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Health and Safety Issues in Precarious Cultural Work

Katherine Bischooping and Elizabeth Quinlan *

1. Introductory Remarks

Of late, cultural workers have been regarded as the quintessential ‘new’ economy workers: the entrepreneurial freelancers, independent of social welfare support, able to create their own jobs¹ and contribute to the Canada’s economic productivity. In 2010, the more than half a million Canadians who worked in the cultural sector, in film and television, the visual and performing arts, writing and publishing, and elsewhere, contributed an annual value of \$39B (or 3.4%) to the GDP².

Although this figure and the whirlwind of recent developments in digital media lend credence to the productivity claim, “‘Starving’ artists getting poorer”³ – the *Toronto Star*’s headline for a report on the 14% drop in artists’ inflation-adjusted earnings between 2001 and 2006 – reveals another facet of cultural industries. Cultural workers are conveniently demonized by neoliberal governments as members of a separate “creative class”⁴ working in industries that receive “hand-outs” while other, non-cultural industries receive investments. During his 2008 election

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¹ A. McRobbie, *Everyone Is Creative: Artists as Pioneers of the New Century*, in T. Bennett and E. Silva (eds.) *Contemporary Culture and Everyday Life*, Sociology Press, Durham, 2004, 184-210.

² Cultural Human Resources Council, *Cultural HR Study 2010*, Conference Board of Canada, Ottawa, 2010.

³ B. DeMara, ‘Starving’ Artists Getting Poorer, in *Toronto Star*, February 9, 2009, L7.

⁴ R. Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It’s Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*, Basic Books, New York, 2002.

campaign, Prime Minister Stephen Harper defended a \$45 million cut to arts and culture funding, arguing that “when ordinary working people come home, turn on the TV and see [...] a bunch of people at, you know, a rich gala all subsidized by taxpayers claiming their subsidies aren’t high enough [...] – I’m not sure that’s something that resonates with ordinary people”⁵. These cuts were coincident with the beginning of the economic recession, during which employment rates fell in cultural occupations – with the exception of heritage collection and preservation – after having increased for several years⁶.

As Vosko, Zukewich and Cranford⁷ *et al.* have shown, the standard employment relationship (9 to 5, full-time, permanent work on the employer’s premises or under the employer’s supervision) has not been the standard for over one-third of Canadian workers. Rather, a growing number of labour market participants patch together multiple poorly-remunerated part-time temporary / contract positions, with unionization which can only provide little regulatory protection. The Cultural Human Resources Council has found that while cultural workers in Canada have proportions of part- and full-time employment resembling those of the Canadian labour force as a whole, their rate of self-employment is especially high; in particular, over 40% of creative and artistic production workers are in the precarious position of being self-employed⁸.

Our project on cultural work during a time of recession explores the career paths of eight individuals who had collaborated on a theatre production in the early months of 2008. The span of the study – from May 2008 to April 2011 – thus covers a three-year period during which workers witnessed the onset of recession and its following upsurge. In this paper, we focus on the health and safety-related aspects of their work. From the fact that live theatre requires “bums in seats”, audiences that are both material and local, as well as the coordination of material objects with material bodies, one might readily conceive of certain specific health and safety issues that might arise, for example, regarding the use of fire on a stage. However, our findings move well beyond stage safety practices. In the three-year period under study, these eight erstwhile collaborators had, among them, held a staggering 412 jobs, both inside and outside the

⁵ B. Champion Smith, *Arts Uproar? Ordinary Folks Just Don’t Care, Harper Says*, in *Toronto Star*, September 24, 2008, p. A1.

⁶ Cultural Human Resources Council, *op. cit.*

⁷ L. Vosko, N. Zukewich, C. Cranford, *Precarious Jobs: A New Typology of Employment*, in *Perspectives on Labour and Income*, 2003, vol. 4, n. 10, (Accessed September 5, 2012).

⁸ Cultural Human Resources Council, *op. cit.*

cultural sector, from acting coach, baker, and census enumerator through to usher, video store clerk, and wedding photographer. This figure points to conditions of extraordinarily precarious labour and directs our attention to the organization of the production system and the relations of production in cultural work.

Accordingly, we take a labour process approach to examining the links between the structural conditions of creative work and the health and safety of cultural workers, a group whose challenges are more often glamorized than taken seriously. In so doing, we illuminate some of the distinctive ways in which work in the cultural sector is charged with uncertainty about work schedules and future work, “employment relationship effort” (i.e. efforts to stay in employment, to deal with multiple employers and / or worksites, and to face constant evaluation), and shapes the “employment relationship support” garnered from individuals, households and unions. Both these terms are drawn from Lewchuk, Clarke and de Wolff’s⁹ model of factors impeding precarious workers’ physical and mental health, which we both apply and gently critique.

