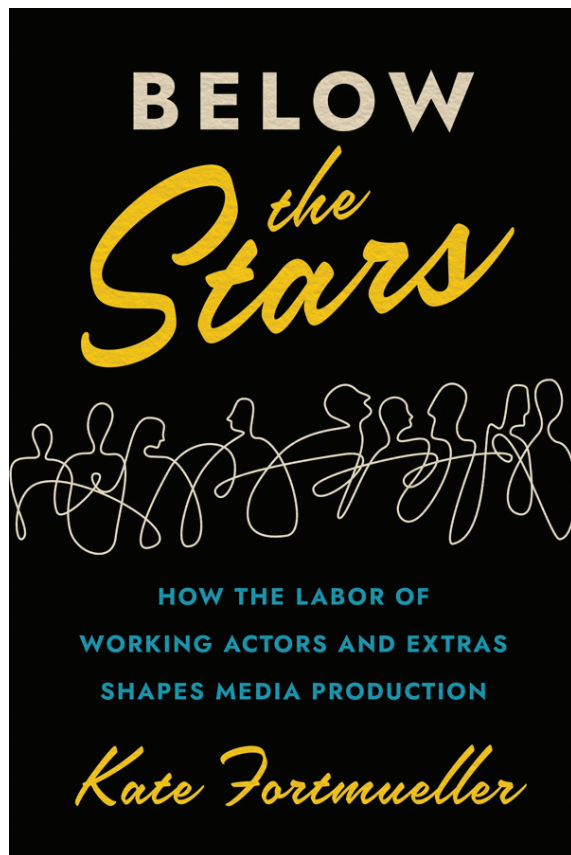


## Book Review:

# Fortmueller, Kate. *Below the Stars: How the Labor of Working Actors and Extras Shapes Media Production* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2021)

**Lauren Steimer<sup>1</sup>**

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA  
lsteimer [AT] mailbox.sc.edu



Kate Fortmueller's *Below the Stars: How the Labor of Working Actors and Extras Shapes Media Production* examines four major historical and technological shifts in the media industries through the lens of screen actors. Fortmueller reminds us that the field has historically emphasized stars and stardom and that most working actors have little in common with major media stars in Hollywood beyond sharing the same union card. In addition to extensive archival research, the author conducted in-depth interviews with actors, casting directors, and other industry personnel from 2014 to 2018; she also participated in workshops, reviewed union administrative paperwork, and observed table reads and an ADR recording session. The author is careful to address concerns of technological determinism, explaining that technological shifts do not determine labor practices, but rather operate as "disruptors," which prompt unions and laborers to rethink their approaches. This point bears repeating as the case study chapters examine major technological shifts in the history of US

media industries in relation to concomitant shifts in labor cultures and union structures for working actors.

Much like Sylvia J. Martin's approach to researching work on set in Hollywood and Hong Kong, Fortmueller signed up for work as an extra with Central Casting. However, unlike Martin's more anthropological approach to production cultures, Fortmueller uses her behind-the-scenes experience and exhaustive union research to address professional stratification and production structures in Hollywood in greater detail. In this way, the book proves a perfect companion piece to Martin's *Haunted: An Ethnography of the Hollywood and Hong Kong Media Industries* (Oxford University Press, 2017). While Martin spoke of the more rigid labor structures of the Hollywood system as a primary motivator for cultural differences between Hong Kong and Hollywood production cultures, Fortmueller does a deep dive into those labor structures. Fortmueller continually addresses two defining elements of the Hollywood media industries for working actors: precarity of employment and the structure provided by union standards and norms.

The first chapter should be added to every course syllabus on Classical Hollywood, stardom, or US media labor, as it provides several industrial histories not previously covered to the same degree elsewhere in the literature. This chapter explains that the freelance model has long been more common than long-term contract work, and the resulting widespread precarity in Hollywood's labor force led to both its systematic stratification as well as a countereffort toward unionization. The author describes the origin of Central Casting in Los Angeles as forged by public concern over Hollywood's image as a dangerous and disreputable institution. She contrasts this history with that of labor unions in Hollywood, which were created to solve problems for working actors and to help them better navigate this industry of disrepute. Beyond the chapter's main argument about these seemingly contradictory organizing structures for actors, two additional contributions can be found: first, the histories of the various actors' unions and second, a clear delineation between the lived experiences of background actors (extras), character actors, supporting players, and stars.

For US television scholars, the second chapter represents another valuable addition to syllabi, graduate reading lists, and research projects. This section of the book maintains that actors and their unions grappled with the unique attributes of television as a medium. Of particular concern were job opportunities, pay structures, medium-specific production cultures, and the geographic center of television production. As studios dropped many contract players in the 1940s, more freelancers flooded the market and, as the author proclaims, many unions like the Screen Actors Guild looked to television as the new battleground for labor negotiations. This chapter is dense with union labor history, but the author's delivery is engaging and the material will alter how television scholars approach the network, industry, and performance standards of this period.

The penultimate chapter will be of interest to television scholars, academics interested in how labor intersects with technology, and cultural policy researchers. This segment discusses residuals in relation to both reruns and the growth of cable in the United States. Fortmueller details the use value of films and television episode reruns to broadcasters and their affiliates, pointing out that these low-cost programming alternatives saved broadcasters

money but did little to compensate actors. While the birth of cable is well covered by industry scholars, none have approached it from the perspective of working actors. Fortmueller asserts that the shift to cable forced a cultural shift for working actors in terms of how they envisioned their labor as recorded and repeatable. This reconceptualization altered the landscape for union negotiations and stratified how actors' labor is qualified and quantified by industry and union alike.

The final chapter represents the biggest break from the former installments. It does not depart from the investigation of technological transformation and its effects on working actors and their unions. However, this chapter employs an ethnographic approach that is reminiscent of the production studies field. Fortmueller observes an ADR recording session and describes the working conditions faced by many voice actors. She draws our attention to the ever-permeable boundaries between home space and workspace as well as television, film, and video game work. This last chapter drives home the earliest arguments of the book: most working actors' lives are structured by precarity, and the boundaries between media are infinitely permeable.

Beyond Fortmueller's contributions to histories of working actors' labor and her demonstration that any approach to Hollywood mediamaking is incomplete without the engagement with creative and craft union histories, her book offers two further models to the field. Fortmueller repeatedly reminds the reader that media productions are ecosystems and that actors operate, refine their images, and find work via a nexus of other laborers within and adjacent to the media industries. No actor is an island. The same can be said for all members of media production teams and the labor process that extends beyond the set. This contribution should not be overlooked and gives us a chance to rethink our approaches to stardom, directors, writers, and even below-the-line laborers. It pushes us away from "creative" labor as the only marker worthy of study.

Fortmueller's second gift to the field is her insistence that the boundaries between television, film, video games, and other new media projects are permeable for actors and that we may want to rethink our rigid categories and approaches to media. It is time to dismantle the silos in our field that have preserved the discrete nature of media forms. Her book provides us with multiple previously obscured union histories. It also drives home our need to re-envision the ideological constructs we sometimes cling to in our field: the conflation of actor and star and the belief in the impermeable boundaries between media. In short, this book fills several gaps in the field and is a necessary addition to any course on the US media industries, stardom, performance, and/or US television history.

---

<sup>1</sup> Lauren Steimer is Associate Professor of Media Arts and Film and Media Studies and Director of the Film and Media Studies Program at the University of South Carolina. Her book *Experts in Action: Transnational Hong Kong-Style Stunt Work and Performance* (Duke University Press, 2021) traces a distinct, embodied history of transnational exchange by identifying and defining the unique forms of expert performance common to contemporary globalized action film and television genres.

