Learning to Freelance: Casual Employment in the Live Entertainment and Production Industry

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Abstract

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This thesis is based on an ethnographic study of freelance work in the live entertainment and production industry. It is informed by participant observation and interviews with workers in Toronto, Canada. It builds on previous studies of temporary and casual work and examines the discourses of flexibility and individual employability that prevail in the industry. This analysis was developed through extensive participant observation as I laboured in the production industry in an attempt to better understand the experience of working class labourers in non-standard forms of employment in an age of increasing contingency and precariousness.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Jobs of the new economy are overwhelmingly part-time, fixed term, and casual. Competitive manufacturing [and other] industries have found it more cost effective to maintain at least part, and sometimes all, of their workforce in a position where they can be ‘let go’ without financial penalty to the company, by calling them ‘casual’ employees or hiring them only on a short-term contract. In both cases workers are not subject to any but the most minimal provisions of standard labour legislation.  

-Winson and Leach 2002, 132

This study of labouring in the live event and production industry examines the reproduction of precariousness. Ethnographic research was conducted for several months at various work sites in Toronto and is drawn upon to inform this thesis. Toronto is an international hub and one of the largest cities in North America and thus a prime location to study this industry. Companies in the industry employ various types of workers with varying levels of skills and training to maintain, distribute, construct and dismantle the equipment used for live concerts, television and film productions, commercial conferences, various art installations, and a host of civic festivals that take place throughout the city and surrounding areas. In describing and analyzing the experience of production workers I develop an understanding of the discourses of freelance work as they relate to and represent the reproduction of precariousness. In this regard, workers engagement with discourses of employability and their self-identification as self-employed entrepreneurs and small businesses are in many respects incongruent with their actually existing status as casually employed labour. I argue that these discourses in conjunction with commonplace industry practices normalize the reproduction of a class of workers who have come to expect and in some respects seek out precarious employment.

Precarious employment has a broad definition and stands in contrast to standard fulltime employment. Precarious employment is characterized by, “labour market insecurity [and] involves those forms of work involving atypical employment contracts, limited social benefits
and statutory entitlements, job insecurity, low job tenure, low wages and high risks of ill health” (Vosko, 2003, 1). The Law Commission of Ontario (2012, 1) explains that precarious work is characterized as having:

Less job security, few if any benefits and minimal control over working conditions. Precarious work may be contract, part-time, self-employment or temporary work...is characterized by job instability, lack of benefits, low wages and degree of control over the process. It may also involve greater potential for injury...examples can include, temporary agency work, self-employment, part-time, casual or temporary migrant work.

Production workers experience all of these conditions. Precariousness, rather than being a marginal experience, is and has been on the rise for several decades and, “ideological changes have supported structural changes, with shifts toward greater individualism and personal accountability for work and life replacing notions of collective responsibility” (Kalleberg 2011, 1). Under the Employment Standards Act (ESA), which outlines Ontario’s labour policy and the regulation of casual work, workers hired by staffing firms and temporary agencies are considered employees of the staffing firm and are hired as casual labourers, and they are more vulnerable than those with fulltime employment. The Ontario Law Commission (2012) has recommended making changes to the ESA and other government policies in order to add more rights and protections for the precariously employed, with the aim of addressing their vulnerability as workers (42).

Freelance Casual Labour in the Live Event and Production Industry

To fulfill their labour needs, production companies hire freelancers either as independent contractors or casual labour employed by the company itself or through a staffing company. In either case, the work being done can be and often is the same. However, the distinction of casual labour places workers outside of traditional employment relationships. Stagehands or production workers often refer to themselves as freelancers, or “freelance”, reflecting the temporary and contingent aspect of employment practices. Freelance is not only a form of employment but a
cultural form. The experience of living and working freelance, as a vocation and status, has distinct meaning and significance for workers. It is this experience, which is intimately linked to precariousness that I examine. Paul Willis (1977), argues that qualitative methods and ethnography are well suited to capture and represent the role or activity of cultural meanings and human agency as they relate to the reproduction of class and social relations:

The processes of self-induction into the labour process constitute an aspect of the regeneration of working class culture in general, and an important example of how its culture is related in complex ways to regulative state institutions. They have an important function in the overall reproduction of the social totality and especially in relation to reproducing the social conditions for a certain kind of production (1977, 3).

