My research balances animation theory with practice, engaging with methods of production and analysis. Because the animated medium can take on innumerable techniques, its capacity for recombination allows the medium to respond to technological and cultural disruption, functioning like a canary in the coal mine for other creative industries seeking to remain vital through ongoing “recombinancy strategies."[[1]](#footnote-0) After working in the animation industry for a couple years, and witnessing similar performative strategies taking place on the level of studio production culture, I found that animators achieve “recombined selves” by incorporating their private interests with their public portfolios.[[2]](#footnote-1) Critical media theory and anthropological methods sensitize me to the exchange of cultural capital within these quotidien production rituals; success in such a highly communal studio environment relies in part on the animator’s capacity to act as a “creative professional,” convincing others of the authenticity of their skills as technicians and artists.

In my upcoming chapter “Women Enacting Animation: Balancing Embodied Authenticity as a Creative Professional in Atlanta,” under review for *Gender Perspectives in Media and Performance*, I argue that these day-to-day interactions are especially challenging for those who fall outside the traditionally white, masculine identity, as they must intensify their day to day performances of creative professionalism in order to secure their position at the studio. Often institutional and technological resources play a role in this too, such as Google Image Search often yielding lack-luster references for black character designs. The precarity of the industry informs many of the production culture’s rules and rituals, which are reflected in my interviews and experience as a professional by a pervasive ambient anxiety. Adaptation to such an environment necessitates an intensification of the recombinancy strategy to perform animated characters and professional personae, and this chapter follows the tactics women enact in the industry to argue that an ethos of empathy and connection to the character exists within and alongside the more masculine ethos of mainstream production strategies.

Thanks to my unique position as a scholar and animator, I can use integrated industrial-cultural methods of analysis to synthesize data across a variety of registers. For my dissertation, I combined production artifacts; interviews with animators; (auto-)ethnographic observations of studios, mixers, conferences, etc.; and economic/industrial data. I found each of these modes balance the others by placing these registers in critical tension with one another. This was especially valuable for navigating contradictions encountered in the field, such as when the animator's day-to-day experiences do not match up with the studio's promises, when definitions of quality or creativity differ according to one’s generation, or when affective labor in a portfolio culture becomes relational labor mediated through global online platforms. Although this approach may seem to be an ad-hoc assemblage of methods, it is unified under the interpretive anthropology of Clifford Geertz, who viewed culture as an ensemble of texts well-known to the insider, over the shoulder of whom the anthropologist must strain to read.[[3]](#footnote-2) I continue the project of critical industrial practices by reading over the shoulders of animators. I delight in uncovering agency where none was thought to dwell, as critics and researchers seldom acknowledge the creative professional roles animators perform throughout the production process.

I will continue my research by stepping into different roles. As a fan of animated material in general, I collect texts from the industry’s front end, while I gather texts from the back end through interviews with animators. Educating students entering the creative industries allows me to keep an eye on the careers of fresh recruits, as they often balance short-term jobs with their academic career, recombining themselves to adapt to precarious professions. Although I am always eager to read over the shoulders of creatives in the industry, I am not content to simply write about animation, and, as my films screened at the Savannah Film Festival and the Center for Puppetry Art’s Xperimental Puppet Theater can attest, I have other expressive tools at my disposal. As an artist, I create animated artifacts which present philosophical theories as they are on the way from one mode to another, from production to presentation. I create animation that engages with topics that are not yet writable by embracing the process of thinking through movement. These motions can create encounters never yet attempted, conveying the ways in which philosophy may be thought-felt through the animated medium. I want to open my approach to more perspectives, not just industry professionals, but outsider-artists and experimental performers. For me, producing texts for the academic or animated industries requires following predefined conceptual logics, but "doing" philosophy opens avenues for collaboration and improvisation. As Erin Manning argues "don't just write about dance... dance that thought around."[[4]](#footnote-3) I will continue to explore questions regarding thinking about animation and animating thought, recombining disparate experiences to discover creative agency in unlikely places.

1. Wells, Paul. “Smarter than the Average Art Form." Animation in the Television Era.” Prime Time Animation Television Animation and American Culture, edited by Carol A Stabile and M Harrison, Taylor and Francis, 2013, pp. 15–32. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Wheeler, Colin S., "Animators of Atlanta: Layering Authenticity in the Creative Industries." Dissertation, Georgia State University, 2022. https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/fmt\_dissertations/18 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Geertz, Clifford. ‘‘Deep Play: Notes on a Balinese Cockfight’’ In *Re-Thinking Popular Culture*, ed. Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990. Pg. 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Manning, Erin, and Massumi, Brian. *Thought in the Act: Passages in the Ecology of Experience.* United States, University of Minnesota Press, 2014. Pg. viii. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)