and its workforce. Even so, comparisons between the developing system of feature animation production and Fordist assembly lines are not remarkable; Disney's adoption of strict divisions of labor, standardized manufacturing processes, and the assembly-line production style is well-established in Disney scholarship. However, what *is* remarkable is how the assembly-line was cemented into the layout of the Burbank campus, fostering gendered divisions among employees. In addition, Walt's own words points to what is most striking about the analogy of the animation machine: the role of the employee as a moving part "more complex than cogs," each with their own distinct emotions and utility "who must be weighed and fitted into his proper place." Defining a worker's *place* was the task of Fordism at Disney and underscored an economic and social restructuring at the studio in which women's labor played a central role.

With the development of Fordism, women were drawn into increasingly tight U.S. labor markets, concentrated at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy where the skills they specialized in were seen as desirable but poorly compensated.[180] Women's participation in the labor market was considered secondary to their role as homemakers, and the marriage of traditional gender roles with labor market regulation led to a workforce that was highly segregated by gender.[181] Feature film production saw a growth of women workers as the production floor was restructured to separate craft work (such as ink and paint) from the locus of creativity[182] (in this case, the Animation Building) where "the absolute creation of the animated

[180] McDowell, "Life Without Father and Ford," 402.

[181] Ibid

[182] Garity refers to the Animation Building as a building that covers the "complete creative function [of a motion picture] from beginning to end" (The New Walt Disney Studio").

picture" took place.[183] This new spatialized logic of production decentralized formerly centralized tasks, isolating workers within their own departments, often along gendered lines.

BECOMING WOMEN WORKERS

Areas of animation production—where women's work was accepted across the industry but defined and perfected at Disney—relied on a redefinition of skills that asserted the inferiority of women and their "supposedly natural attributes."[184] The ideological construction of feminine "talents" (as opposed to masculine "skills") led to patriarchal divisions of labor where women found themselves in dead-end careers despite executing the same competencies as their male colleagues. For instance, while "blackening"[185] was at one time considered a stepping-stone for aspiring animators on their way to in-betweening, these opportunities decreased as the Ink and Paint Department at Disney was solidified as a women's space. Women's spaces in the industry were limited to areas where their work aligned with traditional views of their role in the domestic sphere, and where it was believed that their employment was temporary because they were expected to return to their homes as mothers and wives.[186] Disney's adaptations of these basic

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[183] Garity, "The New Walt Disney Studio*,"* 38-39.

[184] McDowell, "Life Without Father and Ford," 404.

[185] In the previous chapter I contextualized "blackening" as the precursor to "inking," frequently used as a stepping-stone in the pipeline to become an animator.

[186] In his analysis of the developing Ford assembly-line at the Highland Park factory, Pietrykowski states that married women were only employed at Ford if their husbands were ill or deployed, going on to say that "Marriage was a common reason listed for their departure" (Pietrykowski, "Fordism at Ford," 392). Walt Disney has also attributed women leaving the studio after they found husbands as a reason he did not hire more women into advanced creative roles; in a column for *the Hollywood Comment* published on March 18, 1946 Walt said: "too often we have put a girl through our long and expensive training, only to have her marry and retire. She lets her husband earn the money, whereas a male cartoonist has to stay at his job."

elements are outlined in the previous chapter and would continue to transform as feature production demands rose. But in defining these spaces, the social relations of gender were an integral—*not incidental*—part of the restructuring process.[187] Even when the connections to traditional notions of femininity were less literal, such as inking and painting, the shared characteristic amongst these women-centric areas was their lack of appeal to male employees.

Men's aversion to "feminine" spaces and careers does not indicate the level of training or expertise required to excel in them; women's work is often classified as unskilled and inferior because their skills are steeped in sexual bias. In *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States,* Alice Kessler-Harris describes the emergent gendering of occupations based on a hierarchy of skills that aligned women's work with the values of marriage, home, and family care and men's work with "ambition, competition, [and] aggression." For women, their career aspirations should reflect "values appropriate to future home life: gentility, neatness, morality, cleanliness" as well as an "affirmation of home roles."[188] This results in an alignment of sociocultural and industrial-economic imperatives that guide women towards occupations of lower status and lower pay, while simultaneously rendering them non-threatening and non-competitive to their male colleagues. It also reinforces the theoretical centrality of domestic labor that the capitalist-patriarchal model depends on in order to function.[189] In her influential work "Life Without Father and Ford: The New Gender Order of Post-Fordism," Linda McDowell shows that the work performed by women in the home is

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[187] McDowell, "Life Without Father and Ford," 406.

[188] Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*, 128.

[189] McDowell, "Life Without Father and Ford," 407.

translated into labor power that is then appropriated by her husband and children.[190] The work of cooking, cleaning, and caring for others becomes central to men's productivity, or, as McDowell puts it: "women in the home are the grist in the mill of the capitalist system."[191] Aligning women's occupations with these skill sets serves the dual function of "training" them for their "true purpose" of augmenting their husband's labor power, while also boosting the labor power of their male co-workers by removing the burden of low-grade tasks from their responsibilities.

The femininization of labor enables male workers to avoid tasks and tools that are undesirable, simply because they are unpleasant or mundane. Among these low-grade tasks was the art of inking and painting; this process's figurative ties to cosmetics through fine linework and color application, coupled with its more literal ties to service work and grooming, repelled male employees. An anecdote by painter Barbara Baldwin claimed that "some of the men revolted" when women chose to wear hairnets to prevent "dandruff and stuff" from falling onto the cels.[192] The introduction of this "technology" (hairnets) into previously male-dominated production spaces seemingly evoked anxieties from men about "becoming women workers"[193] which led them to reject this tool because of its "feminine" associations.[194]

The anxiety around "becoming women workers" is key to understanding the hierarchy of labor at Disney, is fueled by the determination to maintain patriarchal structures of power.

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[190] Ibid

[191] Ibid

[192] Barbara Baldwin interview by Rita Street WIA/UCLA archives.

[193] McDowell cites an article by Taylor and Phillips where they suggest that maybe "we are all becoming 'women workers'" in an analysis of eroding distinctions in employment conditions and skill differentials that previously separated men and women. I also leverage their research in this project. Phillips and Taylor, "Sex and Skill: Notes toward a Feminist Economics."

[194] Hairnets also have domestic connotations - often used in food services, salons, medical settings.

Barbara Taylor and Anne Phillips use the concept of "becoming women workers" to describe a capitalistic process through which work becomes less skilled and more routine, thereby resulting in a "degradation of labour" that subjects all jobs to the classic features of women's employment.[195] Taylor and Phillips show that in industries employing both men and women (such as textiles or the clothing trade), the basis for defining skilled (men's) or unskilled (women's) labor could not be rationalized in terms of the content of the work; rather, this value was generated through "the struggles of men workers to retain their dominance within the sexual hierarchy."[196] In other words, men's fear of "becoming women workers" is symptomatic of gendered anxieties about the traditional balance of power, where men are in the upper levels of the labor hierarchy at work, and the primary breadwinners at home.

Such gendered anxieties were heightened at Disney during this period of industrial growth, where the restructuring of studio labor corresponded to the restructuring of physical space. While the acquisition of Burbank and the pivot towards animated features may have been seen as a response to the studio's financial needs, Taylor and Phillips show that changes in work organization often resulted from ongoing conflict between capitalists and workers, as well as tensions between workers themselves—especially men and women.[197] (Chapter four delves into labor segmentation as a tool for anti-unionism in relation to the 1941 Disney Animator's Strike, where some of these tensions were foregrounded). Nevertheless, the move to the Burbank Studio heightened the friction between men and women workers: studio mapping shows how gender segregation was entrenched by this industry shift, reinforcing women's inferior social status and

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[195] Phillips and Taylor, "Sex and Skill: Notes toward a Feminist Economics."

[196] Ibid

[197] Ibid

limiting their opportunities for advancement. The physical layout of the campus literally makes this labor division visible.

HYPERION

The early days of the Hyperion Studio were characterized by what Nicholas Sammond refers to as the "unpredictable liveliness of creativity," owing in part to the studio's relatively open and collaborative layout. The original facility, built in 1926, featured small, partitioned offices for Walt and Roy with larger open areas for animation, background, and ink and paint (Figure B3.1). The studio was constructed on a forty-by-sixty-foot lot and was a clear upgrade from the storefront the brothers had previously rented on Kingswell Avenue, though the interior organization was remarkably similar (Figure B3.2). In both studio diagrams, Walt was located in close proximity to Animation, while Roy resided near ink and paint (or, "blackening"). One noticeable difference at Hyperion was the installation of a partition that separated male and female workers, suggesting that gendered divisions of labor were evident and material in the studio's earliest days.

Interior renderings of the studio from 1928-1929 (Figure B3.1) depict the early days of gender segregation at Disney. Eight desks were arranged in rows along the rightmost quadrant of the building for ink and paint, placing the women workers adjacent to editorial and storage. Animation was located across the hall and was divided into the "Silly Symphony Unit" and the "Mickey Mouse Unit." The male artists shared the leftmost half of the building with background and camera,[198] all of which were overseen by Walt's private office. This spatial organization

[198] Some renderings of the Hyperion Layout place the Camera Department on the women's side of the partition, while others nest it with the darkroom on the men's side.

physically separated women from traditionally creative roles and deepened their associations with light manufacturing (editing) and administrative work (storage and archives). The location of the two restrooms on the map further emphasized gender segregation, with the women's room accessible through ink and paint and the men's room facing the short subject units. Even so, partitions are partial structures; collaboration across teams was accessible, and all employees were encouraged to participate in the writing process.[199]

As the studio expanded in preparation for the production of *Snow White*, new wings were added to accommodate the growing sophistication of the medium and the increase in staff. The studio layout transformed as neighboring apartments were adopted into temporary workspaces, though some maps of the interior layout suggest that the distribution of employees in the core building remained the same (Figure B3.3). In the updated layout, Walt and Roy also enjoyed larger offices with enough room to host studio visitors, in addition to a new music room, patio, janitorial closet, and a second storage area. However, the most noteworthy change was the relocation of Roy’s office to the left quadrant of the building near Walt. This change freed real estate for two new additions: a private desk for the executive secretary, Lucille Benedict, in the area that Walt’s office used to occupy, and a private office in ink and paint for department supervisor Hazel Sewell (Figure B3.3). Although Hazel and Lucille are the only two women whose names appear in relation to assigned spaces in the studio layout, it would not be the last time that women would be explicitly located on a studio map (Figure B3.5).

[199] One beloved incentive for employees before the standardization of feature film was a small bonus program for gags. Employees were encouraged to submit gags for their short subjects; if selected they would be paid a small sum. Everyone was welcome to participate.

BURBANK

When operations shifted to Burbank the emerging divisions of labor were more rigidly enforced by the physical structures that separated male and female workers. Where Hyperion offered an open layout that facilitated easy access between departments, Burbank's operations were distributed across four blocks of California real estate (Figure B3.4). In a feature article for the Society of Motion Picture Engineers on the planning and construction of the Burbank campus, studio manager Bill Garity says that the studio was "in reality a small city," consisting of over twenty separate buildings arranged across 51 acres.[200] Like most modern cities, the studio had to be equipped with its own underground utilities, constructing for itself its own streets, storm drains, sewer systems, fire hydrants, electric distribution systems, and more. The buildings were meticulously designed to meet the needs of every department, addressing the challenges each one faced while working on *Snow White* at Hyperion. Garity's article repeatedly cites "scrupulous cleanliness" as a requirement, especially for the Inking and Painting, Camera, and Cutting Departments, which previously had inadequate control over the cleanliness of their ventilation systems. As a result, the studio was fashioned with an extensive air conditioning plant that allowed for control over both the air circulation and atmospheric humidity[201]—an innovation that served the dual purpose of providing comfortable working conditions and stabilizing the cel paint formulas.[202]

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[200] Garity, "The New Walt Disney Studio," 29.

[201] Cel paints were temperamental. If the conditions were not stable, paints could dry too quickly and flake off the cels, or not dry fast enough and lead to smudges.

[202] Garity, "The New Walt Disney Studio," 8-9.

If the Burbank Studio was a city, the Animation Building would be its capital. The building was 250 feet long, divided into eight wings that ran on a North-South axis to allow both ample natural light for the artists and improved structural integrity to offset seismic events.[203] Nestled between Mickey and Minnie Mouse Blvd, the Animation Building occupied nearly a third of the campus and sat on its own block (Figure B3.4). To access the building, visitors had to cross the street or use an underground tunnel system designed for inkers and painters to transport artwork during periods of inclement weather. In other words, the gap between these artistic endeavors was wide enough that it necessitated a custom subterranean passage in California, the leading continental state for seismic activity. Animation's prominent position in the studio layout reinforces the department's prominence in the production hierarchy. In fact, Garity's report of the studio planning process indicates that the Animation Building was central to unlocking the organizational layout of the entire campus:

> The first consideration was to provide a smooth and efficient production flow line—*a sort of picture assembly line*. One building was set aside for the complete creative function from beginning to end. This building is properly named the Animation Building, and in it are the Story Departments, directors, layoutmen, animators, assistant animators, and inbetweeners, the latter three doing the main part of the job, *the absolute creation of the animated picture.*[204]

In Garity's view, the Animation Building is the epicenter of the studio where "the complete creative function" of feature production begins and ends. The building's layout mirrors the creative pipeline, beginning with the third-floor Story Department and continuing through

[203] Garity describes: "Southern California being in the so-called earthquake belt…it was desirable to separate [the Animation Building] structurally into several units which, though integrated into the structure as a whole from the functional standpoint, could weave harmlessly as separate structural units in the event of seismographic disturbance. Each wing has, therefore, been constructed as a separate structural unit, connected to the central section by a copper expansion joint. The central section itself, because of its length, has been divided into two distinct structural units, making a total of ten structural units in this one building" ("The New Walt Disney Studio," 11).