Willis outlines his theory of cultural production through his analysis of working class males as they transition from school to work. Rather than claim that history and material conditions determine class and social relations, Willis contends that there exists an ongoing interactive and codetermining process reproducing class through cultural and material conditions:

Class cultures are created specifically, concretely in determinate conditions, and in particular oppositions. They arise through definite struggles over time with other groups, institutions and tendencies. Particular manifestations of the culture arise in particular circumstances with their own form of marshalling and developing of familiar themes. The themes are shared between particular manifestations because all locations at the same level in a class society share similar basic structural properties, and the working class people there face similar problems and are subject to similar ideological constructions. In addition, the class culture is supported by massive webs of informal groupings and countless overlappings of experience, so that central themes and ideas can develop and be influential in practical situations where their direct logic may not be the most appropriate. A pool of styles, meanings and possibilities are continuously reproduced and always available for those who turn in some way from the formalised and official accounts of their position and look for more realistic interpretations of, or relationship to, their domination. As these themes are taken up and recited in concrete settings, they are reproduced and strengthened and made further available as resources for others in similar structural situations (1977, 59).

This account of cultural production informs my analysis of production workers’ experience as “freelance”. Many people in the industry that I have spoken with and certainly those that I have
interviewed consider themselves to be freelance workers whether or not they are working for production companies directly or through staffing agencies. This process and experience of being freelance is discussed further in chapter 4. I emphasise that freelancing in production can best be understood as a series of relationships within a system employment practices and thus the various aspects that constitute what it means to be a freelancer must be understood in relationship to each other and situated within the system itself. This includes both the formal and informal practices that give shape and coherence to workers experiences.

**Research Goals and Objectives**

The experiences of production workers provide an account of how precariousness is reproduced. As a microcosm of flexible, just-in-time and on-demand practices that are reshaping the experience of workers around the world and their relationship to employers, the production industry is an exceptional site for understanding the changing nature of work. This analysis of work in the industry can serve as a case which can inform discussions of precarious employment in North America. My research questions include:

1) How is work in the industry organized?
2) How do workers explain their employment status and experiences?
3) What are the challenges and risks associated with freelance and casual work?
4) How and why is precariousness reproduced?
5) How does the structure of the industry maintain precariousness?

To answer these questions, qualitative data were collected through participant observation and interviews. No single term can adequately encompass the diversity of positions of those working in the industry. However, for the purposes of this thesis, I will use the term stagehand to refer to those who labour in the industry. The data, based on observations, interviews and fieldwork where I learned to be a stagehand and labourer demonstrate the complexities and contradictions
of being a freelance worker. These data are used to represent workers’ experiences with precarious work. Ethnographic description provides details of experiences, thought processes, rationales, contradictions, and motivations that are not as easily identified through less personal means of investigation. I also explore the rationale and motives behind workers’ choices to continue to work in flexible, non-standard employment relationships.

**Context and Overview of Production Work**

The following section provides an overview of the live entertainment and production industry and outlines how the overall argument of the thesis is developed. It also describes the nature of the industry and how work is organized. This provides context for the reader to understand settings described later in the analysis chapter. It also outlines the rationale for applying ethnographic methods to the study of precariousness.

Production work can be situated in local, national and global networks of the entertainment industry and is linked to the movement of technologies, people, services and capital (Appadurai 1990; Marcus 1995). Such a complex and dynamic industry requires a thorough analysis that takes into account the diversity of experiences. Though I specifically concentrate on the experience of those who labour as stagehands, I draw upon conversations and interviews conducted with people in a variety of positions, including technicians, stage-managers, riggers, drivers, shop workers, office workers and owners of several companies.

Production companies are businesses that specialize in supplying the equipment and personnel to set up and service spectacles and events. Some specialize in particular types of technology, such as lighting or staging, while others take on multiple roles. These companies vary in size and compete for market share in and around the city. Some of these companies supply the lighting and audio equipment for film and television, as well as for concert events.
There are also many small scale productions. These range in size depending on the needs and budget of the client who hires the production company to supply the equipment. The rented equipment is often shipped out and set up by employees of the company, or by self-employed freelancers who negotiate wages directly with the company, or by workers who are employed by staffing agencies. Some staffing companies specialize in live events and have a roster of workers with varying levels of experience in production work. Other staffing companies supply general labour to a variety of industries and are used by production companies during peak times and typically for general labour. All three types of employment relationships, whether one is an employee, freelancer, or casually employed, can and do occur in the same settings and on the same jobs, and at times the people do the same work.