2. Methodology

In winter 2008, the first of the two co-authors had participated in a small, independent Toronto theatre production that involved 11 cultural workers, herself included. In 2011 and 2012, we interviewed eight of these 11, including the co-author, about their cultural – and other – work. The project had been approved by our universities’ research ethics committees; in particular, research participants were assured in written informed consent documents that their decision about whether to be involved in the study held no consequences for the possibility of future collaboration. All names used here are pseudonyms and job titles are lightly edited to increase anonymity. Five of the participants were women, three were men, none were members of visible minority groups, and all but one, the co-author in her late 40s, was in their early 20s to mid-30s. The interviews covered a wide variety of topics including biographical trajectories, education and training, jobs held in the three years following

⁹ W. Lewchuk, M. Clarke, A. de Wolff, *Working without Commitments: Precarious Employment and Health*, in *Work, Employment and Society*, vol. 22, n. 3, 2008, 387-406.

the end of the 2008 theatre production, and job-seeking strategies. The interviews were two to six hours long, and were followed in a few instances by email exchanges to fill gaps or seek clarifications. The result was rich, thick data. Further, the first author annotated the transcripts with contextual information about Toronto and its theatre scene, e.g. the size of various theatres that were mentioned, or about shows that the participants had been involved in that she herself had seen.

The second coauthor, who possesses expertise in occupational health and safety, conducted the initial analysis, grouping material into conceptual categories, comparing for congruency and determining similarities and overlaps of the themes¹⁰. The coauthors then took turns revising the analysis until saturation¹¹ was reached, iteratively rereading the transcripts, grouping material in conceptual categories, refining the emerging themes, assigning interpretative meanings, and comparing findings to those in the literature. This approach led us to focus on the organization of the respondents' cultural work and the resulting health and safety implications.

That a mid-career academic is among the research participants, while the remainder are young adult members of what Bourdieu dubbed the "precarious generation"¹², might be considered to skew the sample's income and education statistics or even to alter the structure of the analysis. We note that in this coauthor's experiences in cultural work, she has frequently encountered others in well-established non-cultural careers – in counselling or banking, information technology or research consulting – creating cultural products as an avocation or an exploration of the possibility of a cultural career. This is but one of the several ways in which the definition of cultural work as "work" becomes blurred. We specify whenever examples are drawn from the interview with this coauthor, provide a footnote showing how the main statistics reported would alter in her absence, and indicate directly when the interview with her is drawn upon to make a point no other participant's interview corroborates.

¹⁰ Y. Lincoln, E. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry*, Sage, Beverly Hills, 1985.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² P. Bourdieu, *Acts of Resistance: Against the Tyranny of the Market*, trans. R. Nice, New Books, New York, 1999.

3. Results

In the sections that follow, we first provide an overview of the participants' jobs, and, second, detail the labour market conditions in which their remuneration for creative cultural work was generally low, and frequently nil. Third, we take up the psychological impact of the participants' labours of love in the cultural sector, and fourth, the broader health and safety implications of the participants' incessant cultural work-seeking. The risks incurred by the combination of creative cultural work with other precarious work form our fifth topic. Sixth, we examine specific health and safety issues that participants confront in unregulated – or underregulated – creative cultural worksites.

3.1. Overview of Participants' Jobs

As stated earlier, in the three years since they went their separate ways, the eight research participants had held a reported 412 jobs¹³. The participant who held the largest number of them (208) was one of the two with burgeoning photography businesses, while the coauthor was the participant who had held the fewest (9). The median number of jobs among all the participants was 25.5¹⁴.

We sorted the jobs into three categories: (1) 341 jobs that involved creative work in the cultural sector, e.g., as acting coach, choir director, comic book writer, digital publicist, film extra, headshot photographer, set painter, and sketch comedian; (2) 37 jobs that fell outside the cultural sector, e.g., bartender, fast food promoter, and secretary; and (3) 34 jobs falling in a middle ground of non-creative work within the cultural sector, e.g., box office sales, community centre administration, and music teaching¹⁵. According to this categorization, the participants had held

¹³ Absent the co-author, the seven remaining participants would have held 403 jobs, a participant who had held 15 jobs would have held the fewest, and participants would have held a median of 33.0 jobs.

¹⁴ This figure is likely an underestimate, since the co-author's continued familiarity with other participants' careers enabled her to prompt them to report 35 jobs that they would otherwise have omitted. Further, had we to have attempted to disentangle the information about jobs in which multiple roles were entwined, e.g., Composer / Performer / Choir Director / Audio Engineer, the interviews would have become prohibitively long; thus, such combined jobs are typically counted as one.

¹⁵ The sorting of non-creative vs. creative jobs in the cultural sector was based on participants' accounts rather than standard industrial classification systems. For example,

medians of 17.0 creative jobs in the cultural sector, 3.5 jobs in other sectors, and 1.0 non-creative job in the cultural sector¹⁶.