[204] Garity, "The New Walt Disney Studio," 8. Emphasis mine.

Character Modeling, Directing, and Animation. In this depiction, animators are solely responsible for "the absolute creation of the animated picture," rendering all other studio labor invisible. And when accounting for Garity's estimation that men occupied ninety percent of the offices in the Animation Building, this depiction also rendered women invisible.

In a distribution of labor that recalls the layout of Hyperion, the Ink and Paint Department was positioned alongside other areas of light manufacturing in a building that also housed the studio archives, commonly referred to as "the morgue." Located next to camera and cutting on the studio map, ink and paint was considered one of the most "critically important technical departments."[205] Their designation as *technical* workers supported the spatial logic of Fordism that sought to segregate craft work from other shop floor laborers.[206] Although the women artists worked with complex tools and demonstrated advanced artistic skills, they were consistently deskilled in industry literature, their creative labor often reduced to "tracing of the [animator's] outlines."[207] The inferior status of women and the association between their trade skills and domesticity defined the value of the work they performed; reinforcing the idea that the gender of the worker, rather than the nature of the work itself, determined whether the job was considered skilled or unskilled.

The implementation of permanent physical boundaries around areas where women worked directly affected how their skills and careers were socially constituted and influenced how men interacted with them in professional spaces.[208] While the Walt Disney Productions

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[205] Cline, *A Lot to Remember.*

[206] Pietrykowski, "Fordism at Ford," 390.

[207] Garity, "The New Walt Disney Studio," 6.

[208] "These associations took on a spatial dimension as female workers began to occupy very specific places on studio lots—and thus in the minds of studio workers—while their employment in others dwindled." Hill, *Never Done*, 14.

Direction Map (Figure B3.4) provides an overview of the campus layout as it was publicly circulated to studio visitors, the internal discourse around the gendering of space reveals escalating sexism among employees. Mindy Johnson describes the “hermetically sealed and predominantly feminine domain of the Ink & Paint Department” as a rich target for harassment from male animators.[209] Monikers were adopted that linked the space with the gender of its workers, and the building was often referred to as the “Nunnery,” with other options such as the “Henhouse,” or “Convent” kept in reserve. Johnson also reports that some animators referred to it as “Tehachapi,” from the Kawaiisu word Tihachipia, meaning “hard climb”—and the location of a regional women’s correctional facility.[210]

An employee map of the Burbank campus tucked away in the back of a 1943 handbook titled “The Ropes at Disney” demonstrates how men perceived women and their work (Figure B3.5).[211] Through this map, we can discern patterns of how women’s labor was internally represented in the studio’s culture. The map illustrates the labor distribution on the Burbank campus by using cartoon drawings of the workers themselves, absent from the rigid physical structures that they worked in. The cartoon displays forty-four cheerful employees participating in various activities across all four quadrants of the campus. It is a snapshot of the collegial atmosphere often referenced when folks recall early anecdotes about the studio. Among the cartoon employees, ten individuals appear to be women based on their long hairstyles and flowing skirts. What is most interesting about this map is where the women are located and what they are doing. Contrary to the male employees—who are primarily engaged in work tasks (21 of

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[209] Mindy Johnson, *Ink and Paint,* 228.

[210] Ibid

[211] Beck, “The Ropes at Disney.”

the 33 men) or physical exercise (10 of 33)—sixty percent of the cartoon women are drawn as passive spectators or unrelated to studio activity. These women are shown dining, sleeping on the lawn, refueling at the service station, and watching their male colleagues play baseball. One particular image of the Ink and Paint Department offers a literal representation of how inkers' and painters' skills were gendered and devalued: one woman is turned away from her desk, applying makeup with a compact mirror, while another observes a paint spill on the floor beside her. Of the three women drawn in the Ink and Paint Building, only one of them is actually seen working, pouring paint from one can into another.

This employee map visualizes the limitations that women faced in their career advancement at Disney. The only options offered to women in this rendering are inking and painting, acting, food service, and secretarial work. These options mirrored the areas where women were commonly seen across the film industry, as highlighted in Disney's promotional tour videos. Other aspects of studio life, however, were highly sexualized and were not depicted on this or any other studio map.

THE PENTHOUSE CLUB

"Men Only! Sorry Gals…" is featured across the center of a page in the Disney Employee Manual. The text appears alongside a whimsical illustration of a large red sun and a group of Disney workers enjoying the California weather (except one person who seems to have forgotten his sunscreen that day). This section of the employee guide highlights the amenities available at the then-new Burbank campus, including an elite membership-based club known as "the Penthouse Club." Located on the top floor of the Animation Building, the Penthouse Club was only available to male employees who could afford the $7 monthly fee, roughly half the

weekly salary of a newly hired inbetweener. The actual club entrance featured a mural filled with fair-skinned women in various stages of undress, surrounding a single man who closely resembled the mural's artist.[212] For the upper echelon of employees that could access its benefits, the club offered a restaurant, bar, barbershop, masseuse, steam baths, fitness center, and recovery beds for the occasional hangover. Contrary to the image presented in the handbook, animators reported that artists often sunbathed in the nude—that is, until complaints came in from nurses who spotted them from the upper levels of the hospital across the street.[213]

The Penthouse Club is the most egregious example of gender segregation on the Burbank Studio lot, and its exclusivity made explicit a gender and class hierarchy among employees that fostered resentment. Despite the club's expansion to include more people outside of the founding members, it remained a space that was exclusive to men (with the notable exception of service staff) and was cost-prohibitive to lower-ranking artists. Even the name "penthouse" evokes an elite social and class status. While the new studio boasted "the best equipped and most modern commissary in the Valley" that was available to all employees, the overall campus lacked the expansive amenities and convenience afforded by the club. This was one space where the rules governing women's access *were* written into studio policy; if that wasn't enough of a deterrent, the explicit sexualization of women prominently displayed in the club's entrance literally illustrated women's expected roles.

If the Burbank studio was Walt's promise to contribute to the advancement and sophistication of the animation medium, the Penthouse Club was his guarantee that men would lead the charge. The Penthouse Club worshipped at the altar of patriarchy and acted as a physical

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[212] Animator Freddy Moore was responsible for the mural above the Penthouse Club.

[213] Pierce, "The Penthouse Club at the Disney Studio."

representation of the gendered segregation and labor hierarchy that undergirded the studio's culture. It was Walt's reinvestment in the patriarchal attitudes of the industry and a testament to the polarization of male and female workers. These private and public maps show how Disney visualized and located women's labor in the animation production pipeline. However, these internal portraits did not in align with the public-facing representations of the studio. Studio tours—filmed and used as promotional material—showcase a stark contrast between Disney's idyllic portrayal of the studio's working culture and the lived experiences of the women and men Walt employed, an incongruity that would directly contribute to one of the most prolific strikes in animation history.

"Don't tell me you cook all this yourselves?": The Disneyfication of Women's Work

It was common practice for early Hollywood studios to promote themselves through various means, including trade publications.[214] Photos, maps, and articles were released to showcase each studio's mastery of the production process, aiming to reassure potential viewers and investors that their operations were reliable and their products worth consuming. With the advent of more sophisticated facilities, studios began producing pseudo-documentary shorts that promised viewers a backstage tour of the production process from start to finish.[215] Despite frequently being marketed as an "insider view" of the industry, these films hardly represented reality. Instead, they serve as a self-portrait of studio life from the management's perspective,

[214] Hill, *Never Done: A History of Women's Work in Media Production*, 58.

[215] Ibid

revealing rich details about the logic of gendered labor through what is shown and what is concealed.

A TRIP THROUGH WALT DISNEY STUDIOS (1937)

Disney released its first promotional short in 1937, just a few months prior to *Snow White*. Walt only appears on camera in the first two minutes, introduced by the narrator as "the guiding genius and active head of the organization."[216] Seated to his left is his secretary, Dolores Voght Scott, seen silently taking notes as he addresses the viewer. Dolores is foregrounded in frame, occupying nearly a third of the real estate, and yet she fades into the background, like the dwarf maquettes on the shelf behind Walt. The camera, which Scott never faces, renders her slightly out of focus and reinforces our attention to Walt. This framing reflects the expectations of her role at the studio: quietly observing and recording the contributions of the men around her.

The narrator of *A Trip Through Walt Disney Studios* shares that the studio is in peak production on *Snow White* at the time of filming, working tirelessly through the night to produce "something entirely new in entertainment…a first in cinema history." Walt's address to the audience reveals that the promotional short was requested by their distributor, RKO, to help them sell their new project. The film proceeds to "map" the entire production process, also inadvertently mapping gender across the studio's production systems. Beginning with the Story Department, viewers travel all the way through ink and paint, where the narrator describes the "120 girls" that "take the animator's pencil drawings and trace them in ink on sheets of celluloid,

[216] *A Trip Through Walt Disney Studios* (1937)

following exactly every line of the original." Women are depicted in uniform rows of desks, periodically turning over their cels to view the pencil sketch beneath them.

What is striking about the image of ink and paint artists turning over their cels is that the material action of these women's labor exactly mirrors what viewers have seen just a few minutes earlier in the Animation Department. A core difference, however, is in how these skills are described. Male animators, seated at their desks, place clean sheets of paper over their completed drawings and use lightboards to illuminate the previous action so they can closely trace the movement. As the camera zooms in, we see one animator turn his paper over several times to reference the drawing beneath it. The narrator notes that the art of animating is "purely creative," "breath[ing] life and movement into the characters" whereas inking and painting is tracing and coloring. The Paint Laboratory, at least, offers one glimpse into the innovative work of women at the studio by depicting a woman worker mixing pigments while wearing a gas mask. This department was responsible for developing classified paint formulas in over 1,500 shades that were then hand colored on 15,000 cels by the end of production.[217]

A Trip Through Walt Disney Studios demonstrates the ways in which feminized labor is incorporated into the larger studio system—through secretarial work, inking, painting, and stenography—while omitting the details of the female leaders at the studio during this time, such as Hazel Sewell. The short functions as an informative view of animation production processes, as well as an advertisement for the impressive labor statistics on *Snow White*.

[217] *A Trip Through Walt Disney Studios* (1937)

THE RELUCTANT DRAGON (1941)

In contrast to the documentary style of *A Trip Through Walt Disney Studios*, *The Reluctant Dragon* is a studio promotional tour that masquerades as entertainment. Animation scholar Esther Leslie calls *The Reluctant Dragon* "docu-fiction," stating that "the film presents Burbank as a workers' paradise, a fun factory of Fordist proportions, efficient at generating laughs but fueled by imagination."[218] Leslie's analysis indicates that this film may be one of the earliest examples of "Disneyfication,"[219] a term commonly used pejoratively to describe the transformation of something real and unsettling into something safe and controlled. In other words, *The Reluctant Dragon* is a precursor to the Disney trademark style, which offers "a real-looking world presented in ideal terms."[220] The film exemplifies this process, offering viewers a "behind-the-scenes" look at animation production that is artificially staged and masks reality.

The Reluctant Dragon premiered at the height of the Disney animator's strike on June 20, 1941, presenting an idealized vision of studio life that could readily be interpreted as a propagandistic tool aimed at restoring the public's confidence during the dispute.[221] Unlike the animated features, the release timeline for *The Reluctant Dragon* was brief; production took less than a year from start to finish, with only a month spent shooting the live-action sequences that

[218] Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands*, 211.

[219] Several references such as Merriam-Webster and the Oxford English Dictionary actually include 'Disneyfication' as a cultural term in their online dictionaries. While I am paraphrasing Webster's definition in-text, the OED also calls 'Disneyfication' a "metaphorical resemblance of some cultural phenomenon to a theme park,' citing cultural homogenization, sanitization, and 'family values' among its connotations (Oxford Reference).

[220] Ibid

[221] It is also likely that the studio hoped this interior view of animation production would help guarantee the success of future films. Scholar Richard McCulloch notes that paratextual behind-the-scenes footage helped studios condition the reception of their films. Gowanlock, "Animating Management," 71.

account for the majority of the film.[222] After *Pinocchio* (1940) yielded disappointing box office returns, the studio expedited production in an effort to secure easy profits. When sharing his ideas with story artists about a group of films that could be produced quickly and on low budgets, Walt said, "The answer I thought was to get out a couple of things that we call 'quickies'… but which would be damn good entertainment."[223] The film sought to leverage viewers' curiosity about the intricacies of animation production while showing off the studio's elaborate new Burbank campus. In the end, *The Reluctant Dragon* did not improve the studio's financial situation or regain public favor, receiving mixed reviews and failing to find its audience.

The ongoing labor disputes between the studio and its employees had a detrimental effect on *The Reluctant Dragon*'s distribution and reception. Striking artists organized picket lines outside of theaters showing the film, holding signs that featured artwork inspired by the animated characters that they helped bring to life. In solidarity with the strikers, Technicolor refused to process Disney films until bargaining issues were resolved. This resulted in only seventy-five copies of the picture being released nationwide; a hundred copies less than the studio requested.[224] These are just a few of the details that constitute the cultural backdrop of this film's production. The spatialized and gendered tensions that we have examined offer a critical context for interpreting the film's imagery, themes, and production conditions.

The Reluctant Dragon demonstrates an imagined studio culture that emphasizes white feminine beauty aesthetics, undermines the technological efforts of women in paint chemistry

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[222] Didier Ghez reports that shooting for the live-action sequences began on October 9, 1940, and wrapped by November 7 of the same year. Ghez, "The Reluctant Dragon," *The Walt Disney Film Archives*, 189.

[223] Ghez, "The Reluctant Dragon," *The Walt Disney Film Archives*, 189.

[224] Ghez, "The Reluctant Dragon," *The Walt Disney Film Archives*, 193.

through domestic metaphors, and gestures at an attitude of casual sexism on the Burbank lot. The film follows *New Yorker* columnist Robert Benchley on an unofficial and self-guided tour of the Disney facility. At the recommendation of his "nagging" wife, Benchley is at the studio to pitch a story idea to Walt. While there, he is assigned a security guard who unsuccessfully attempts to escort him through the property, unintentionally losing Benchley at every turn.

