

Precarious Creativity: Global Media, Local Labor

ed. by Michael Curtin, Kevin Sanson

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Precarious Creativity encompasses twenty chapters, each with a sharp focus on the increasingly difficult, unsustainable, and exploitative circumstances of creative work in the media industries. Without exception, the contributors offer razor-sharp accounts of the specific conditions in selected locations and contexts, the overall result being far more probing and coherent, however, than a series of loosely interconnected case studies offering diverse reflections on a shared theme. The sense of common purpose and reciprocal awareness that characterize the volume's many contributions undoubtedly have much to do with its origins in a successful conference, and with it being one of the outcomes of a multiyear University of California (Santa Barbara) project on the globalization of labor. This collaborative project's strong integration is also the fruit of common orientation across the individual projects, as each explores a given production site or jurisdiction with a fine awareness, not only of the dynamics and practices of globalized media industries, but of the urgent need to probe debate concerning the changing realities of creative labor. A striking feature of the volume is the high number of contributions by scholars who have initiated and defined the still emerging debate, through socially committed research efforts fueled, in part, by aspirations to realize positive change. The table of contents identifies an introduction by Michael Curtin and Kevin Sanson, chapters by Toby Miller, John Caldwell, Shanti Kumar, Vicki Mayer, Violaine Roussel, Petr Szczepanik, Matt Sienkiewicz, Tejaswini Ganti, Juan Pinon, Jade Miller, Kristen J. Warner, Anthony Fung, Michael Keane, Marwan M. Kraidy, Herman Gray, and Allison Perlman, as well as co-authored pieces by Heather Berg and Constance Penley, John Banks and Stuart Cunningham, and Miranda Banks and David Hesmondhalgh.

In their lucid introduction, the editors set the stage for the collaborative project creating a stark contrast between the glamour that surrounds Hollywood and the realities of its working conditions, identifying a trend towards deteriorating conditions for creative labor since around the early 1990s. The scope of the volume's investigations extends well beyond the West coast of the United States, however, since Hollywood is but one among many domestic and international sites of significant industrial activity. *Precarious Creativity* is thus judiciously designed

to ‘offer insight into the changing nature of film, television, and digital media work in diverse locations: Hyderabad, Lagos, Prague, New Orleans, Miami, the Middle East, and of course, Hollywood’ (p. 10). A central assumption is that the specificity of the ‘screen media’s industrial mode of production’ has been largely overlooked, and that this situation is best remedied by looking carefully at the ‘particular qualities of its highly specialized and detailed division of labor’ (p. 9). Media corporations’ strategic pursuit of transnationalism, as a means of accessing cheaper labor pools and less regulated production environments, is foregrounded as the single most important factor in the intensification of workers’ precarity, a condition characterized, among other things, by a lack of job security and benefits, poor pay, and long working hours. In many cases the relevant strategy — appealing to those who wield globally-oriented corporate power, but often damaging to locally embedded labor — is rendered viable or all the more effective by power dynamics at the national or sub-national levels. For example, tax breaks are a common means of courting inward investment consistent with a given government’s or region’s priorities and public image.

Precarious Creativity is wide-ranging in its attempt to capture a global trend towards precarity and the specific mechanisms of its intensifying institutionalization on a global basis. At the core of the project are issues of justice and workers’ rights, and questions of how change is to be effected in contexts where unions are non-existent, being weakened and undermined, or simply circumvented through the transnational mobility of capital and creative projects. The editors rightly identify the volume’s overarching conclusion as follows: ‘As our contributors make clear, the central tension is not one between local laborers in different regions — a perspective that feeds too easily into the hands of producers — but is rather a struggle against the diverse yet increasingly interconnected modalities of exploitation in screen media production around the world’ (p. 16). Given this emphasis on struggle, a central aim throughout is to identify promising means of advocacy and negotiation, the resources that might make it possible not only to counteract the effects of precarity, but to institute practices that are consistent with the most basic principles of sustainability and fairness. While *Precarious Creativity* for the most part confronts the reader with the stark realities of exploitation in the screen industries, the picture it paints is by no means one-dimensional. The aim, clearly, is also to draw attention to the ‘opportunities’ that the ‘increasingly global nature of media production’ make possible (p. 10).

Calls for community engagement and knowledge transfer pervade the spheres of academic research these days. *Precarious Creativity* is a shining example of research with precisely the sort of wider relevance that various versions of the “impact agenda” envisage. Given the significance of the issues that it takes up and the quality of its discussions, this volume deserves to be read carefully not only by scholars and students (at all levels), but by leaders of industry, by government bodies with regulatory and policy-making remits, and, not least, by those considering creative careers. Published through Luminos, the open-access

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publishing program of the University of California Press, *Precarious Creativity* is fortunately readily available, and at no cost.

It is impossible in a short review to capture the richness of the individual chapters, each of which meets the highest standards of academic rigor, relevance, and incisiveness. The editors and their team deserve the warmest of congratulations on what is truly a timely, and thus hopeful, achievement.

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