3.2. “Don’t Do the Math”: Remuneration in the Cultural Sector’s Secondary Labour Market

The very quantity of the participants’ creative positions in the cultural sector speaks to how the risks and uncertainties inherent in the production processes and outcomes of cultural industries are downloaded onto those working in the industries. All cultural projects are end-dated: even the legendary 60-year run of Agatha Christie’s *The Mousetrap* replaces its cast annually¹⁷. The participant who had held the lone permanent position that had not been generated through self-employment had quit it after a traumatic three months. Thus, the greatest continuity in creative work was reported by an actor who looked forward to a third summer in which she would hold a seven-week contract with an outdoor theatre company, as well as again donating her time to its annual fundraiser.

a music school teacher assigned to teach keyboard without headphones to 20 to 30 students felt “the choice was either to not give a damn or blow a gasket in class”; this position was accordingly categorized as non-creative. At times the sorting had an arbitrary element, as when a photographer waffled over whether her work was “art” or simply “artful” (i.e. what she deemed non-creative).

¹⁶ Absent the co-author, the participants would have held a total of 333 creative jobs in the cultural sector, with 21.0 being their median number of such jobs. Medians of 5.0 and 2.0 jobs would have been in other sectors and in non-creative cultural work, respectively.

¹⁷ St Martin’s Theatre, *The Mousetrap Performance Program*, St. Martin’s Theatre, London, 2011.

Table No. 1 – Characteristics of Participants' 341 Creative Cultural Jobs.

Compensation	
At a loss	5
Unpaid	91
Paid *	229
Missing data	16
Producer	
Self-produced	20
Produced by others *	321
Duration	
Less than a day	49
Over 1 day, up to 1 week	43
Over 1 week, up to 1 month *	208
Over 1 month, up to 3 months	19
Over 3 months, up to 6 months	9
Over 6 months, up to 1 year	6
Over 1 year	7
Missing data	1

*Note: * marks how participant Althea's paid photography jobs were categorized.*

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

The typical creative cultural job that our participants held was one week to one month long and remunerated (Table No. 1), though that conclusion is swayed by participant Althea's 180 one-week long paid photography jobs; when these are omitted, the balance shifts decidedly toward unpaid work of up to one week's duration. Cultural industries are subject to the same structural forces as other industries, notably labour market segregation and gendered and racial segregation. These structural forces cannot readily be studied using a sample of three men and five women, all of them white. However, we can note that primary labour markets are characterized by a small number of jobs offering security, promotion, high wages and benefits in exchange for experience, education, and loyalty, while secondary markets are characterized by low wages, high turnover, and the impossibility of improving one's position by acquiring additional

education and training¹⁸. In the Canadian cultural work context, primary labour market jobs are largely unionized ones, e.g., in the Canadian Actors' Equity Association (the 6000-member theatre, opera, and dance union), and ACTRA (the 22,000-member Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television, and Radio Artists, which also includes digital media artists). Like other primary labour market jobs, these are rationed, leaving most cultural workers ghettoized without protections, security, and sustaining incomes.

Our research participants were cognizant of how the economic downturns had led to the loss of primary labour market opportunities in the cultural sector. One actor who had gone to London (England) for Shakespearean training rhymed off the demises since 2005 of several Toronto-area outdoor Shakespeare companies. Another, who had auditioned for a training program that provided background work contracts at the Stratford Festival – Canada's largest theatre festival – received a rejection letter saying, “The recession had hit the Festival pretty hard and they were going to have fewer jobs this year, and in a year when Festival veterans were going to be losing their jobs, it didn't make sense to be training new ones.” The largest new employment source that the participants mentioned was Nuit Blanche, an annual, overnight contemporary art festival that had its inception in Toronto two years before the recession set in. Although Nuit Blanche now contributes \$37.2 million to the local economy¹⁹, during the period surveyed, it provided only four of the participants' 341 creative culture sector jobs.

By our participants' accounts, of these 341 jobs, only a pair of one-week contracts in acting and in production management, participant Althea's numerous photography jobs, and participant James's \$5000 day of performing in Costa Rica in an antacid commercial were remunerated at anything resembling primary labour market rates; the preponderance were for pay so low that Pupo and Duffy would deem it coercive²⁰. Further, as is common in the secondary labour market, education had no bearing on pay. For example, James, who holds an MA in Drama, estimated that he had typically done film, TV and commercials acting for \$400/day, sideshow freak work for either \$0 or \$40 per show, stage acting for an

¹⁸ See P. Doeringer, M. Piore, *Internal Labor Markets and Manpower Analysis*, Heath, Lexington, 1971; D. Gordon, R. Edwards, M. Reich, *Segmented Work, Divided Workers: The Historical Transformation of Labor in the United States*, Cambridge University Press, NY, 1982.