In this film, the "character" of Walt Disney is a hidden figure, the "man behind the curtain." Like the previous documentary short, Walt has less than a minute of screen time in *The Reluctant Dragon,* appearing only in the final live-action scenes. Instead, we (the audience) are meant to identify with Robert Benchley as our surrogate guide through the Burbank studio. Benchley wanders through various stages of the production process, including story development, character modeling, layout and backgrounds, animation, sound, and ink and paint. While predominantly shot as a live action film, the film does feature a number of animated shorts interspersed throughout Benchley's conversations with employees, including the eponymous "Reluctant Dragon." Benchley, like Walt, wanders through the studio like it is a playground, filled with childlike wonder while avoiding authority. His antics are written off as adolescent and playful, embodying the very spirit and attitude of "boys will be boys." Beneath this playful demeanor, Benchley depicts something more insidious; he demonstrates the casual sexism of men towards women at the studio.

Through the protagonist of Benchley, toxic white masculinity is on full display: he interrupts drawing classes, attempts to steal a character model,[225] and makes flirtatious advances towards the female employees. Notably, his worst behaviors emerge in his interactions with

[225] Notably, the maquette that Benchley tries to steal is a black centaurette, presumably from the recent production *Fantasia* (1940).

women. In the studio drawing class, Benchley weaves through the rows of artists sketching a live elephant. The first woman he encounters is Japanese American illustrator, Gyo Fujikawa. After expressing his dissatisfaction with the instructor's modifications to Fujikawa's work, Benchley nods at her, saying: "Well, zoi gin…That means 'good-bye' in Chinese," misinterpreting her identity and disregarding her opinion that the "round tummy" she added to her elephant sketch was "kind of cute."[226] Benchley makes his way to the head of the room, narrating facts about elephants, while animator Retta Scott observes him, drawing feverishly. Benchley turns to Scott and requests her drawing pad to illustrate his point about the elephant's "vacant stare" and "stupid, oafish expression," only to learn that Scott has caricatured his likeness onto her elephant's face. Benchley reacts with humor, proclaiming that "a face like that, even on an elephant, is a vast improvement," backing away from the artists with Scott's drawing still in hand. While we do see female artists actively engaging in creative labor, their opinions and their voices are drowned out by Benchley's self-indulgent monologuing. In this scene, a white man takes up the most space.

While *The Reluctant Dragon* offered a contrived view of studio life, it also shared a carefully articulated image of studio space. For the interior live-action scenes, many of the departments were recreated on soundstages. The film's art director, Gordon Wiles, cited the studio's corridor lighting as a central reason for not shooting on location.[227] Relocating interior scenes to the soundstages also meant that other films in production could proceed uninterrupted. Bulky cameras and film equipment that were too large to navigate some of the tight corners were

[226] Sound in this scene further undermines Fujikawa's talent and identity by implementing a stereotypically "Asian" sound effect at the end of their conversation, further reinforcing the difference between her and Benchley.

[227] Ghez, "The Reluctant Dragon," *The Walt Disney Film Archives*, 191.

cited as another concern, especially in departments like ink and paint, which were filled with delicate tools.[228] In fact, the ink and paint set was one of the most elaborate and anticipated constructions for the film. *The Bulletin*, an internal studio newsletter, reported:

> Glass-partitioned so that the camera can encompass every room…a one-floor set of the Inking and Painting building will begin construction soon, according to Gordon Wiles, art director of Benchley live action. When erected, [the] set, [the] most spectacular of those to be built, will encompass [the] entire floor area of stage D.[229]

The Ink and Paint Department was recreated as an imaginary space called "The Rainbow Room," interspersed with a combination of real (employed staff) and imaginary (paid actors) women workers. Women employed at the studio were selected to appear in the film by participating in an internal beauty pageant (Figure A3.2, Figure A3.3). A story about the pageant was released in *The Salt Lake Tribune* on May 8, 1941, where Walt proclaimed: "We've got loads of pretty girls around here. Let's have a contest among all the gang and see what girls win. Then we'll use 'em in the picture" (Figure A3.4). While some have speculated that the pageant was more of a public relations tactic to promote the film than an earnest casting method,[230] it is confirmed that a pageant did take place. In an interview, June Patterson[231] recalls that the pageant experience was "so scary" because of the tall platform and precarious wall that the women leaned against, saying, "I have a thing about heights anyway and I had high heels on."[232] The Tribune also reported on three other women featured in the final film: Special effects artist

[228] Canemaker, *The Lost Notebook*.

[229] Ghez, "The Reluctant Dragon," *The Walt Disney Film Archives*, 191.

[230] Amidi, "That Time Walt Disney Held A Beauty Pageant For His Ink & Paint Artists."

[231] June Patterson is an uncredited ink and paint artist who worked on Disney Golden Age films like *Pinocchio*. She is identifiable in Figures A3.2 and A3.3 as the only woman wearing a two-piece.

[232] Interview with June Patterson and Larry Whitaker, March 8, 2013.

Mildred Rossi, the animator Retta Scott, and sculptor Shirley Soderstrom. While acknowledging some of their professional contributions,[233] the Tribune primarily comments on the girls' appearance, using words like: "tiny," "piquant," "striking," and "vivacious." Both the pageant and its press coverage emphasized the expected conformity to white feminized beauty aesthetics while casually reporting workplace sexism.

Workplace sexism is more explicitly on display in the Rainbow Room sequence of *The Reluctant Dragon*. Benchley is guided to the pseudo-ink and paint room by a painter named Doris (played by actress Frances Gifford).[234] This scene is one of the most direct displays of the studio's technological advancements in color, all spearheaded by women. The Rainbow Room "theatricalizes the production of color," featuring canted camera angles, tilts, and abstract color compositions.[235] Montages of beakers, flasks, bowls, and thick, colorful paints emphasize the tools of women's labor in the department. Benchley's remarks, however, undermine the creative and scientific work of women in the paint laboratory by framing the space in domestic terms. Phrases like: "Don't tell me you cook all this yourselves" and "That looks very tasty," connect the space to other traditional tasks of white femininity; chemistry is reimagined as culinary art.

The Rainbow Room reaffirms the Ink and Paint Department as a feminine space and reinforces the centrality of color in women's labor. When our protagonist encounters his new guide, Doris, the film transitions from black and white to full technicolor, allowing the viewers

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[233] Interestingly, the Tribune introduces Rossi as "one of the very few girls in special animation effects" before calling Scott "the only actual woman animator in the whole studio," gesturing toward either a hierarchization of animation subdepartments or a general lack of awareness about the artform.

[234] While Disney did cast some of the actual woman workers into his film, as indicated above, it is important to note that the woman with the most onscreen dialogue (Doris) is a paid actress—not a studio employee. See: Thompson, "Quick—Like a Bunny!"

[235] Thompson, "Quick—Like a Bunny!"

(and Benchley) to appreciate the breadth of the department's color selections as well as Doris' beauty.[236] In the Rainbow Room, women are the ones who are "over"-represented, filling the space from wall to wall uniformly crouched over their desks with cels or standing by paint cabinets mixing beakers. Depicted in this way, women's bodies are represented as extensions of their tools, presenting them as "mechanical assets rather than human resources."[237] Their status as "assets" of the studio is reinforced by Benchley's remarks about Doris' appearance. Near the end of her tour, Doris picks up a painted cel from *Bambi* (1942), holding the drawing up for Benchley to admire. In a moment that animation scholar Kirsten Thompson says, "foregrounds the ways in which gender is at stake in the material production of animation," Benchley looks past (or, *through*) the hand painted drawing at Doris, saying: "It'd be alright if you could get that reindeer out of the way." Doris demurs, ignoring Benchley's remark and responding by offering to "scare up [a] background" for the cel. Holding his ground, Benchley replies: "Nothing wrong with the one I just saw." The aestheticization of women's material work, their domestic labor, and their bodies authorizes the skills at play in the inking or painting of animated cels and is continually reaffirmed at the Disney Studio.

The Reluctant Dragon is not one of Disney's most acclaimed films; it isn't an accurate portrayal of production processes, and it isn't an accurate representation of studio life at the time, either. What the film does offer, though, is a representation of a segregated workplace where women were beginning to occupy more prominent roles in animation. It is a demonstration of the casual sexism women experienced from their male colleagues and, arguably, a sanitized

[236] When Benchley sees Doris again after first meeting her in black and white, he proclaims: "But you look so different in technicolor!" Drawing attention to the studio's technological partnership while indirectly commenting on her appearance.

[237] Hill, *Never Done*, 76.

depiction of reality. Thus, *The Reluctant Dragon* gives viewers a snapshot of a studio at the height of its creativity on the precipice of radical change. Disney's golden age was about to come to a reluctant end, and Walt did not know it yet.

4
Women on the (Picket) Line

> …the girl artists have the right to expect the same chances for advancement as men, and I honestly believe that they may eventually contribute something to this business that men never would or could.
>
> —*Walt Disney, speech given to all employees 1941*

This quote from a speech given by Walt Disney in 1941 is often recalled by enthusiastic fans and studio historians as incontrovertible evidence that "Walt Disney was no 'gender bigot.'"[238] Its circulation in popular media outlets surged during the 2010s[239] as *Frozen* (2013), and then *Frozen II* (2019) dominated the global box office.[240] And yet, the event that fostered the most Disney-apologism was not directly related to the studio at all; in a speech she delivered during the National Board of Review Dinner,[241] actress Meryl Streep resurrected well-worn allegations against Walt that characterized him as a sexist and racist anti-Semite. This event prompted swift responses from The Walt Disney Family Museum and Cartoon Brew[242] to address and correct "common misconceptions" about Walt in an effort to "inform and educate

[238] Amid Amidi, "Walt Disney Was No Gender Bigot."

[239] For additional references to this speech, see: Davis, "The 'Dark Prince'"; Friedman, *The Disney Revolt*; Holt, "The Forgotten Women"; Keegan, "72 Years Before *Frozen*."

[240] This speech garnered attention with the release of *Frozen* (2013) because it was the first Disney animated film to credit a woman, Jennifer Lee, as a co-director.

[241] The focus of Streep's speech was to honor and recognize the efforts of actress Emma Thompson for her portrayal of P.L. Travers in the Disney biopic *Saving Mr. Banks* (2014). In her speech, Streep quoted animator Ward Kimball saying: "Some of his associated reported that Walt Disney didn't really like women…He didn't trust women or cats." She then proceeded to talk about Disney's support of "an anti-Semitic industry lobbying group" and called him a "gender bigot," reading from the now infamous 1938 rejection letter to Mary V. Ford that is cited in this project's first chapter. Setoodeh, "Meryl Streep Blasts Walt Disney at National Board of Review Dinner."

[242] Cartoon Brew is an animation news website launched in 2004 by animation historians Amid Amidi and Jerry Beck. Amidi and Beck have over twenty combined book publications between them; Beck has served on the Cartoon Network advisory board and currently serves as Vice President of the ASIFA-Hollywood board.

present and future generations."[243] These responses from these two groups ranged from critically informed to saccharine. Both groups emphasized the contributions of women at the studio, particularly through the 1940s, and pointed towards the culture of sexism that was pervasive across industries in American society. In a tragic case of irony, Cartoon Brew's defense of Walt against Streep's "Disney-Bashing Speech" invited a wave of sexist remarks leveraged against Streep in the comment section, turning their rebuttal into a modern-day witch hunt in the name of protecting the legacy of "the most important animator in the history of mankind."[244]

When taken out of cultural and historical context, this section of Walt's speech to his employees *does* frame him as a progressive leader advocating on behalf of gender equity in the workplace. However, the totality of this speech reflects a confused and embittered CEO grasping to regain control over an overextended and acrimonious workforce. After the breakthrough success of *Snow White* (1937) and the studio's subsequent move to Burbank (examined in the previous chapters), the Disney studio was now in simultaneous production on three feature-length films. Despite Walt's best efforts to routinize the machine of feature animation production during the Burbank transition, development on each of the films had proven to be problematic,[245] and the studio was behind schedule and over budget.[246] In addition, the war abroad shrank

[243] To see the response from the Walt Disney Family Museum, refer to: The Walt Disney Family Museum, "Common Misconceptions About Walt Disney."

[244] This quote can be attributed to an anonymous commenter. This comment signals another ironic and often uncorrected misconception about Disney: that he furnished any of the animations himself.

[245] The three films that the studio was working on by the spring of 1938 were *Bambi, Pinocchio,* and *Fantasia* ("The Concert Feature").

[246] Neal Gabler writes at length about the challenges the studio faced during production on *Bambi* and *Pinocchio* in his book *Walt Disney The Triumph of the American Imagination*, in the chapter titled "Parnassus." Additional discussions can be found in Michael Barrier's *Hollywood Cartoons: American Animation in its Golden Age,* "Part One, Chapter 6: Disney 1938-1941."

European markets, which meant diminishing returns on investments for the studio and its employees.[247] During a time of uncertainty about the future of the studio and the potential for American involvement in the war, a new and unforeseen shift was taking place in the Animation Building: women were heading story development and character design on one of the new projects.