Production workers in Toronto’s production industry constantly shift between employment and unemployment. My research, in part, explores the consequences of minimal job security for non-unionized workers who rely on networking and on staffing agencies to gain employment. This study does not include unionized workers, though some informants have discussed their experiences with unions and their reasons for not joining. Unionized workers in the entertainment industry are represented by The International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (I.A.T.S.E. or I.A.). It was founded in 1893 and represents workers in both Canada and The U.S. (IATSE History 2014; IATSE Structure 2014). Stagehands, otherwise known as grips, are those who work in the entertainment industry, including theatre, film, television and concerts. They set up and take down the materials used in a production. They perform a variety of duties and can specialize in sound, audio, video and staging. They can be unionized, freelance, employees of venues, employees of companies that own and operate specialized equipment; they can work for studios and they can also be employed by staffing agencies. This study concentrates
on those who work as freelancers and as casual labourers who work for the production companies directly, for individual contractors, and for staffing agencies.

Employment in this industry is a complex and by no means homogeneous experience because workers are able to take on a variety of roles and develop skills that are transferable across industries. The production industry is made up of media corporations, studios, concert venues, conference halls, audio-visual companies, technical specialists, designers, shipping companies, labour unions, freelance workers, and labourers. To a certain extent, workers have the potential to be ‘hyper-mobile’, to garner relatively high wages and to exercise some control over their work. Workers also experience alienation in various ways, depending on their relative status in the segmented and hierarchically structured industry. Individuals, though complicit in this process, are not entirely complacent. The structuring of power and control is reflected through hegemonic and ideological discourses that perpetuate precarious employment. Dominant groups and individuals have the power and ability to influence practices and discourses in ways that benefit their interests by attaining the consent of workers in such matters as work arrangements and wages. I am arguing that employment practices and dominant discourses perpetuate and contribute to the concentration of wealth, asymmetrical economic relations, stagnating wages, and job insecurity. Employment practices within the industry operate in such a way as to constrain individuals. These, instead of being challenged, are made to appear normal and legitimate. It is this normalizing that requires examination and critique. Companies, people, equipment, and discourses can operate at different levels depending on the situation, or event. Each production produces new connections and dissolves others. Contingent work or flex-work is made to appear legitimate through discourse and rationalized rhetorical ideologies. This perpetuates the system of relations and practices that reinforces the oppression of workers
through non-standard employment practices. This constraint is normalized through dominant discourses and through induction practices. A perceived lack of alternatives and the disciplining of workers reproduce the system that, through co-action among the various people in this assemblage, maintains stratification.

Public Issues Anthropology and the Study of Precarious Work

Public Issues Anthropology utilizes ethnographic methods to study contemporary matters of concern. This thesis addresses the concerns of workers and the challenges they face as a result of precarious employment. Ethnographic writing makes effective use of narratives and dialogues to demonstrate the complexity of human experiences, which is quintessential to an analysis of precariousness in contemporary labour markets (Weis 1990; Weis and Fine 1996).