¹⁹ Scotiabank Nuit Blanche, *Event history*, n.d., (Accessed August 30, 2012).

²⁰ N. Pupo, A. Duffy, *Unpaid Work, Capital, and Coercion*, in *Work Organisation, Labour and Globalisation*, vol. 6, n. 1, 2012, 27-47.

average of \$1/day, and sketch comedy for “shits and giggles” (i.e. a good time). “Ha!” said an MA student, when probed about the pay and hours involved in one of her directing positions, “I made a dollar an hour.” “Don’t do the math”, warned a BFA graduate, who had spent an estimated 190 hours composing, audio engineering, performing and directing a choir in a musical theatre production. We did the math. His \$500 pay meant that he had earned \$2.63/hour for his work on this production; in another, 60 hours of work had led to “a 20 percent share of zero profit.”

The participants were stymied by their distance from the better-paid primary labour market, with one actor saying “that professional sphere, the like Equity Association professional sphere, is closed [gestures its remoteness].” Several participants felt membership in Equity and ACTRA would initially close doors to them. Molly was the participant who was nearest to attaining union membership, having accumulated half of the job credits required to become an apprentice member of Equity. However, she was concerned about this prospect, because it would place her “in a much bigger pool, and it’s a tenuous transition – a pool of Fiona Reid [a leading Canadian stage actor] and people who are 15-year veterans of Stratford.” Thus, participants perceived an arduous road before them, even if they did enter the primary labour market.

3.3. The Psychological Costs of a “Labour of Love”

Meanwhile, each participant had been doing unpaid creative cultural work, with five of the eight reporting fewer paid jobs than jobs that were unpaid or held at a loss²¹. Frequently they worked for nothing in order to immerse themselves and gain experience in a field that brought them “enchantment” and “joy and wonder”; as Gill and Pratt put it, a romantic “vocabulary of love is repeatedly evinced”²² in projects on cultural work. Indeed, participant Nicole spoke of “love” eight times in her interview, in one instance tellingly using the expression “love project” to characterize work done at a loss. In “I got the job because I gave myself the job” scenarios, the participants contributed both financial and human capital to

²¹ Absent the co-author, four of the seven remaining participants had held more unpaid creative cultural positions than paid/at-a-loss ones. The co-author had funded three of the five projects that were done at a loss.

²² R. Gill, A. Pratt, *In the Social Factory? Immaterial Labour, Precariousness and Cultural Work*, in *Theory, Culture & Society*, 2008, vol. 25, n. 7-8, 1-30, 15.

their creative cultural work in 20 situations, mounting theatre productions of varying success and writing music, fiction, and scripts that might or might not lead to future pay.

However, the bulk of the 91 creative cultural sector jobs that they undertook for free were not self-produced. In other industries, “rate-busting” would be the label for working for pay rates and in conditions that would be unsustainable in the long-term. The group continually grappled with aspects of skill devaluation implicit in unpaid work. “It’s always a piss-off,” said Nicole, speaking of an unpaid photography job, “when you do something for free and then they turn around and pay someone else to do the same job.” Another participant turned to the unexpected figure of her tax accountant to validate her professionalism: “She helped me recognize that the things that I do are professional. I can claim my expenses; they’re not *indulgences*, personal flights of fancy, wastes of time because they ‘don’t make money.’”

Some participants generalized the sense of devaluation, speaking of the arts as societally undervalued or of the arts community as self-devaluing. One participant wondered why “things that are sometimes brief and require less of me as an artist pay more than the soul-searching gut-wrenching that pays nothing.” Another thought that artists were schooled to feel money matters were “lowbrow when you’re an artist talking about Human Truth. It’s pedestrian. And that’s exploited by people who hold the pocketbooks.” A third maintained, “If you’re not gonna pay your actors, you’re gonna get shitty actors and your play is gonna suck. Most plays suck.” Although Lewchuk, Clarke and de Wolff’s employment strain model²³ is one we will show to be valuable in understanding health and safety risks in the cultural sector, it falls short here. This model does not include predictors specific to the knot of unease, mistrust, doubt, and anger of seeing one’s cherished efforts so broadly discounted, and of seeing one’s passion harnessed by post-Fordist capitalism²⁴.