Disney's first year at the Burbank studio was characterized by paradoxical gendered organizational practices. The previous chapter established that space at the studio was not gender-neutral and that cultural constructions of womanhood were inseparable from the division of labor and the deskilling of low-level production processes that structured the physical layout of the new Burbank campus. Representations of women's labor on studio maps and in promotional tours were confined to the sanctioned feminine spaces of ink and paint, clerical work, and service roles—indicating a spatialization of labor that upheld patriarchal power structures and positioned women at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy. In addition, the implementation of Fordist production methods contributed to a culture of sexism that taught employees how to relate to one another within these spaces, reinforcing the notion that "social attributes such as gender are mutually constituted in the workplace and the community."[248] In other words, discourses of male superiority/female inferiority were embedded in both the

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[247] Gabler reports that where *Snow White* had grossed $2 million in England alone, the studio's next feature, *Pinocchio,* garnered only $200,000. While the studio offers its own explanation of the discrepancy to its shareholders, some have attributed *Pinocchio's* poor performance to the film's dark themes, calling it "the bleakest vision of any Disney feature" (Finch, *Art of Disney,* 88). Whereas *Snow White* offered audiences a reprieve from Depression-era anxieties, *Pinocchio* seemed to do the opposite, instead reminding them of the "responsibilities of maturity and what one had to sacrifice to grow up." Gabler, *Walt Disney triumph of the American Imagination,* 327.

[248] Linda McDowell, "Life Without Father and Ford," 405.

professional and the social layout of the studio. So much so, that when a minority of women breached the masculine domain of animation, they were met with harassment and abuse.

Whereas the fear of "becoming women workers"[249] had been entrenched in a material reality tied to the gendering of space in the new studio layout, male anxieties expanded into the symbolic realm as women assumed more prominent positions of power in the masculine areas of creative agency. If gender segregation was woven into the transition from Hyperion to Burbank in 1940, it was then unraveled during the transition into World War II as the studio welcomed increasing numbers of women into male-dominated positions. In the midst of war, the fear of becoming women workers was no longer about men being forced to wear hairnets or complete undesirable tasks; it was perceived to be a threat to their identity as men and their status as the dominant sex.[250] Tensions loomed around what it *meant* to have women in men's spaces and how their presence would influence gendered labor hierarchies at the studio. These tensions forged the backdrop of the 1941 Disney Animator's Strike.

This chapter examines the implications of physical and symbolic boundary-crossing, establishing a correlation between the labor unrest that led to unionization and the tensions arising from the shifting spatial and symbolic gendered hierarchies within the studio. Despite the established gendering of skills and the physical separation of labor, a minority of women made significant and lasting contributions to the aesthetic development of animation at Disney by intruding male-dominated spaces. If we recognize space and occupation as instruments of power,

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[249] In the previous chapter, I introduced the concept of "becoming women workers" as the masculine anxiety around maintaining the traditional balance of power where men have always been in the upper level of the labor hierarchy at work and the primary breadwinners at home. This concept implies that there is a relationship between how power is operating in, or connected between, those two spheres.

[250] Phillips and Taylor "Sex and Skill: Notes towards a Feminist Economics."

we can begin to unpack the conflict brought on by contradictions between the established feminine animation disciplines and the location of women's physical bodies in predominantly male departments. Women who upset the unspoken social contract with men, which allowed them to engage in paid labor so long as it didn't disrupt the hegemonic power structures, were frequently subjected to patterns of exclusion, harassment, and discrimination. Although the cornerstone of union organizing efforts was the push for wage increases and labor recognition through film credits, the gender cleavages reified during this period added another layer of insecurity to an already precarious male workforce.

By analyzing how women are represented in the public and private discourses of the Disney animation strike, we can reach a more nuanced understanding of the gender dynamics that drove conflicts over economic security and labor power at the studio on the precipice of World War II. Beginning with Walt's address to his employees in February 1941, I show how these tensions were linked to the studio's relocation to Burbank and the restructuring of physical labor detailed in chapter three. I then juxtapose the public representations of the strike against the union's internal communications in order to scrutinize the appropriation of women's labor as a bargaining tool. Finally, I turn to anecdotal accounts of women's experiences working in male-dominated areas of production to show that the cost of their career advancement was often isolation and verbal abuse. Incorporating women's own records of their working relationships with Walt and the other men in their department creates space for women to speak on behalf of their own history-making.

Worth as Much as a Man

> There is a rumor that we are trying to develop girls for animation to replace higher-priced men. This is the silliest thing I have ever heard of. We are not interested in low-priced help… if a woman can do the work as well, she is worth as much as a man.
>
> — *Walt Disney, speech given to all employees 1941*

Within the first year of Disney's move to the Burbank studio, the dreams of an animation utopia had faded under the weight of economic realities. The studio's second feature, *Pinocchio* (1940), received abundant praise for its aesthetic sophistication. It is widely regarded as Disney's masterpiece, with some claiming that it brought "the cartoon to a level of perfection that the word cartoon would not cover,"[251] calling it "the pinnacle of animation art"[252] or simply stating, "it's a Disney."[253] Despite critic's admiration for the film, however, revenues returned nearly half of what the film cost to produce and ushered the studio toward a financial crisis. In its 1940 annual report, the company told shareholders that *Pinocchio's* defeat was the outcome of "excessive cost which was a direct result of the transition period through which the company passed when it changed its policy of making one feature in two years…**to a policy of producing from two to four features a year as presently projected.**"[254] In addition to *Pinocchio,* the studio had ambitious plans to ramp up production on three additional features: *Fantasia* (at the time called "The Concert Feature"), *Bambi*, and *Dumbo.* By the end of 1940, Disney had also launched development on an untitled Mickey Mouse feature, *Peter Pan*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and *The Reluctant Dragon.* This intensification of labor demands proceeded despite tightening

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[251] Neal Gabler, *Walt Disney: Triumph of the American Imagination,* 326; Otis Ferguson, "The New Republic."

[252] Neal Gabler, *Walt Disney: Triumph of the American Imagination,* 327.

[253] Neal Gabler, *Walt Disney: Triumph of the American Imagination,* 326; Otis Ferguson, "The New Republic."

[254] Emphasis mine. Walt Disney Productions, "First Annual Report 1940."

financial constraints from their bankers; as early as August 1940, Bank of America had imposed a $2.25 million budget ceiling on the studio and demanded cuts in employee salaries.[255]

Tensions among studio employees were high as dwindling profits and subsequent economic uncertainties materially impacted their livelihoods. The studio, which had carefully articulated and refined its labor organization with the move to Burbank, was experiencing major growing pains. Between 1937 and 1941, the staff had grown four hundred percent,[256] and the newer employees had little tolerance for Walt's favoritism and paternalistic managerial style.[257] However, even those workers who had been with the studio since the early days of Hyperion considered themselves loyal to Walt—not his studio, from which he was indistinguishable—and their devotion wavered during the studio's decline.[258] As production pressures reached new heights, whispers of unionization traveled through the halls. In response, the studio attempted to institute a company-controlled union;[259] when that effort failed, Walt called the employees into

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[255] Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons: American Animation in its Golden Age,* "Part One, Chapter 6: Disney 1938-1941."

[256] The studio had grown from 300 employees to over 1200 by 1941. Gabler, *Walt Disney: Triumph of the American Imagination,* 351.

[257] When the studio was forced to cut salaries, Walt and Roy took two very different approaches. Roy enacted an even 10% cut across the departments that he managed. Walt, on the other hand, only cut the salaries of those creative roles "that [he] thought were being overpaid" and additionally asked "some of the loyal ones in the higher brackets to help by taking a cut that they, in their own minds, thought they could stand." Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons: American Animation in its Golden Age,* "Part One, Chapter 6: Disney 1938-1941." Gabler links the distribution of finances to Walt's paternalism, notably the arbitrary dispersion of bonuses, on page 354. For additional discussions on Disney's financial management strategies, see: Friedman, *The Disney Revolt*; Gomery, *Disney Discourse.*

[258] Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons: American Animation in its Golden Age,* "Part One, Chapter 6: Disney 1938-1941."

[259] Disney's attorney Gunther Lessing promoted an internal studio union called the "Federation of Screen Cartoonists" in order to contain employee bargaining power and intercept organizing efforts from the Screen Cartoonists Guild, which had already successfully unionized several other prominent animation studios by 1940. Disney executives refused to negotiate with the Federation, instead leveraging it as a camouflage for blocking the more reputable, independent union. Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons: American Animation in its Golden Age*, "Part One, Chapter 6: Disney 1938-1941." Also see: Friedman, "The Fake Disney Union" and *The Disney Revolt*; Sito, *Drawing the Line.*

the large theater—just like he had several years prior when he announced that they were about to produce the first animated feature.

Disney's speech to his employees offers tangible evidence of the economic, class, and gendered tensions that unpinned the studio culture in 1940. At least two written versions of the speech exist, with each variation implementing the same maneuvers to emotionally appeal to the audience. In one version accessed through Special Collections & Archives at California State University,[260] Walt blends self-pity with self-congratulations, speaking at length about the hardships he overcame in his efforts to "show the skeptics that the animated cartoon was deserving of a better place; that it was more than a mere 'filler' on a program." His unwavering pursuit to advance the sophistication of the cartoon medium could only be achieved through blind confidence and an "unselfish attitude toward our work." In fact, Walt references "unselfishness" three times on the first page of his address, underscoring his perceived personal sacrifices as dues paid towards the greater good of the medium. According to Walt, these dues paid dividends; he credits his labor with raising animation "from obscurity to a point where it held the world's record gross for both short subject and features." Walt's message—that when you are willing to endure a little self-sacrifice, you are greatly rewarded—aligns his story with the ethos of the American Dream.

Walt's speech articulates the significance of economic sacrifice in the name of the greater good, equating free labor with morality. His words focus on perceptions of economic disparity and anxieties around the existence of an "inner circle" or "chosen few" that profit from salary adjustments more than others. He refutes the claims that "we have class distinction in this place,"

[260] The Motion Picture Screen Cartoonists Guild, Local 839 Collection.

arguing instead that bonuses are distributed to "all permanent employees who play a part in the success out of which these profits derive," adding that neither he nor Roy "in the whole history of the business" ever received any dividends. In the second version of the speech that is published in a collection titled *Walt Disney Conversations*, Walt goes so far as to name the weekly salaries of key executives, including himself, revealing that he is the highest salaried man in the studio ($500.00 per week), with Roy coming in second ($350.00 per week). Walt claims that he has "never been interested in personal gain or profit" and downplays the size of his earnings by saying, "if I had chosen to take another course, I could easily be making five times that amount." These are the policies and attributes that built Walt's business.

By focusing on wages and economic sacrifice, Walt's speech gestures toward a workforce that is overworked and underpaid, though it does not account for the gendered intonations of employee unrest. While compensation is a key factor in the animation strike, wage disparities were related to other class and gendered tensions at the studio regarding access and amenities. For example, Walt highlights the infamous "Penthouse Club" by name, reassuring the audience that it is "not a closed thing"—despite the membership dues and the exclusion of women. He gestures towards the gendered segregation of the "Penthouse" space by exclusively using masculine pronouns, stating that "at the start we had to allow those *men* who carry the main responsibilities of the Studio the first chance to join" before "throwing it open to the whole group." In the same speech, however, he undermines this message of inclusivity by saying: "I have always felt, and always will feel, that the men who are contributing the most to the organization should, out of respect alone, enjoy some privileges."

Economic and gendered spatial anxieties become entangled through allusions to the Burbank campus. Naming the Penthouse Club as a source of discontent highlights how

employees equated their ability to access certain spaces (and invariably advance their careers) with gendered hierarchies and economic status. Only those who could afford the membership dues could access the Penthouse Club, where top-ranking animators and male leaders from across the studio gathered. Other class distinctions existed—such as better seats in the theater or reserved spaces in the parking lot—but in both versions of his speech, Walt names the Burbank studio as a source of discontentment. In one version, opening with: "A lot of fellows wonder why we have to have the new Studio."

I would argue that Disney employees were not dissatisfied with the Burbank studio's state-of-the-art amenities or special features tailored to the benefit of their craft. Rather, the institutional arrangement of labor that distributed workers along an assembly-line style of production in order to increase efficiency and profit also succeeded in engendering class and gender conflicts.[261] While there isn't any direct evidence at Disney to suggest that the implementation of Fordist industrial practices was an intentional union-busting tactic, these same decentralized production practices were employed by the Ford Motor Company as "a means to forestall or avoid unionization."[262] Further, segregating labor along gendered lines served a more complex role at the Ford Highland Park plant than simply being a site for cheap labor.[263] Isolating women and deskilling their work contributed to the "reproduction of a quiescent work force."[264] Regardless of intent, the same effects of Taylorization were evident at Disney and acknowledged by striking artists, who said: "We are run on a factory—a machine—basis, but we

[261] Pietrykowski, "Fordism at Ford," 384.

[262] Pietrykowski, "Fordism at Ford," 385.

[263] Pietrykowski, "Fordism at Ford," 394.

[264] Ibid

have no machines. The men and women who turn out the production are themselves the machines."[265]

While on the surface, Walt's speech suggests counterhegemonic views on the role of women in animation, the fact that two versions exist contradicts this message.[266] Animation scholar Michael Barrier explains that one version of the talk was delivered exclusively to the lower-ranking employees, namely the women who worked as inkers and painters, on February 11,1941. Walt delivered a different version to the other (male) staff members the night before, addressing some of his remarks specifically to the animators.[267] It is difficult to parse out which version was presented on each occasion, but the impact was the same: the speech made the artists angry and emboldened the union effort. Walt had spoken to them from the lens of a businessman,[268] stoking their resentment of the studio's new corporate environment.

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[265] The Motion Picture Screen Cartoonists Guild, Local 839 Collection (1-35).

[266] In May 1941, just a few months after Walt's speech, Glamour magazine published a two-page spread titled "Girls at Work for Disney," featuring photos of some of the women who were "holding important posts in story and character development, backgrounds, layouts, and cutting." Glamour praised Walt as "The great cartoonist open[ing] up new careers for talented girls in his Hollywood studio." This article was released in the same month that the strike began (50-51). Notably, the same edition of Glamour also features a series of cartoon sketches titled: "Why Career Girls Go Crazy" and an article on "Successful Careers at Home" featuring "six examples of attractive young women whose full-time job is marriage" (60-61, 64-65).

[267] Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons: American Animation in its Golden Age,* "Notes to Chapter 6."