Anthropologists have addressed problems of injustice, inequality and oppression through their analyses and collaborations with wider publics beyond the university system. Early pioneers of anthropology, such as Franz Boas and Margaret Mead, as well as more recent figures, including Nancy Scheper-Hughes, Paul Farmer, and Wade Davis, have been catalysts for political and social action and the development of policy responses to public issues through their scholarly and popular writings and presentations (Borofsky 1994; Erikkson 2006; Lamphere 2004; Lassiter 2005; Low and Engle Merry 2010; Schensul 2006). Anthropology has had a long tradition of engaging in debates and studying pressing political and social issues (Hymes 1969; Leach 2002). As a discipline it, “offers powerful analytic tools for integrating culture, power, history, and economy into one analytical framework” (Edelman and Hagerud 2005, 20). The humanist and critical approaches within anthropology have been beneficial for the discipline’s ongoing growth and maturity. The postmodern turn, the post-colonial movement, feminist scholarship and the reinventions of Marxist scholarship have encouraged anthropologists to develop comprehensive
and holistic approaches to the study of social life and its complexities (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Fischer 2007; Rabinow and Marcus 2008; Ortner 1984). The political economy tradition in anthropology has also contributed to our understandings and analyses through a sustained critique of capitalist work relations and the impacts on ways of life and livelihoods (Bourgois 1996; Harvey 1989; Lem and Leach 2002; Mintz 1974; Nash 1981; Smith 2001; Tsing 2005; Walton 1993; Wolf 1982). My research and analysis has been informed by these critical traditions. My aim has been to incorporate their principles, methods and theories in order to examine the relationship between agency and structure, so as to better understand how complicity towards precariousness, or conversely, the reasons why resistance towards it are scarce, while also identifying aspects of critique that do occur within in the industry but are not necessarily being addressed through collective action. By situating workers experiences and analyzing their narratives I hope to better understand their challenges and their hopes for more satisfying and rewarding careers.

One might label this approach as a critical and applied ethnographic study that incorporates sociocultural political economy, critical theory, and post-structuralism with discourse analysis and contemporary ethnographic methods. Anthropologists and other social scientists in these traditions contribute to the ongoing critique of “the fundamental logic of surplus appropriation and the essential dynamics of capitalist economies” (Lem and Leach 2002, 11-12). In connecting their work to Marxist scholarship, Lem and Leach (2002, 15) argue that:

The agenda for anthropology should be reinvigorated by a commitment to exposing the “innermost secret” of the social structure of a system of economic and political organization based on the appropriation of labour, the appropriation of surplus. Inasmuch as some may take these propositions as provocations, we are eager to rise to the challenge of debate.

According to Leach, qualitative anthropological research, with its interdisciplinary and holistic approach to analysis and that which, “theorizes agency is key to our ability to understand the
relationship between globalized economic process and people’s everyday making sense of their world” (2005, 19). An anthropological enterprise that aims to address contemporary concerns of the working class must take into consideration the multiple forms of employment and most certainly this must include precarious work. Public Issues Anthropology should address the ideological construction of precarious work. I explore this through an examination of the experience of precariously employed stagehands and production workers in general, who view themselves as freelance workers. By outlining the ways “freelance” work is organized in the production industry we may begin to understand ways to challenge the status quo and improve working conditions and reduce the various risks that workers face as a result of their working lives. This research will also be of interest for policy makers and scholars concerned with occupations and the ever changing world of work.

**Overview of Chapters**

In chapter 2, where I present my literature review, I will discuss and review the relevant concepts and theoretical approaches to the study of work. It will outline the relevant sociological and anthropological literature, especially that which takes precarious work and labour in the arts as its focus. It will also provide examples of ethnographic case studies that address class, work and precariousness. The chapter builds a foundation and framework for my critique of precarious work in the live event and production industry. Discourse theory and assemblage theory are used to understand the reproduction of social and economic relations that perpetuate the precarious nature of work in the live entertainment and production industry.

Chapter 3 will further discuss the rationale for this ethnography. It will outline the scope of this project in more detail, including the extensive fieldwork and interviews that were conducted throughout the research process. It makes the case that ethnographic methods are
particularly well suited for developing an understanding of the experiences of freelance and casual labourers. This approach to research is useful for documenting and analyzing the significance and impact of determinant structural constraints and discourses that maintain and reproduce precarious employment practices.

Chapter 4 is devoted to analyzing the data. I provide examples of individual narratives and present the above arguments more concretely than can be done in this introduction. My experiences and knowledge gained through participant observation, which helped me to develop these arguments and critiques, are also discussed. Portions of the transcripts from interviews are used to support the theoretical arguments and to present a description of how employment is structured. The chapter highlights many of the risks, challenges, and frustrations experienced by production workers, including their disappointment with employment insecurity, stagnating wages, and working conditions. It also describes the positive experiences and benefits of working as a freelancer. As much as possible I use specific examples and the words of my informants as a representation of the social processes and structural aspects mentioned above.