Many participants were also working for low or no pay alongside, or as part of, developing their networks. In the theatre world, as elsewhere, both immediate connections and “the strength of weak ties”²⁵ mattered. At times, participants thrived on their networking successes, happily relating that they had received a reference letter from a prominent director, or speaking comfortably of “leveraging” friendships and

²³ Lewchuk, Clarke, de Wolff, *op. cit.*

²⁴ See Gill, Pratt, *op. cit.*

²⁵ M. Granovetter, *The Strength of Weak Ties*, in *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 78, n. 3, 1973, 1360-1380.

relationships. In other instances, they found it trying that networking should be the key to finding work. One was embittered that “the way you get to work with somebody you want to work with is you lick their boots for five years until they trust you to hold their pencil.” “I over-think it into complete anxiety”, said another, contemplating the chore of working a crowd – one of the several ways that work and leisure time and spaces blurred together for cultural workers²⁶. The cautionary story a third participant told, of being hired by a national award-winning artist who sent an email midway through their project announcing that her agreed-to pay would be halved, shows the sinister face of “leveraging” in a closely-networked community²⁷.

Turning to Lewchuk, Clarke and de Wolff’s model²⁸, then, we construe networking as paradoxically providing both employment relationship support (i.e., a sense of community support) at the same time as it added employment relationship effort (i.e., through constant evaluation). Our data do not permit us to assess which of these outweighed the other for our participants; indeed, Gill and Pratt contend that researchers studying cultural work should stop oscillating between talk of the positives and talk of the negatives of networking and the other affectively-associated elements of cultural work, and instead arrive at ways of “thinking these together”²⁹. In discussing the job-seeking side of their employment relationship efforts, though, most of our participants were plainly quite stressed, in ways that Lewchuk, Clarke and de Wolff³⁰ have associated with physical pain, exhaustion, sleep problems, and headaches. We turn now to elucidating pertinent aspects of the creative cultural work search.

²⁶ For a discussion, see A. Neff, E. Wissinger, S. Zukin, *Entrepreneurial Labour among Cultural Producers: “Cool” Jobs in “Hot” Industries*, in *Social Semiotics*, vol. 15, n. 3, 2005, 307-334.

²⁷ For related discussions of gatekeeping in the Australian music industry and of “flexploitation”, see, respectively: C. Gibson, *Cultures at Work: Why ‘Culture’ Matters in Research on the ‘Cultural’ Industries*, in *Social & Cultural Geography*, 2003, vol. 4, n. 2, 201-215; and G. de Peuter, *Creative Economy and Labour Precarity: A Contested Convergence*, in *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, vol. 35, n. 4, 2011, 417-425.

²⁸ Lewchuk, Clarke, de Wolff, *op. cit.*

²⁹ Gill, Pratt, *op. cit.*, 16.

³⁰ Lewchuk, Clarke, de Wolff, *op. cit.*

3.4. *“Feverishly Applying”: Health & Safety in Seeking Creative Cultural Work*

As Table 2 shows, most of the creative cultural work our participants found was of brief duration, requiring a median of “over one week, up to one month”. Some positions routinely required only one day’s work, such as singing in a pub or presenting a sideshow freak act in an evening of burlesque performances, though development of a theatre production from script-writing to staging more commonly took up to six months. Gaps in creative cultural work could demoralize. “What I find hardest about the profession”, an actor said, “is the psychology, the confidence, the believing the next audition will be worthwhile, the believing when you’re not acting, you’re still an actor.”

Given the brevity of most of their creative cultural jobs and their passion for them, most participants made continual efforts to seek or create new cultural work opportunities, in work-seeking that could consume hours, amounting to an unpaid job in itself. “Getting a foot in the door is very complex issue”, a director explained: “It’s basically trying to become CEO.” A playwright recounted spending 10 hours on each application for a grant that could partially support her writing. And, one actor had even decided to call himself “retired”, which did not so much mean that he had left off acting as that, “I didn’t have to feel guilty about not doing anything, so that if I spent an afternoon where I wasn’t feverishly applying for auditions, then that was fine.” Auditions themselves could take anywhere from “probably two minutes” to “hours of your life”. Preparing for them could consume yet more time, depending on whether the actors were given five minutes or three weeks to study a script. Up to 1.5 uncompensated hours might be spent in waiting rooms³¹.

Auditioning demanded not only time, but enormous psychological resources. Once in casting rooms, actors had to contend with the possibility of being rejected simply for not fitting the physical type that a casting director envisioned. Molly said she found herself thinking “I don’t want any part of this” when surrounded by “six-foot blonde bombshells flipping their hair back and reapplying their make-up for the fifth time.” Leonard remained embarrassed by the memory of going to an audition where he was told that, for both unfilled roles, “We’re looking for Morgan

³¹ Note that ACTRA members are paid for call-backs (to a 2nd or subsequent audition) and for waits of over one hour, according to ACTRA, *National Commercial Agreement between the Joint Broadcast Committee of the Institute of Communication Agencies and The Association of Canadian Advertisers and ACTRA*, October 31, 2011 to June 30, 2014, 2011, (Accessed September 2, 2012).

Freeman types.” A white man in his 30s, he tried out all the same, adopting a gravely tone. The casting company altogether stopped inviting him to their auditions – a reflection, Leonard worried, that they thought his judgment poor. That industry practice is to contact only successful auditioners meant that he would never know for certain.