[268] Michael Barrier has an excellent quote that explains the dichotomy of Walt's approach to business: "Disney became an artist in order to realize ambitions that were fundamentally those of a businessman; as his studio grew, he continued to treat it as a typical self-made entrepreneur would—as an extension of himself, despite the studio's size and increasingly industrial character." *Hollywood Cartoons: American Animation in its Golden Age,* "Part One, Chapter 6: Disney 1938-1941."

"One of the Wives:" The Appropriation of Women's Labor in Strike Messaging

The most pervasive myth surrounding the Disney animator's strike is that it originated in the Ink and Paint Department.[269] The prevailing narrative suggests that Art Babbitt encountered an unnamed female painter who had collapsed at her workstation from hunger; her meager salary necessitated skipping meals to support her family. This perceived injustice launched Babbitt's unionization efforts and framed the labor movement at Disney as an emancipatory campaign in the name of the studio's lowest-ranking female employees.

This origin story serves a greater purpose than raising awareness around the underpaid status of ink and paint artists; it offers an illusion of gender unity amongst employees while simultaneously confirming that class and gender divisions existed and were inextricably linked to studio space. Animation historian Tom Sito[270] has validated elements of this myth through his seminal book *Drawing the Line: The Untold Stories of the Animation Unions from Bosko to Bart Simpson*. In an interview with Babbitt, the nameless painter is identified as Helen Blume,[271] who would "stretch her money by skipping lunches" and, on at least one occasion, "actually passed out from hunger."[272] Sito reports that despite the "beautiful cafeteria" at the new Burbank Studio,

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[269] While this story is frequently touted as a historical allegory in trade articles about current labor disputes, it has apparently been mythologized to the point of inspiring a fictional stage play. The plot summary states: "Fantasy and reality clash when a movie director, hired to helm a documentary about how cartoons are made, finds himself at the world's most famous animation studio in the midst of a polarizing labor strike. Suggested by real events at the Disney Studio in 1941, DIZGRUNTLED takes a hard look at the growing pains of creative companies." The play's cast of characters includes Helen Blume, described simply as "an artist." See: Playwright's Center, "Dizgruntled."

[270] Tom Sito is an American animator, animation historian, and Professor of Animation at USC's School of Cinematic Arts. Sito was a mainstay of Disney's Feature Animation division from 1988 to 1995 and has appeared in numerous documentaries about the studio. He is President-Emeritus of the Hollywood Animation Guild, Local #839 IATSE.

[271] Blume was a cel paint artist at Disney, and a single parent supporting her mother and children after her husband left her during the Great Depression.

[272] Tom Sito, *Drawing the Line*.

many inkers and painters could not afford to eat there[273] on their regular weekly salary, which was the lowest in the industry.[274] According to historical timelines,[275] Babbitt began organizing in earnest in February 1941 when he was nominated as Chairman for the Disney unit of the Screen Cartoonists Guild. By that time, the Burbank studio had been operational for over a year, with budget cuts impacting compensation and job prospects for nearly as long. And yet, this story presupposes that Babbitt did not find evidence of women's diminished working conditions until entering the female-dominated space of ink and paint. As the central protagonist in histories of the Disney animation strike, Babbitt sheds his status as the studio playboy[276] and assumes the role of women's savior.

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[273] Ibid

[274] While Disney is accused of having the lowest wages for inkers and painters in the industry, low wages and poor working conditions were common in this area of the animation industry. Martha Sigall, a painter from Leon Schlesinger Studios, has written that her salary as a painter was capped at $21 per week (inkers were paid a little more and could reach $23). Sigall also reports that studio executives sometimes used these wage disparities as incentives for recruiting new talent, hovering near the entrance of a rival studio asking ink-and-paint girls "How much are you getting paid? Like to make $5 a week more?" Sito, *Drawing the Line*.

[275] The events that led to the Disney animator's strike are complex and involve a number of key players that are outside of the scope of this project. In summary, Babbitt is first approached by the studio lawyer Gunther Lessing in December 1937 to discuss creating a "loosely-knit employee organization" that would block the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) from recruiting studio members. Babbitt helps the studio form the Federation of Screen Cartoonists in January 1938 and serves as President of the union for nearly two years. However, studio leadership refuses to negotiate without a union charter which the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) does not grant until October 1939. By the end of 1940, an independent union called the Screen Cartoonists Guild had successfully organized artists at Screen Gems, Schlesinger, and Walter Lantz studios and had set their sights on Universal Pictures and Disney. Walt summons the Federation leadership and asks them to revive the organization in order to block the Guild; this request backfires, ultimately pushing Babbitt and the other leaders toward the Screen Cartoonists Guild. Babbitt is nominated as the Guild's Chairman in February 1941, and in April of that year, the NLRB unofficially rules that the Federation is a company union, forcing it to disband. Over the course of the next six months, the studio forges two additional company-controlled unions to combat the Screen Cartoonists. The Guild calls for a studio strike and nationwide boycott of Disney products in April 1941 after Art Babbitt is fired and escorted off the studio premises. History comes full circle on July 8th when Walt signs an agreement with the head of IATSE, William Bioff, a renowned organized crime figure and corrupt union leader, to settle the strike. Guild leaders refuse to negotiate with the mobster, and the strike continues until July 29th when the US Government intervenes in arbitration. The Guild receives a closed shop union contract with Disney on August 2nd (Friedman, *The Disney Revolt*).

[276] John Canemaker Collection, "Interview with John Canemaker and Art Babbitt." Also, see: Gabler, *Walt Disney: Triumph of the American Imagination,* 240.

Whether or not it is true that Babbitt rescued Blume from deprivation is inconsequential; the circulation of this narrative promotes the animation strike in the name of the women workers, citing women's issues as a central bargaining priority. However, when analyzed within the context of union paraphernalia and strike coverage, a bait and switch is revealed. Masculine pronouns were ubiquitous in strike communications, and anxieties around a "surfeit of labor in the animation market" were leveraged as a reason for every artist across the industry to support the union's cause (Figure C4.1).[277] The combination of declining revenues and exponential labor growth led to a scarcity of jobs in animation that increased male anxieties around women being trained as their bargain replacements. As a result, women's labor was commonly appropriated in union communications to deliver a message of solidarity that predominantly spoke to male workers, emphasizing how the union would help the male artists receive the treatment they deserved. Communications from strikers to loyalists[278] often included the "incentives for *men* to work," citing money, security, and credit as their three core objectives. These incentives were accompanied by statements, such as: "If a *man* feels *he* is being well paid *he* will work harder and more conscientiously"; "A *man* will work better and harder if *he* knows that *he* can keep his job as long as the Studio needs that job done"; and, "A *man* will work better for *his* personal satisfaction in this job and for credit for work done."[279]

The strike provided an opening for men at Disney to redraw the boundaries around gendered labor, reasserting their dominance in spaces of creative agency and, by extension, the

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[277] On the Line, July 16, 1941 "Not a worker in Hollywood can afford to lose the Disney Strike!!!" The Motion Picture Screen Cartoonists Guild, Local 839 Collection, (1-33).

[278] This was a term Disney used to refer to non-strikers.

[279] "The Disney Strike is Still on!" The Motion Picture Screen Cartoonists Guild, Local 839 Collection, 1-35. Emphasis mine.

occupational hierarchy. The anxieties that underpinned the animation strike reflected intensifying gender and class tensions between workers as women increasingly inhabited traditionally male spaces like story development and animation. By prioritizing the challenges of women as ink and paint artists, the strike overlooks the mistreatment of women in higher-profile areas of production. This absence of diverse female labor representation in strike materials and narratives indicates that it was not merely about the conflicts between employees and management, but that gendered confrontations amongst workers played a significant role in the power dynamic of the labor dispute.

However, the animator's strike was not exempt from the contradictory gendered organizational practices that had come to define the studio during this period. While union communications were predominantly from the perspective of male employees, at least one woman ink and paint artist was represented in union leadership: Phyllis Lambertson. Lambertson had only worked at the studio for a year prior to the strike and was elected as the Vice President of the Guild. Records show that Lambertson was present at key negotiations with studio executives and testified in court in the legal case of NLRB v. Walt Disney Productions.[280] During her testimony, Lambertson recalled that Walt gathered all of the women from ink and paint on the eve of the strike "to ask for their cooperation."[281] *Bambi* was in its final production stages, primarily in the Ink and Paint Department, and "it was up to them to help get the picture out now." Walt was accompanied by department supervisors Dorothy Smith and Grace Christensen, as he assured the 200 female artists that "if any of them wanted to come to work the

[280] The National Labor Relations Board sued Walt Disney after Art Babbitt was laid off in November 1941, presumably for his principal role in the animation strike. The trial was in October 1942 and lasted for seven days. In the Matter of WALT DISNEY PRODUCTIONS and, ARTHUR BABBITT, C-2104 (1942).

[281] In the Matter of WALT DISNEY PRODUCTIONS and, ARTHUR BABBITT, C-2104 (1942).

following day…across the picket line…he would support them and their jobs would be safe." Lambertson's testimony was considered essential evidence in support of the accusations that the studio interfered with the union activity of its employees.[282]

The obstacles that women faced are reduced to wage disparities in strike literature, focusing on the union's goal of helping Disney inkers and painters become the best paid in the industry[283] while overlooking the myriad ways that women's labor was undervalued. For example, although Lambertson held an executive position as a union officer, her name rarely appears in strike correspondence. Art Babbitt (President) and David Hilberman (Secretary), on the other hand, are frequently cited in both internal bargaining updates and public event coverage. Additionally, while union literature *did* cite women's issues as a central bargaining priority, they receive very little real estate on the page. Taglines that drew attention to the low wages for women working in ink and paint, like: "The girls are the lowest paid in the entire cartoon industry[284] (they earn from $16 to $20 a week)"[285] and "The fellows and girls who draw me [Donald Duck] make less than house painters," summarize the totality of union coverage on woman-specific issues. At the same time that the union promoted itself as an organization for the

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[282] Ibid

[283] While this is a significant goal with a tangible financial effect, it is important to note that the average salary for inkers and painters across the animation industry does not set the bar for this achievement very high. Having the highest salary in an occupation on the lowest rung of the labor hierarchy does not necessarily translate into fair compensation.

[284] Although I did not encounter this example in my archival research, Jake Friedman offers a slightly expanded version of this message that relates the strike back to the unpaid bonuses on *Snow White*: "The salaries of the Disney artists average less than those of house painters…The Disney girl inks and painters receive between $16 and $20 a week. On *Snow White*, the much-publicized bonuses did not even compensate the artists for the two years of overtime they worked. *Snow White* made the highest box office gross in history—over $10,000,000.00. All the other major cartoon studios in Hollywood have Screen Cartoon Guild contracts. The Disney Studio is the only non-union studio in Hollywood." *Untitled Document circa June 1, 1941,* from Friedman, *The Disney* Revolt, 190.

[285] American Federation of Labor Picketline, The Motion Picture Screen Cartoonists Guild, Local 839 Collection, 1-35.

interests of women workers, it also engaged in a smear campaign against the inkers and painters who crossed the picket lines (Figure C4.2).[286]

Despite their centrality in union literature, women in ink and paint actually constituted the majority of Disney loyalists.[287] The guild reported that "of the remaining 110 artists inside the studio, who fall under the guild jurisdiction, 75 are girl inkers and painters," whereas "The Animation Department, backbone of the studio, is represented 92% in the picket line."[288] By naming animation "the backbone of the studio," the guild's message reinforces spatial and gendered hierarchies at the expense of the women workers they purport to advocate for. Notably, this statistic also excludes the few women who worked in the Animation Department—like Sylvia Holland and Retta Scott—who were among the 8% of workers who crossed the picket line.[289] Contrary to the strike's narrative of gender integration, women who worked at various levels of the labor hierarchy were, by and large, loyal to Walt.

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[286] Examples of smear rhetoric, which use the term "fink."

Excerpt from a union song titled "My Little Red Axe":

"Once I had a girl who inked
Taught her how to be a fink.
She finked how long I do not know.
When the strike's over I'll let her go" (1-35)

Excerpt from "Primer of the Strike":
"I is for INKERS, who INK with an 'F',
When passing the pickets they'd like to be deaf."

The Motion Picture Screen Cartoonists Guild, Local 839 Collection, 1-35.

[287] Most groups disagreed on the strike numbers, especially at the height of the conflict. The Guild's business agent has since confirmed that there were approximately 330 strikers out of 602 artists. Author Jake Friedman has argued that the strike was so adversarial because "it was an extremely balanced divide." The union's strength could be swayed by as little as twenty votes. *The Disney* Revolt, 193. Of the 382 strikers identified through Friedman's research (including some non-artists), approximately 65 were women, and only half worked in ink and paint.

[288] The Motion Picture Screen Cartoonists Guild, Local 839 Collection, 1-28.

[289] Holt, *Queens of Animation.*

There are a number of possible explanations for women's loyalty to the studio during strike negotiations. Women had limited options for lateral or upward career mobility in the industry as wartime uncertainties contributed to widespread layoffs. Additionally, the fear of retribution from Walt likely dissuaded women in higher positions from joining the strike. This was especially true for artists like Sylvia Holland, who had recently served as the creative director[290] on the "Waltz of the Flowers" sequence in *Fantasia* (1940), but had to fight for credit.[291] Holland's correspondence with her brother-in-law suggested that she supported the union efforts overall, saying: "I have come to the conclusion that Walt is alright and is not trying to do *us* dirty, but that he is pig-headed and badly advised."[292] Holland calls Walt's head legal counsel, Gunther Lessing, "a dirty little so-and-so," claiming that he is "very dangerous when it comes to dealing with employees, most of whom…only want a fair deal with their employer."