In the conclusion chapter, I provide a summary and overview of the thesis findings and draw conclusions. I also highlight the limits and challenges associated with the research project. I put forth several recommendations for further research on the subject and briefly outline how this study can be expanded. This study is limited in scope, duration and breadth. I worked for several companies and alongside hundreds of workers of various ranks, levels of experience and statuses. My interpretation and analysis is only a partial framing of what I have experienced, observed and have had told to me by my informants.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The individual is no doubt the fictitious atom of an “ideological” representation of society; but he is also a reality fabricated by this specific technology of power that I have called “discipline.” We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it excludes,” it “represses,” it “censors,” it “abstracts,” it “masks,” it “conceals.” In fact, power produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production.

-Michel Foucault 1977, 194

This chapter provides an overview of relevant literatures in the social sciences, especially as they relate to the political economy of work and the reproduction of precarious work. It further builds on the foundation made in the introduction for understanding how work in the production industry is organized and structured through the use of non-standard employment practices. The discussion of precarious work in this chapter will also include some of the relevant ethnographic studies of work, including literature that examines temporary work, staffing agencies, and freelance employment. Literature regarding the culture industries and art worlds is also examined. These literatures are brought together in order to situate the experience of production workers, which are presented in Chapter 4, in the broader context of contemporary employment practices and the critiques made against contemporary employment practices.

The chapter also outlines discourse and assemblage theory and their compatibility in order to theorize the reproduction of precariousness. Theories of discipline (Foucault 1977), assemblage (De Landa 2006; Deleuze and Guattari 2003) and control (Deleuze 1992) are useful for describing the processes and structures that produce and reproduce systemic as well as social forms of domination. This theoretical stance will be explained in this chapter and will be teased out in the analysis chapter. The critique that I develop here also includes an analysis of how asymmetric power relations in the industry lead to differing levels precariousness. By analysing the discourses of precariousness and freelance work I aim to contextualize the ways individuals
situate their experiences and understand their positions within the industry. This is done in order to demonstrate the varying levels of agency that workers exercise in their efforts to determine and shape their careers. I will also attempt to demonstrate how dominant discourses, especially those that serve the interest of employers, and are thus considered hegemonic, are incorporated into the discourses of workers. Gramsci’s concept of hegemony is useful for explaining how the construction of power, ideology, and coercion occur in social and class relations whereby particular organizations and individuals are able to dominate others (Dunk 2003, 54, Barber, Leach, and Lem 2012; Nash 1981, Parker 1994; Schwatzman 1993, 30). Individuals in the production industry are caught up in discourses and practices that reproduce social and material relations where individual ambitions are used to leverage control in precarious employment relationships throughout the industry. The perpetuation of employment practices and discourses that reproduce precariousness have the effect of limiting workers’ opportunities to challenge the structural aspects of the labour process. The rationalizing of flexible work arrangements benefits capital and workers with higher levels of social and cultural capital.

In recent decades, researchers have become concerned with the rise of temporary and contingent employment practices (Hollister 2011; Kalleberg 2011; Sennett 1998; 2006; Smith 2001). Social scientists are concerned with and critical of the increase in non-standard employment and the associated risks taken on by workers as a result of contemporary changes in employment practices that have been attributed to late-capitalism, neo-liberalism, and globalization (Casey 2002; Casey and Alach 2004; Deleuze 1992; Fitzgerald 2012; Fu 2013; Harrison 2008; Harvey 1989; Lewchuk, Clarke and De Wolff 2011). Researchers have argued that qualitative accounts of these changes are often left out of demographic, economic and psychological analyses regarding the impact of new forms of work and working life (Friedland
Social scientists, including sociologists and anthropologists are and must continue to address these issues through qualitative research studies. A study of work is invariably tied to themes such as identity, alienation and class, all of which are interwoven and aspects of larger forces, institutions, and structures (Appadurai 1996; Bourdieu 1998; Burawoy 1978; 1979; Giddens 1984; Gottfried 1992; Kalleberg 2000; 2003; Leach 1998; 2012; Lewis 2007; Marcus, A. 2005; Marcus, G. 1995; Marx 1990; Ortner 2006; Rifkin 1995; Sennett 2006; Steinberg 1989; Wacquant 1991; 2008). The anthropology and ethnography of work utilizes neo-Marxist approaches and political economy to study the “formal organizations within the larger social and economic structure of modern class society” (Schwartzman 1993, 28). Analyses of how precariousness is structured and the discourses that maintain and reproduce it are of critical importance because they will generate insights into the ways workers can begin to challenge the risks associated with non-standard employment.