The mix of desire for work and the dwindling of job opportunities was a potent one, facilitating the possibility of sexual harassment and scams in auditions and elsewhere. Molly recounted a conversation in which she learned that an acquaintance of hers had taken a theatre workshop with a warm-up in which “everybody has to be naked.” Though Molly considered such a warm-up as “verging on abusive, it’s so manipulative”, her acquaintance replied, “If you’re not willing to go there, you’re not ready to call yourself an actor.” The co-author had a “creepy” experience when she was seeking to cast an adult actor to take part in a children’s fairytale play. Observing that one candidate flirted with her throughout the audition, she wondered, “Wow, where did he learn that? He must have thought it would work.” In the absence of shop steward or union representation, James recounted how a co-star had sought advice about whether to accept an unpaid role in a film in which the director – who would also be the producer, writer, and cameraman – planned a graphic lesbian sex scene set in his own apartment. “When all you do is spend all day hoping for yourself and getting rejected,” James said, “sometimes when somebody asks you to do something any sane person would say ‘no’ to, you’re: ‘Maybe this is my big break.’”

It should be noted that legitimate members of the secondary labour market fairly commonly conduct auditions, rehearsals, and film shoots in private homes or other non-professional setting, saving their shoestring budgets \$15 per hour in studio rental costs. (In fact, the co-author first met most of the participants in a private home where auditions were being held for their joint project). Working in homes incurs a number of risks, some to be addressed later. Its impact here is to magnify the ambiguities surrounding auditions. Molly told of being approached in Toronto by a stranger who called himself a film actor. He claimed that she looked familiar and handed her a card, saying to her: “Come tomorrow, come to this apartment.” Long afterward, Molly worried about what might have happened to anyone accepting this disquieting invitation. Meanwhile, James had gone for an audition at a private home, only to be met at the door by a man clad in boxer shorts, who ultimately attempted to enlist him in a pyramid scheme.

3.5. “Flexible and Disposable”: Health Risks of Work in Precarious Combinations

Although the greatest *quantity* of jobs that the participants held were creative ones in the cultural sector, given the low income from these jobs, each participant derived the greatest part of their income elsewhere – in box office management and sales, as a music teacher, as a bartender-server / business manager, as a census enumerator / bookstore salesperson, as a secretary, and as a professor. Their median income was \$29,992 (\$29,000 if the coauthor is omitted). Although among them the participants had three college diplomas, eight Bachelor’s degrees, two MA degrees, and one PhD (the co-author’s), this median was slightly more than what Statistics Canada had reported for 30-32 year old high school graduates’ income in the year 2000³². Only three participants mentioned having employer-paid health benefits in the three-year period covered by the study. Two participants who hoped to have children wondered whether it would be feasible, as “the difference between subsistence for two and subsistence for three is pretty great. When expressed as a ratio, it’s 33 point 3 repeating.” Further, as Rusch-Drutz discusses, the schedules required in theatre work often mesh poorly with those of parenting³³. Participants’ options for lines of work outside the creative cultural sector were largely constrained by the distinctive schedules that most of their creative cultural work demanded; Gill and Pratt call the resultant work patterns “bulimic”³⁴. Actors needed to be able fit unpredictable chunks of audition time into their schedules at unpredictable intervals with as little as a day’s notice. Actors, directors, music directors, and assistant directors had to be able to block out time for rehearsals, where an industry adage is that one minute on stage requires one hour of rehearsal. Composers and designers of sets, costumes, props, and lighting could often work more independently for most of a production, but the final technical and dress rehearsals usually involved entire production teams. Writers, on the other hand, described their work as least dependent on others’ schedules, yet time-consuming nonetheless. “My mind has to just always be there”, said one of the several writers in the sample.

³² Statistics Canada, *What Difference Does Learning Make to Financial Security?*, January 2008, (Accessed September 2, 2012).

³³ C. Rusch-Drutz, *Stage Mothers: A Qualitative Analysis of Women’s Work Experiences as Mothers in Toronto Theatre*, in *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering*, vol. 6, n. 2, 2004, 90-101.

³⁴ Gill, Pratt, *op. cit.*, 14.

For six of the eight participants, though, complementing their fitful creative cultural work schedules with shift work was the most feasible way to make a living. (The two others had found permanent part-time secretarial work or were the co-author.) A participant who was a bartender/server in several different establishments reported typically working five 5:00 p.m.-1:00 a.m. shifts per week at one of them, dropping to three shifts a week when she had cultural industry contracts. “[Bar jobs are] not satisfying for what my capabilities are”, she said, “but they are definitely satisfying in terms of financial freedoms, in terms of the ability to fluctuate your schedule, which every artist loves”. Another participant, Cynthia, tellingly characterized bookstore shift work as meeting her need for “something in a big company that’s flexible and disposable”.