Other justifications for resisting the strike often signaled an overidentification with the studio's interests. Ink and paint artist Grace Godino said: "I felt it was wrong to do this. I had been treated so well at [Disney] that I saw no point. Why should I kick a person in the face that gave me this opportunity that I was so happy with and that I enjoyed."[293] Walt had succeeded in

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[290] Sylvia Holland is one of the women Walt named in his speech to the studio in February 1941, along with her assistant Ethel Kulsar. While Holland abstained from the picket line, Kulsar participated as a striking artist. See: Jackson, *Walt Disney Conversations*; Friedman, "Babbitt Blog" and *The Disney Revolt*.

[291] It is relevant to note that while Holland did receive credit as the creative story lead for this movement, she had to fight for it. The narrative of her patiently waiting for her name to appear on screen during a viewing of Fantasia spans a page and a half of Holt's text. The final confrontation, though, is described as an explosion "Sylvia was usually calm and cool but this provocation was too much for even her easy temper. She went completely silent, stood up, and walked out of the room…Walt, sensing trouble, followed her down the hall…After a minute of silently boiling, however, she turned to Walt and exploded. 'It's outrageous!' she exclaimed, then insisted her work be properly credited. Sylvia would get the satisfaction of seeing her name, though many others wouldn't…Sylvia made certain that not only her name but also the names of two of the women who toiled alongside her, Bianca Majolie and Ethel Kulsar, were featured prominently. Theirs were the only women's names in the program." Holt, *Queens of Animation,* 89.

[292] Sylvia Holland to her brother-in-law Glen Holland. Jake S. Friedman, *The Disney Revolt,* 233. Emphasis mine.

[293] Johnson, *Ink and Paint,* 185.

"construct[ing] a sense of identity that linked the interests of the worker with the interests of the company"[294] by repositioning the ink and paint artists as essential to the success of *Bambi* (and, by extension, the studio). Inker Marie Justice said that the final production stages on *Bambi* were finished "in record time because the people that worked, worked hard."[295] Meanwhile, other women simply did not see their interests represented in the strike. Painter Jean Orbison abstained—not because she didn't think they deserved a union, but because she didn't like "the way they went about doing it." Orbison called the strike "distasteful," claiming that strikers would yell at people, with some animators casually insulting the appearance of women who walked by. "That had nothing to do with the animation part," Orbison recalls, "I wasn't too crazy about some of the guys."[296] Orbison's critique indicates a perceived disconnect between union messaging and union activity, gesturing at the importance of centering women's voices when advocating on behalf of their concerns.

The over-representation of women's labor in union paraphernalia compliments their underrepresentation on studio maps, limiting the scope of women's struggles to the domestic space of ink and paint. Meanwhile, their experiences of verbal harassment, sexual assault, and career access are omitted[297] from the narrative. This maneuver re-establishes "a woman's place"

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[294] Pietrykowski, "Fordism at Ford," 396.

[295] Johnson, *Ink and Paint,* 185.

[296] Johnson, *Ink and Paint,* 184-185.

[297] It is important to note that news coverage of the animator's strike frequently overlooked the gendered conflicts that the union sought to address, instead focusing on their demands for wage increases and film credits or reporting on bargaining updates with studio executives. When women did appear in the news, their representation was almost entirely visual. They were captured and displayed in photographs of striking artists, with captions like: "Comely cartoonists on strike against Walt Disney in Hollywood, use their craft effectively in informing the public of their demands" or "The purpose of picket lines is to attract attention. This purpose is better served when the picket is a girl clad in shorts." The Motion Picture Screen Cartoonists Guild, Local 839 Collection (Box 4. file 2 and 3).

in animation, by keeping women in spaces that are intricately linked to domestic skills, thereby ensuring that hegemonic power structures are upheld. This dynamic is clearly illustrated through "the Women's Auxilliary [*sic*] of the Screen Cartoon Guild,"[298] the only avenue in union correspondence where women were given the space to directly communicate with one another.

The Women's Auxiliary exemplifies the conversion of women's domestic labor into power appropriated by men.[299] The auxiliary organized the wives of striking workers to back the union effort by leveraging their "feminine talents" in support of their husbands.[300] The group newsletter primarily communicated bargaining updates, childcare services, and auxiliary meetings where women would socialize and plan fundraising events. Each newsletter featured a simple drawing of a woman in a polka dot dress holding an infant, standing beside a row of four children and a dog. This image, combined with the auxiliary's standard signature: "One of the Wives," paints a picture of womanhood that is defined by domesticity and maternalism. Even when sharing an anonymous poem that underscores the importance of women's labor in an organized workplace, that message is diminished in the newsletter (Figure C4.3). The poem, "O Brubg Bacj Mu Typist T' M3," reads:

> My typ7t id avay on jer stryk lyne
> Mu typoist bein goin o'er a veek
> My typ1/2iat id avay on the frond line
> While thesq kuys play hind and serk.
> Bjing bzck, bting bczk, brung bqck
> My typixt tu me

[298] Flyers circulated by the group feature a small type, reading: "Published by and for the Women's Auxilliary of the Disney Unit Strikers of SCREEN CARTOON GUILD." However, going forward I will use the correct form "Auxiliary" when referencing the organization.

[299] Linda McDowell, "Life Without Father and Ford," 407.

[300] Friedman, *The Disney Revolt,* 202.

Bging bxcj, bring bacj, bting baxk
Muy rypist to mee.

Anon.

The rampant grammatical and keyboarding errors render the prose practically illegible, comedically underscoring the importance of clear, skilled communication in a professional environment. The author suggests that even a week without a "typoist" has a detrimental effect on the workplace. Because of the established gendering of clerical work (discussed in chapter two), it is easy to attribute a feminine identity to the "typixt" and a masculine one to the unintelligible leader, demonstrating that even women in the lowest roles of the industry are critical to a well-functioning workplace. However, this message is weakened by the auxiliary group's commentary, which asks: "Don't you imagine this tells how a lot of them inside feel? Change 'typist' to fit the other jobs that are vacant and unfillable *except by our own men.*"[301] In one breath the auxiliary undermines the strength of women's organizing power and contributes to their systematic subordination, rendering the material effects of their labor invisible by reposing it from the perspective of the striking men.

The Disney animator's strike of 1941 has been called "the most neglected and underrepresented story in animation history."[302] While this may be true, I have argued that women's complex role in that story has been largely overlooked. Thus far, this chapter has shown that women were central to both the mythology of the strike and to catalyzing the event, by linking labor unrest to tensions surrounding shifting spatial and symbolic gendered

[301] The Motion Picture Screen Cartoonists Guild, Local 839 Collection, 1-35.

[302] Tom Sito, *Drawing the Line: The Untold Stories of Animation Unions from Bosko to Bart Simpson.*

hierarchies at the studio. Despite their centrality in union correspondence, many women (especially in ink and paint) chose to cross the picket line and support Walt rather than their colleagues. Thus, I read the overrepresentation of inkers and painters in union paraphernalia as a signal of a disgruntled male workforce seeking to remind women of their place. Ironically, while ink and paint was below animation in the occupational hierarchy, the building facilitated easy access to community and the women who worked there benefitted from strength in numbers. On the other hand, as we will explore in the next section, the walls that separated the ink and paint artists from the Animation Building further isolated the women in the Story and Animation Departments from a majority of the female community at the studio.

A Martini in the Window and a Candle in the Fridge: Women in Creative Spaces[303]

When Bianca Majolie stood at the front of the room during Story Department meetings, she could feel the color start to drain from her face, her palms sweating, and her heart pounding.[304] There was nothing about her job that she dreaded more than presenting her ideas to

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[303] Alice Davis was one of the original "designing women" at Disneyland, joining WED Enterprises in 1962 (a precursor to Walt Disney Imagineering). Davis worked alongside art designer Mary Blair designing and constructing costumes for Disney's Audio-Animatronic characters throughout the park—including the "It's a Small World" ride that Blair is famous for. The two women reportedly had a close friendship, and Davis' often describes Blair's sense of humor through an anecdote about a visit the two women had where Davis was greeted with a pitcher of martinis and two frosted glasses sitting on the windowsill, a pink ribbon tied to the glasses that trailed into the kitchen. The ribbon led to the refrigerator, where Blair had placed a candlestick with the candle burning. She had turned the more traditional concept of a candle in the windowsill (presumably set by the domestic woman/wife) and a martini greeting you (the working man, or husband) in the fridge on its head. While this is delivered as a playful game devised by Mary to present Davis with the martini glasses as a wedding gift, it serves as an apt metaphor for the reversal of traditional roles that this chapter explores. In many ways, the women who worked in the Story Department and in Animation might seem out of place—like a martini glass in the windowsill. Holt, *Queens of Animation*; Johnson, "A Martini in the Window"; The Walt Disney Company, "Remembering Disney Legend Alice Davis."

[304] Bianca Majolie was the first woman hired in story at Disney in 1935 and worked on story treatments for several Disney shorts, including Elmer Elephant, which would inspire the feature-length film *Dumbo*. Majolie was one of a small handful of women who began creative careers on *Pinocchio, Fantasia*, and *Bambi* and is a key representation of the challenges these women faced due to their gendered isolation. Majolie is also a potent example of the impact of Golden Age Era work on future productions, as her uncredited story treatment for *Cinderella* would pull the

Walt and her male coworkers, and she skipped as many meetings as she could. As Bianca stood frozen and silent, she could hear the laughter and joyous conversations from the ink and paint artists on the other side of the windows, and she thought to herself: "*I could be like them. All I have to do is leave [story for ink and paint].*"[305]

At least, this is the story as Nathalia Holt tells it, in her book about the women who had advanced creative careers at Disney, *Queens of Animation: The Untold Story of the Women Who Transformed the World of Disney and Made Cinematic History*. While Holt's writing style presents the information creatively, interpreting the feelings and motivations of women who have long passed, the foundational concepts that underlie her writing can be substantiated: Bianca Majolie *did* dread story conferences. There is much anecdotal evidence that Walt's feedback to his employees during story meetings was "harsh."[306] According to animation scholar and historian John Canemaker, Bianca Majolie "found it difficult to deal with Walt's direct criticisms of her work in group sessions and the subsequent changes required by endlessly tearing apart story boards, a necessary part of the job." Canemaker adds that according to her coworkers, Majolie "was so nervous when Walt would take off on one of those things [criticisms of her work] she would throw up after the meeting each time."[307] The treatment she received from her male coworkers was no better, with Holt saying, "It wasn't enough to have her

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studio out of a financial crisis in 1960 – decades after she was unceremoniously fired without warning after taking a vacation to address her declining mental health due to her poor treatment at the studio. Tom Sito discusses Majolie's dismissal in *Drawing the Line*, saying: "Disney visual-development artist Bianca Majolie took some unauthorized time to visit her mother. When she returned to the studio on June 1, 1940, she was surprised to find someone else in her office. Her personal effects were waiting out in the guard's shack. Without any warning she had been fired."

[305] Holt, *Queens of Animation,* 3-4.

[306] Davis, "The Dark Prince and Dream Women," 220.

[307] Canemaker, *Before the Animation Begins.*

[Majolie] work rejected by Walt, whom she respected and who was frequently her champion. She knew that the team wanted her to be thoroughly humiliated. Her tears fueled their cruelty."

This section examines the stories of women who held positions of creative authority, analyzing how they resisted the exploitation of their labor by male colleagues, as well as the consequences they faced when the "creative" spaces that they occupied and the "non-creative" spaces that were created for them came into conflict. As I have established in these last two chapters, space played a critical role in how men and women related to one another on the Burbank campus. Anecdotes like the one about Majolie, illustrate the extreme results of gendered tensions, leading to fear and isolation into the workplace. While the women in the Ink and Paint Department were devalued in the studio hierarchy, they benefitted from strength in numbers. Though the Ink and Paint Building defined oppressive boundaries around women's career advancement by limiting their physical mobility, it also buffered the sexual harassment, verbal abuse, and childish pranks by male animators.[308]

While emotional labor was an inevitable requirement for all women working at Disney during this time, it was a central facet of the careers of women who worked in the Animation Building. This was especially true for women in story development, whose primary contribution to production was developing the emotional arcs for the characters and stories that would be brought to the screen. As the first stop in the creative pipeline, story was also subject to the most scrutiny. Women, in particular, felt the added pressure to perform sanctioned emotions while suppressing others, often while navigating the challenges of being an outsider or a "token" presence. If Majolie had an emotional outburst, it was not perceived to be because of *her*

[308] Interview between Mindy Johnson and author, September 2019.

feelings, it was because she *was a woman*.[309] A woman's inability to mask or regulate emotions fueled the sexist ideologies that underwrote studio production culture, leading men like Walt to say: "This is why we can't use women…they can't take a little criticism."[310] Wearing an emotional mask, which I use to describe the act of intentionally replacing your true emotional response with a more socially acceptable one, is itself a form of emotional labor. Arlie Hochschild's influential work on emotion labor defines it as "labor [that] requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others," saying it "calls for a coordination of mind and feeling, and it sometimes draws on a source of self that we honor as deep and integral to our individuality."[311] Women like Majolie strategically crafted subordinate personalities in order to curtail the harassment and verbal abuse of their male colleagues.

The stark contrast between the stories shared by Bianca Majolie, and the notoriety of women like Mary Blair[312] underscores the centrality of studio space plays in defining

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[309] Griffin et al, "Organizational Readiness and Gendered Subjugation," 885. Vicki Mayer also explains that emotion work is considered a gendered category of labor because when women do emotion work, "they achieve membership in a group identity," whereas when men do it "it is likely to be seen as an individual trait." *Below the Line: Producers and Production Studies in the New Television Economy*, 132-134.

[310] Didier Ghez, *Walt's People vol. 9, Talking with the Artists Who Knew Him* (Bloomington, IN: Theme Park Press, 2011).

[311] Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*, 7.

