

Revisiting Reflexivity: Exploring the common experience of employment risk among 'low skill' service and 'high skill' creative workers

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Building on Beck's 'Risk Society' (1992), Allen and Henry (1997) argue that labor market flexibilization produces 'reflexivity winners and losers.' Individuals with 'tradable skills,' including creative professionals, are said to benefit from greater autonomy and income while individuals without 'tradable skills,' including cleaners and security guards in the service sector, are condemned to risk and uncertainty. To date, however, the existence of this binary and the assumption that skills and education insulate individuals from risk remains up for debate. In fact, a growing number of studies suggest that the employment structures of so-called 'creatives' feature similar instances of contractual, spatial and temporal forms of fragmentation and risk commonly associated with low-skill/low-wage service work. Indeed, despite 'sexy' job titles, intrinsic rewards and the perception of greater autonomy, workers in cultural industries such as music, film and fashion share much in common with their counterparts in the service sector. To document some of these commonalities, this presentation draws on interviews with independent musicians and retail workers in Toronto. In particular, I explore the shared engagement with risk producing processes such as income uncertainty, individualization, performativity, multi-skilling and neoliberal modes of governmentality.