The irony, of course, is that part-time workers themselves are regarded as flexible, disposable, and exploitable by their employers. As a participant put it, the expectation is to “give your life and soul to your crappy minimum wage part-time job”. In Lewchuk, Clarke and de Wolff’s model, efforts to keep employed, having multiple employers, working at multiple locations, and facing constant evaluation all figure into employment relationship effort, with attendant health consequences³⁵. Participants’ stories of job quitting were of insult added to injury. Frustrated at being assigned coffee shop shifts that lasted only three hours, one participant quit upon being warned that taking shifts at a different coffee shops would constitute “a conflict of interest”. Another, teaching tearful and reluctant children in a music school, was paid with late and bouncing checks but noted, “When you’ve got nothing else you put up with it.” His tipping point came when he was told his pay would be cut by \$2 per hour. When a third told her employer that she was quitting a part-time contract job that made her “violently ill”, he made a pass at her. (“I puked a little in my mouth,” she said.) In drawing direct links between “toxic” workplaces and her wellbeing, this participant was similar to two others who spoke of chronic conditions that were aggravated by stress.

Non-creative work in the cultural sector, especially in Toronto’s large performing arts venues, seemed to offer a solution to several participants. “It just sounded like at least a joe job that had something to do with what I wanted to do”, said Cynthia, describing why she left off bookstore shift work to usher and tend bar in an arts venue. She, like the two other participants working in box offices, was assured that she would have the scheduling flexibility her creative work required. Our interviews cast

³⁵ Lewchuk, Clarke, de Wolff, *op. cit.*

doubt on this. Another box office staffer who considered his workplace to be “understanding” nonetheless spent a gruelling 47-hour day combining a pair of sales shifts during a Christmas rush with a pair of nights filming on location, and only two hours of sleep. A third box office staffer had spent three weeks in 10:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m. rehearsals, followed by 6:00 p.m.-9:00 p.m. box office shifts, coming home to an empty fridge. Just as Cynthia had done when combining theatre and bookstore shifts, this staffer had worked over 80 hours a week for a sustained period. In the United States, such a schedule is now banned for medical interns because of its association with burnout, depression, and serious error³⁶; in Japan, labour researchers examine the phenomenon of *karoshi* – “death by overwork”³⁷.

Participants sometimes emphasized these extremes, with remarks such as “one of the things that I love about performance is that you can ask an actor to do that, but if you went to a banker and told them a 47-hour day, they would tell you to go to hell.” But, “everyone’s so tired”, said Cynthia, who would catch herself napping in her assistant director’s seat when stage lights were low. Another participant told a cautionary tale of an acquaintance who had given up a small theatre space that he owned and ran, “keeping it alive living in an apartment space at the back. He had no life. He said to me, “This is what I’ve done 24/7 for probably ten years. [...] I’m going crazy, I need to live.” Numerous studies have explored the impacts of working long hours, including fatigue, sleep disturbance, acute stress, workplace accidents, and declining cardiovascular health³⁸, with Gill and Pratt summarizing research specific to cultural workers³⁹.

³⁶ R.N. Wilkey, *Federal Whistleblower Protection A Means to Enforcing Maximum-Hour Legislation for Medical Residents*, in *William Mitchell Law Review*, vol. 30, n. 1, 2003, Art. 18, (Accessed September 2, 2012).

³⁷A. Kanai, “*Karoshi – work to death*” in Japan, in *Journal of Business Ethics*, vol. 84, 2009, 209-216.

³⁸ For example, see: J.V. Johnson, J. Lipscomb, Long Working Hours, *Occupational Health and the Changing Nature of Work Organization*, in *American Journal of Industrial Medicine*, vol. 49, n. 11, 2006, 921-929; A. Spurgeon, M. Harrington, C.L. Cooper, *Health and Safety Problems Associated with Long Working Hours: A Review of the Current Position*, in *Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, vol. 54, 1997, 367-375; and M. van der Hulst, *Long Work Hours and Health*, in *Scandinavian Journal of Work, Environment & Health*, vol. 29, n. 3, 2003, 171-188.

³⁹ Gill, Pratt, *op. cit.*

3.6. “Never Say No”: Safety Issues in the Creative Cultural Workplace

As discussed earlier, participants’ education and training had little bearing on what they were paid for their creative cultural work. At the same time, we noted that they often took on challenges for which they had no education/training, in unregulated workplaces, and / or in preparing acts under the aegis of self-employment. These factors make for potentially serious safety issues. “Never say no” was the motto one participant took away from her first lighting design, though implementing such designs would, in a regulated workplace, require ladder training. The co-author told of turning one room of a private home into a design studio, where she painted with indifference to the fumes, and aged a costume by setting fire to it, which she described as “really fun: I began to understand pyromania.” That she would readily consider identical activities hazardous in her academic workplace is indicative of the ethos of bravado more generally infusing cultural worksites, represented most extremely by James, a sideshow freak who described standing in front of the mirror preparing to put a mousetrap out on his tongue. When asked who would be liable were he injured, James replied, “I could go after the producer of the show because they asked me to put myself in danger, but that’d be a douchey thing to do, so I’ve never signed an agreement of any sort. I think it’s just assumed that the performer is looking out for themselves.” Were James to be injured in his home, being without an employer would leave him even less legal recourse.