[312] Mary Blair is one of very few women artists from this period who is widely known in both industry and academic spaces, and who has been the subject of many publications. Her contributions to Disney were inconceivable for most women in early animation. She is both the exception to the rule and its most tragic example. Walt's favoritism granted her significant opportunities to pursue her dreams and explore her art to the fullest extent, including the freedom to work remotely from the other side of the country and traveling to the studio as needed. However, this favoritism also caused intense jealousy from her husband, Lee, who had been an animator at Disney prior to the war and became physically abusive towards Mary. Tragically, Walt's favoritism could not protect her or her career after his death in 1966, when her projects at the studio were cut short and her creative ties became severed. For more information on Mary Blair: Canemaker, *The Art and Flair of Mary Blair*; Gugliemo et al., *Pocket full of Colors*; Johnson, *Pencils, Pens, and Brushes*; Novesky, *Mary Blair's Unique Flair*.

institutional hierarchies and shaping women's experiences. Mary Blair possessed an unusual amount of power for women of the period, owing largely to Walt's admiration of her work. However, Blair was protected from the direct harassment of her male coworkers because most of her employment at Disney was not physically located at the studio. Blair moved to New York with her husband Lee shortly after the war, taking on projects for Walt remotely and only periodically traveling to California. Blair, as a woman with unusual power, represents an organizational anomaly at Disney. Despite her physical distance from the Burbank studio, however, she was not exempt from abuse. Her husband Lee, who struggled with alcohol addiction, was allegedly verbally and physically abusive to Mary. Lee's jealousy over Mary's work and the attention that it received is often cited as a point of friction in their marriage.[313] Tragically, the value of Mary's work for the studio did not out measure her status as a woman, and when Walt died in 1966 her connection to Disney was severed. After nearly three decades of aesthetic contributions to the art form, Mary Blair's story indicates that women's place in the upper tiers of the occupational hierarchy might have been won, but were never secure.

[313] The John Canemaker Animation Collection, Accretions 2003, Subseries A: The Art and Flair of Mary Blair. Additional anecdotes can be found in Holt, *The Queens of Animation*.

5
Tale As Old As Time

> Jennifer Lee is a model for all young women (and men) with aspirations of pursuing a career in animation film. Her accomplishments are exceptional in terms of scriptwriting, directing and creatively leading Disney Animation. We can confirm that there is a before and after Jennifer Lee in the way that women creators are perceived in our industry.
>
> —*Annecy Festival Director Marcel Jean, 2022*

The circumstances for women working in creative culture industries, during the Golden Age of Animation and today, return us to oft-cited problems of women's career advancement: "prejudice, glass ceilings, and 'sticky floors.'"[314] My work in this dissertation demonstrates that the culturally accepted characteristics that were associated with white womanhood during the Golden Age of Animation were deeply rooted in skills that were purportedly linked to care and domestic work, thereby defining the types of professional roles that women were allowed to occupy. Some technologies, like color animation, offered women opportunities to innovate new tools and techniques for their production workflow; in rare instances, this led to more advanced managerial roles. Other technologies, like the standardization of feature-length film, simultaneously limited most women from advancing their careers by physically segregating their so-called-non-creative-work from other areas of production while inviting an exceptionally small number of women into the male-dominated "creative" spaces. Once women operated in key animation spaces, they often faced verbal abuse and sexual harassment. General labor tensions that emerged from this organizational system ultimately led a majority of studio employees, regardless of their gender, to strike for more equitable pay and labor recognition; striking workers succeeded in negotiating a contract that continued to position women beneath men in the studio hierarchy. Ultimately, many women lost their jobs. The Golden Age of Animation has

[314] Conor, "Gender and Creative Labor," 14.

emerged as one of the most prolific periods for women at Disney in animation history when analyzed for the quantity of women employees and their distribution throughout the studio pipeline. This advancement, and the career of one woman in particular, Mary Blair, would ultimately halt with the death of Walt Disney in 1966 and wouldn't gain traction again for almost thirty years.

As the Walt Disney Company celebrates its centennial this year, women's progress in the industry remains uncertain. The roles that constituted women's work in the 1930s have evolved into, or rather, assumed the disguise of contemporary production management departments, where women have made the most career advancements in recent years.[315] While the work is no longer reserved for women, the lingering effects of feminized skills may help explain the low status and compensation of workers on the lower tiers of the production ladder.[316] Although Disney made significant strides in promoting Jennifer Lee[317] (the first woman to co-direct an

[315] Just a month before this project's completion, production workers at Disney Animation Studios voted to unionize with The Animation Guild, in an NLRB (National Labor Relations Board) election called after the studio refused voluntary recognition of the union in March of this year. (Carras, "Workers at Walt Disney Animation Studios Vote to Unionize…"; Pedersen, "Disney Animation Studio Staffers Vote to Unionize with IATSE & Animation Guild"; Zee, "Walt Disney Animation Studios Production Workers Vote to Unionize").

[316] The Hollywood industry writ large is seeing a surge in union activity this year (2023) in response to various issues including compensation. This year alone, SAG-AFTRA (Screen Actors Guild – American Federation of Television and Radio Artists) and WGA (Writers Guild of America) staged a simultaneous strike for the first time since 1960 (Lang, "SAG Actors Are On Strike"; Porter, "SAG-AFTRA Strike"). This led to a considerable impact on the economic stability and employment opportunities across the industry, including animation (Taylor, "How the SAG-AFTRA Strike Will Affect Animation"). Animation workers are isolated within the industry because their contracts did not allow them to participate in the strike, despite receiving fewer benefits and lower pay than WGA writers. The Animation Guild (TAG) reports that despite "historic gains" in their 2022 negotiations, animation writers still make 47 to 60 cents on the dollar per week compared to live action (Ibid. Also see: Li, "The Hollywood Dual Strike Isn't Just About the Writers and Actors").

[317] Notably, when asked how Lee was going to be able to juggle being a CEO, writer, and director of *Frozen II* (2019), Lee directly related her professional obligations back to her domestic skills, proclaiming: "Guys, I got it. I'm a mom." (Keegan, "Jennifer Lee on Plans for Walt Disney Animation").

animated feature for the studio) to be CEO of Animation after John Lasseter's dismissal,[318] the studio continues to wrestle with its relationship with women workers. In June, a new analysis of salary data revealed that the Walt Disney Company has systematically underpaid its female employees, depriving them of more than $150 million in wages since 2015.[319] It may be true that the industry for working women is marked by a "before and after Jennifer Lee," but the struggles for recognition, job security, and fair wages that have characterized the careers of women at Disney for one hundred years indicate that progress has barely scratched the celluloid ceiling.

[318] John Lasseter came under scrutiny in 2017 after allegations of sexual misconduct became public. Former Pixar employees described a culture of sexism that made it difficult for female employees to thrive, citing crude remarks about women, inappropriate touching, and a fraternity environment. They said, "the studio has perpetuated a system in which the company's creative leaders, who are mainly men, are treated as royalty and are protected at all costs" (Ng. "Will animation legend…").

[319] See: Amidi, "Lori McAdams, 'John Lasseter Protector' and Key figure in Illegal Wage-Fixing Conspiracy"; Gabriel, "What is the Animation Wage-Fixing Lawsuit?"

APPENDIX A: IMAGES

Figure A3.1

Figure A3. 2

Figure A3. 3

'Reluctant Dragon' Vehicle for Many Disney Employes

HOLLYWOOD — When word went around Walt Disney's studio that actual members of the personnel were going to have parts in the forthcoming Disney full-length RKO Radio production, "The Reluctant Dragon," speculation was rife as to just who would be called upon to don greasepaint.

"We've got loads of pretty girls around here," said Walt. "Let's have a contest among all the gang and see what girls win. Then we'll use 'em in the picture.'"

Parents and friends raised eyebrows in wonder.

"What kind of a picture is this you're making, where you're using real people?"

They were told that Walt, as usual, had a new idea. So many people had wanted to learn about the studio that Walt had decided to do a comedy laid in and around the studio, with Robert Benchley as a much-confused outsider in the middle of it all. And then, naturally, there would be animation sequences, too — because after all, it was a story about an animation studio.

A beauty contest was held, through the channels of the weekly studio newspaper, with the result that several of the Disney personnel favorites found themselves "emoting" on the set for several days.

Tall, raven-haired Mildred Rossi, who is one of the very few girls in the special animation effects department, found herself attending twice as many studio art classes as usual, as the script called for her and others to be art class students. Tiny, piquant, blonde Retta Scott, the only actual woman animator in the whole studio, was another chosen. Striking Shirley Soderstrom, the only woman sculptor in the studio; Jeanette McCurdy, one of the studio paint laboratory belles; vivacious, curly-haired Viola Anderson, and several others got roles.

Figure A3. 4

APPENDIX B: MAPS

Figure B3. 1

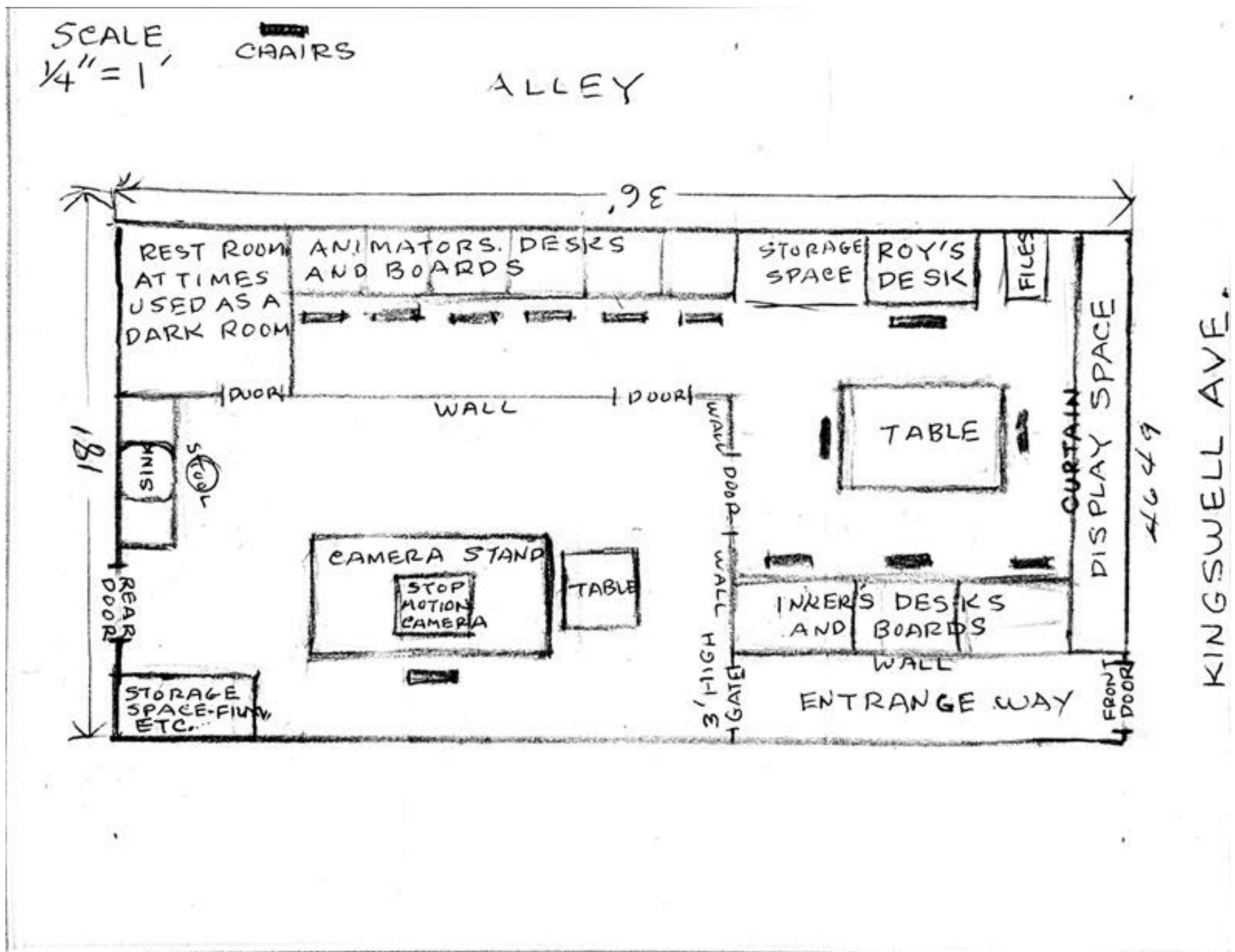

Figure B3. 2

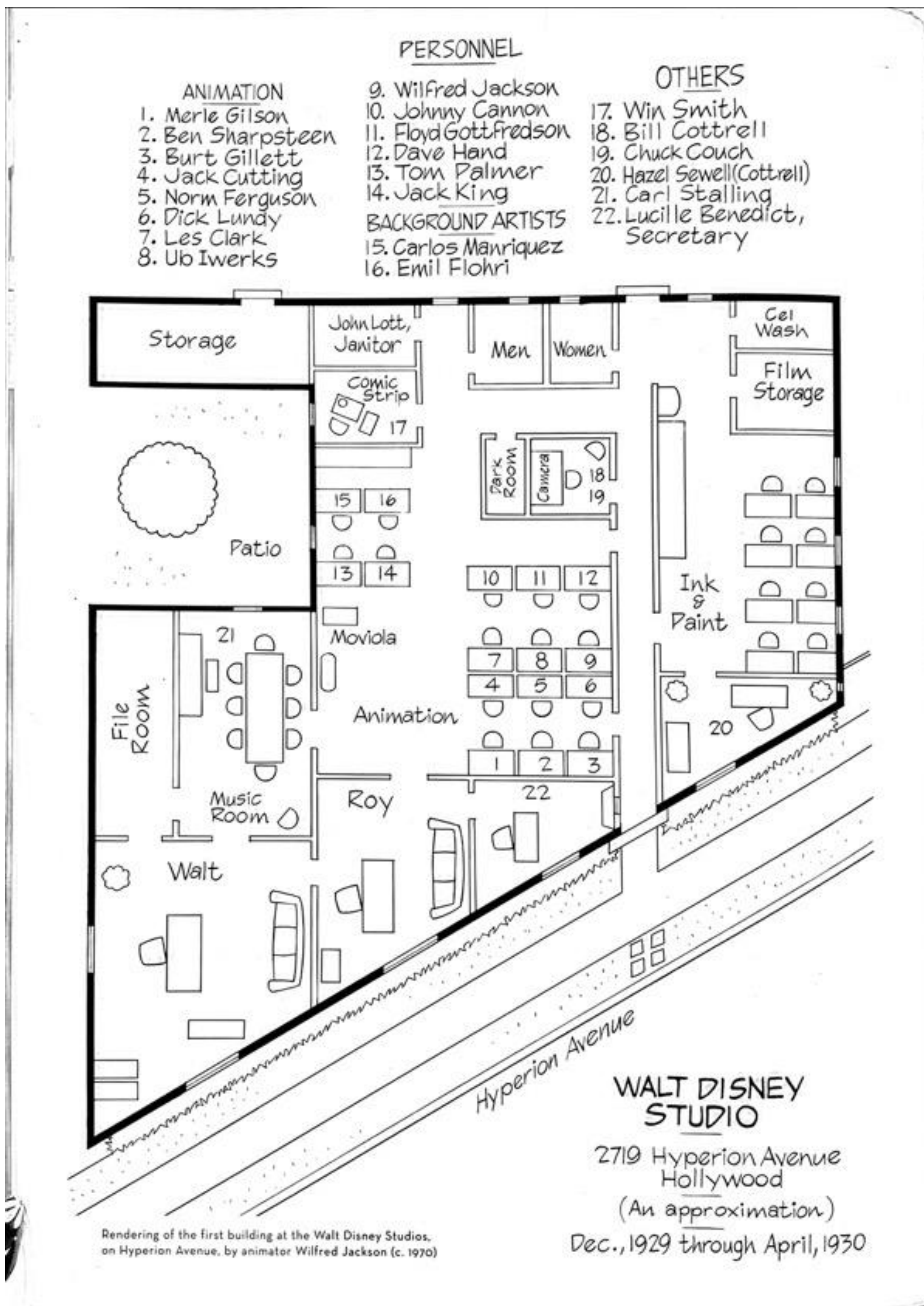

Figure B3. 3

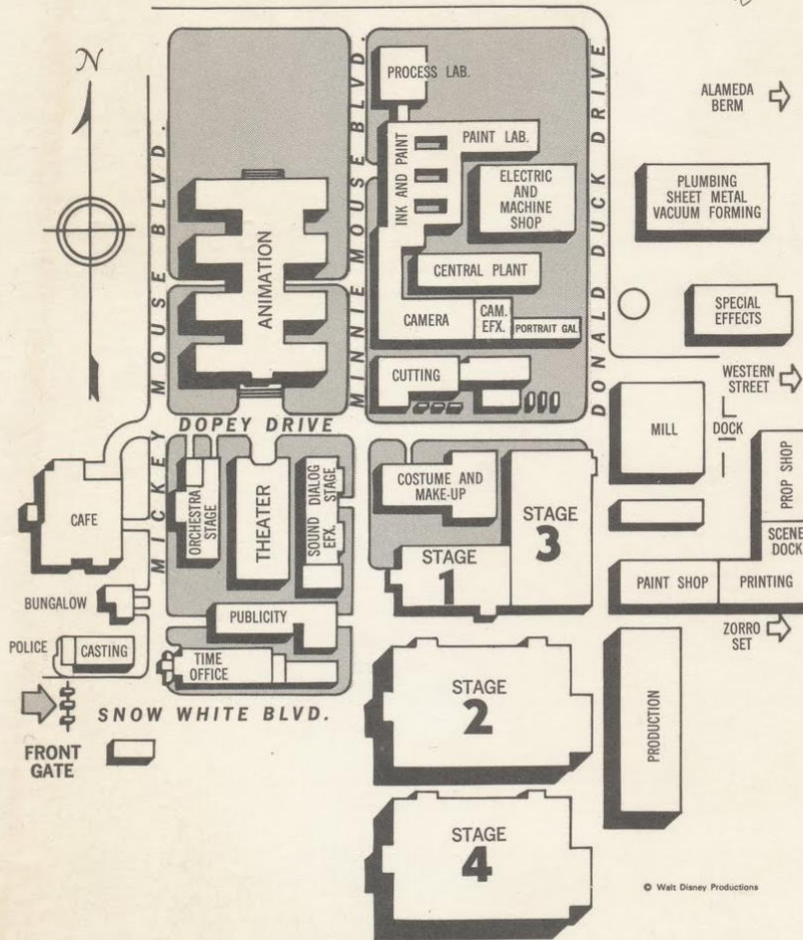

Figure B3. 4

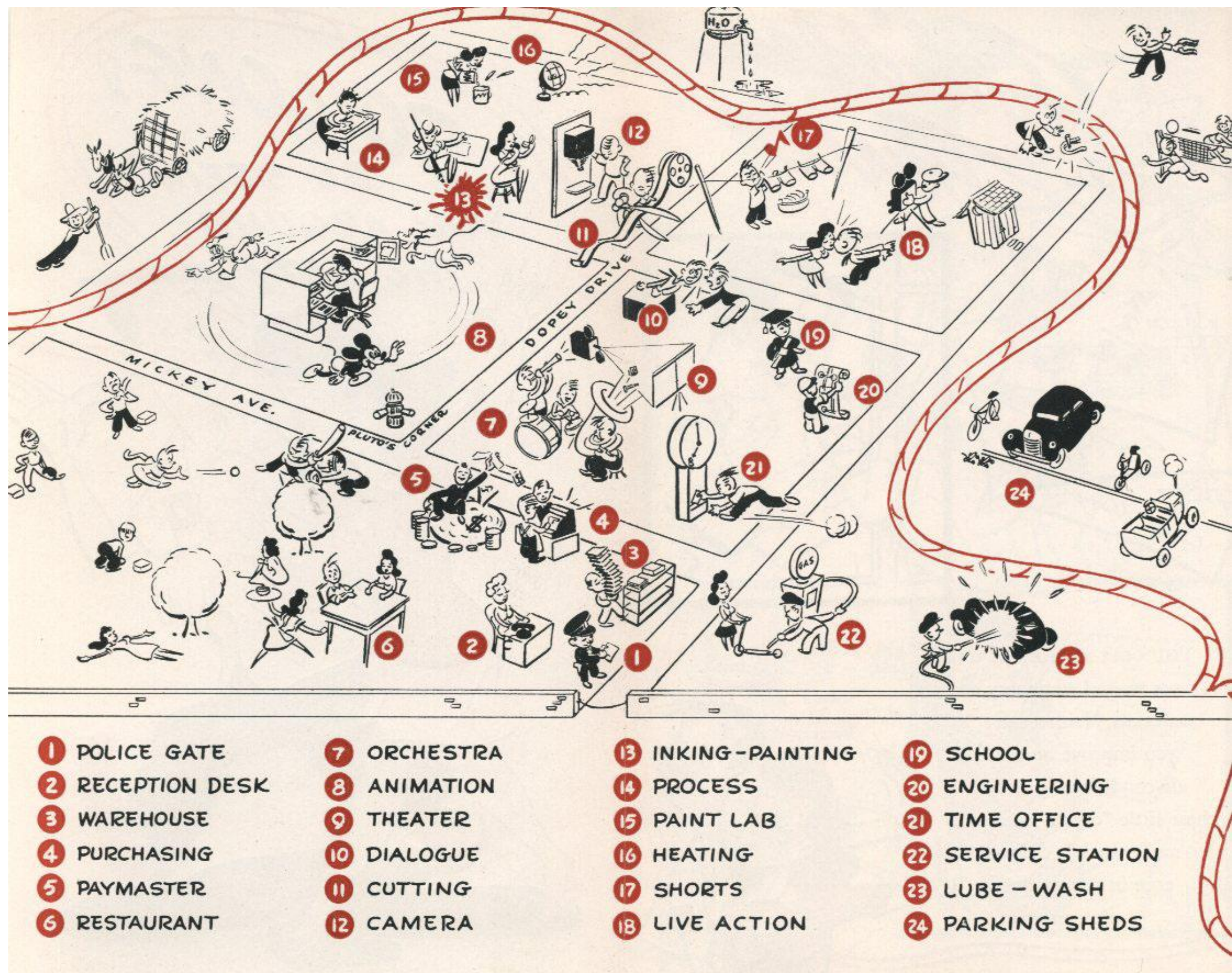

Figure B3. 5

LAST NIGHT WE HAD A MEETING. . . . .

Representatives of the craft Unions and Guilds of the motion picture industry met to discuss the "Disney-Bioff" situation. A working, fighting combination of forces was formed to win the Disney strike and lick Bioff and his stooges in Hollywood.

The strength of honest union men and women will block the powerful combination of Bioff-Producer interests in their efforts to break our strike.

BUT WE'RE STILL ON STRIKE !

Walt Disney is trying to starve us into surrender.

He knows he can't lick us any other way.

So we're turning to <u>you</u> - - the men and women who get these leaflets each day as they go through the Studio gates.

Because it's your strike - - We're on the picket-line for you. If Bioff and Disney can lick us then all the work you have put into your unions will be dumped into the ash-heap.

Not a worker in Hollywood can afford to lose the Disney Strike ! ! !

<u>WE NEED YOUR FINANCIAL SUPPORT</u>, and we plan to have authorized representatives at the gates daily to receive your contributions from 10 cents to 10 dollars.

Mimeographed and issued by Screen Cartoonists 852,1441 N.McCadden Pl.

Figure C4. 1

PRIMER OF THE STRI

A is for ARTIST, anonymous gent;
They said,"He's a comer!" the day that he went.

B is for BIOFF the eminent thug,
Fresh from his sophomore year in the jug.

C is for CONTRACTS, illegal and phoney,
Walt gets the gravy and we get baloney.

D is for DISNEY, who lays down the law,
The only great artist who never could draw.

E is for EVERYONE working for Walt,
Earning the sugar but getting the salt.

F is for FIELD of ALFALFA, where dwells
The Baron of Burbank asleep on his cels.

G is for GOONS sent to stymie the Guild;
They all got away before any were killed.

H is for H UMORIST, topper of gags,
He leaves us in stitches, and also in rags.

I is for INKERS, who INK with an "F",
When passing the pickets they'd like to be deaf.

J is for JOB, some kind of a bizness
To keep a guy up while he's working at Disney's.

K is for KNIFE that's slipped in the spine
When the studio hands out a contract to sign.

L is for LOGGERHEADS; speaking of that
That's where the Guild and the Disneys are at.

M is for MONEY the studio owes,
For which it has shown us its thumb to its r

N is NEGOTIATE; isn't it sill
The Guild wanted Uncle and W

O is for OVERHEAD, soon to b
Out of the studio, under the

P is for PANIC; the scabs who pass by
Are jumpy as grandma the 4th of July.

Q is for QUOTA of pictures we made,
For which we earned shokels which never were paid.

R is RELUCTANT, descriptive of Gunny
When kindly requested to pay us our money.

S is for SCABBY; approach him on tip-toe,
He's riding to glory asleep on his Scripto.

T is for TEMPUS which fugits away
While artists are slaving for nothing a day.

U is the U.S.; the studio feels
They'd rather have Bioff to handle their deals.

V is for VICTORY; that's what we've got
Whether the studio knows it or not.

W stands for the generous guy
Who gives his men anything-- up in the sky.

X is for Xtra the artists all do
For which they are fired when the picture is through.

Y is for YESWALT, the password to know
If you have any hopes for your salary to grow.

Z is for ZOMBIE, or Victory Scotch;
Drink'em down double and let the scabs watch.

Figure C4. 2

"O BRUBG BACJ MU TYPIST T' M3"

My typ7t id avay on jer stryk lyne
Mu typoist bein goin o'er a veek
My typ½iat id avay on the frond line
While thesq kuys play hind and serk.
BJing bzck, bting bczk, brung bqck
My typixt tu me
Bging bxcj, bring bacj, bting baxk
Muy rypist to mee. Anon.

Don't you imagine this tells how a lot of them inside feel? Change "typist" to fit the other jobs that are vacant and unfillable except by our own men.

TEA IS SERVED, MADAM:

To meet you, and have you meet with us, we are holding a joint Guild meeting and tea at three o'clock Tuesday, June 10th, for every wife, sweetheart or friend of our picket-liners.

The pleasant Eucalyptus knoll across from the Studio (our headquarters) will be the setting and will provide a surprise to those of you who have not as yet seen it. Bring your children, we'll see they are cared for and happy.

The dramatic story of the development of the knoll, how we were told to set up a Soup Kitchen feeding as many as 450, how 8 tents sprang into usefulness, with ping-pong tables, beach umbrellas, lounge chairs and indeed many of the comforts of home, were all realized in 3½ hours. Plus all this, a well-known speaker will be our guest.

HELP'S POURING IN

When Technicolor joined our side of the "Battle of Justice" the severest blow was given Disney. Now he can't get any films printed, either new or old.

The Teamsters Union forbid any truck to pass our lines, so no supplies have reached them for 9 days. Our wager is that they are getting just a little low on a number of articles.

Financial aid--so vitally important to us on strike, is growing daily. Schlessinger, Pal, M-G-M, and Screen Gems have voted a donation of 5% of their salaries for the duration of the strike. $1500 is the approximate amount received so far this week from all sources.

PICKET LINE DISTRACTIONS

"Never had more fun in my life!" "Feel like a human again!" "This is making a man out of me," and so on and so forth. Everyone in "the great walk" is literally "raving" about the grand time they are having. Dummies, songs, tricks and comradeship all contribute.

FOOD SALE

Saturday, June 7th, at the Arco at Magnolia Park, we are sponsoring a food sale. If you wish to donate cookies, cakes or jams they would be appreciated. Tell your friends so they will patronize our table.

Figure C4. 3

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