Moreover, the default position of theatre artists is to abide by directors’ direction. Thus, even a participant who had told a director that she didn’t know how to do sound design could be over-ridden with, “‘Okay, well, you’re going to do sound design.’ He just kind of threw me in the pool, and I did it.” Although this situation entailed no risks, others did. An actor summed up his assigned tasks for a film role as “*Same as usual*: Learn my lines, make choices for my character, *take direction*, but there was the additional thing of being underdressed, covered with stage blood, and standing in the snow for eight hours.” [Italics ours]. When James was cast to act as a marauding Chimp, he was expected to wear a headpiece “held together by fancy chemical glues. You’re wearing a mask, breathing through here [points to the eyeholes], and huffing and every time you take a breath, it’s mostly CO₂ filled with chemicals and not actually breathable air. You do two scenes, pull the head off and lie down.” In this instance, film regulations made a difference. When James could not see well enough to think he could safely break a sideview mirror off a moving car, a stuntman was cast as the Chimp and James was assigned another role.

However, one can imagine a situation in which a desperate actor would not speak up, especially after a production company had invested in creating a Chimp costume requiring a full-body cast.

Working in un-regulated workplaces without protection of collective agreements and occupational health and safety legislation, these workers can be subject to profound and unique risks arising from the work and the way it is organized. Few other types of workers face a completely unpredictable situation. Nicole was left to handle at an overnight arts festival where the event she was assigned to manage attracted “close to half a million people over the course of 12 hours”, including a hazardously-driven bus that was being followed by 750 partying ravers. “It’s very satisfying when none of your actors die,” was her summary of the night.

4. Conclusion

The organization of creative production has some unique characteristics that engender health consequences for its workers. Cultural workers’ employment relationships for any of the multiple jobs they might hold at a given time are embedded in a complicated web of contracting, sub-contracting, employment and self-employment. From our interviews with eight cultural workers, we found that many changed their relations to the means of production and crossed over from employee to self-employed, from independent to dependent contractor, often several times in a single day, within a single work project. Even within the same production, participants perform routinized and non-routinized, craft, technical and professional jobs, each with different terms of employment. They are waged employees in some instances, while, in others, they own the means of producing and distributing their cultural outputs.

Their ambiguous status places these workers somewhere between the definitions of employee, dependent contractor, and self-employed. As a result they are denied basic forms of protection of minimum wage and occupational health and safety legislation⁴⁰. These regulatory regimes were designed to deal with permanent employees in large workplaces and are configured for the small, distributed workplaces with high-turnover of staff and attenuated chains of sub-contracting that characterize the

⁴⁰ J. Fudge, *Labour Protection for Self-Employed Workers*, in *Just Labour*, vol.3, 2003, 36-45.

cultural industries⁴¹. Labour regulations governing minimum wage, employment insurance, and occupational health and safety require updating if they are to reflect the reality of dissolving distinctions between types of employees and self-employed (Fudge, 2003). The cultural workers explored in this article would be among the beneficiaries of such social policy changes.

Arguments against such regulations abound. Labour standards for safe, decent work, such as the ILO's universal floor of rights, are often perceived as obstructing economic development. As the well-known economist, Paul Krugman, argues, "bad jobs at bad wages are better than no jobs at all"⁴². Other arguments against regulations come from within the cultural industries: Leger, along with participants who speak with pride of "being willing to put up with more crap because they *want* to", view regulation as too closely associated with the disciplining of radical expression and dissent⁴³. Until the debate is settled, the under-regulated precarious work of cultural labourers will be done for "shits and giggles" with deleterious health and safety consequences.

⁴¹ C. Mayhew, M. Quinlan, *Fordism in the Fast Food Industry: Pervasive Management Control and Occupational Health and Safety Risks for Young Temporary Workers*, in *Sociology of Health & Illness*, vol. 24, n. 3, 2002, 261-284.

⁴² P. Krugman, *In Praise of Cheap Labor: Bad Jobs at Bad Wages Are Better than No Jobs at All*, in *Slate*, March 21, 1997, (Accessed September 5, 2012).

⁴³ M. Leger, *The Non-Productive Role of the Artist: The Creative Industries in Canada*, in *Third Text*, vol. 24, n. 5, 2012, 557-570.

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