Ethnography, Structure and Agency, and the Study of Cultural Production

The philosophical debate concerning free will and determinism has been an ongoing aspect of the social sciences since the enlightenment (Hampson 1990, 114). Social scientists are concerned with the ways in which individuals and groups are implicated in processes, including their roles as active participants and agents of change through acts of resistance, protest and struggle (Burawoy 1979; Fine and Weis 1998; Ortner 2006; Thompson 1966; Weis and Fine 1996). Anthropologists use their research findings and theoretical insights to highlight the relationship between individual action and structural aspects of social and economic relations (Henson 1996; Purser 2012; Weis and Fine 1996; 2013; Weis 1990; Weis 2006; Williams, C. 2006; Williams, D. 2009). Anthropologist Michael Fischer explains Weber’s (1930/1958) “insistence on understanding the cultural frames of reference of the motivations and intentions of
actors,” in order to bring to light how power is a “culturally formulated legitimate domination (on the grounds of tradition or that the person giving the order is legitimately entailed to do so)” (Fischer 2007, 8; Weber 1958). Weis and Fine have further refined analyses of power and domination by addressing class, race and labour markets in their ethnographic studies of working class culture. In arguing for the continued examination of individual and group agency they state:

Our key point that structures produce lives at one and the same time as lives produce, reproduce and at times contest these same social/economic structures has somehow gotten lost, and this is a critical element of an emerging class cultural paradigm (Weis and Fine 2013, 224).

They have shown how individual perspectives and value judgments reinforce divisions in the working class and redirect attention away from structural or macro conditions. Through induction practices, dominant discourses and asymmetric relations of power, individuals are constrained by the broader patterns and processes at work that structure industry. Production workers, as I show in chapter 4, are not unaware of the ways in which they are subject to industry practices and processes, however, the matter of choice and the degree to which they are able to exercise choice, is cited as one of the key factors that characterizes freelance work. Individuals may perceive themselves to be acting in their best interest within parameters beyond their control and beyond changing. In this sense, they do perceive themselves to be constrained, thus paradoxically, the belief that they are acting in their best interest and things could not be any different is part of a hegemonic discourse. This notion of choice or control is in need of exploration and examination. The question of choice relates directly to freedom, or freewill and is not simply interesting for philosophical queries, it has bearing on how we understand the way power and control function.

Ethnographic studies can inform these theoretical and philosophical debates, while also generating insights that can inform policy and lead to political changes. George Marcus explains
that, “ethnography or [the] anthropological monograph has gone far beyond its once rather modest role (which of course had its own orthodoxies) to a form that showcases brilliance in theoretical acuity, storytelling, and the power of selected material and key metaphors” (Rabinow et al. 2008, 86). Ethnographic research contributes to our knowledge of individual agency by showcasing how individuals respond to forms of domination and oppression.

Paul Willis’ now classic text, Learning to Labour (1977), is an ethnographic account of how working class culture among young males in the United Kingdom is produced and linked to the reproduction of class, in both cultural and material senses. His study focused on a group of working class males, the ‘lads’, in high school and tracked them as they moved into working class jobs. The book studies the ‘lads’ rejections of academic pursuits and their induction into the working class. The aim of Willis’ case study is to bring to light the ways that agency and structures intertwine at the individual and group level (Bessett and Gualtieri 2002; Willis 1977). Willis’ microanalysis serves as an example of how ethnographic research can be used to generate theoretical insights and extrapolations that can inform our understandings of issues at the societal level. He is concerned with cultural production as a process through which structure and agency co-exist to reproduce social, economic and material relations.

Willis’(1977) theory of cultural production, which is comparable to Anthony Giddens’ (1979) structuration theory, is useful for explaining and demonstrating the relationship and compatibility of structural determinants with individual action and agency, each of which act on the other in a mutually creative process. According to these theories, the subjective and the material are interconnected and mutually constitutive (Giddens 1984; 1991; Willis 1979). The ethnographic case study is particularly well suited to explore these processes by teasing out the everyday actions and activities of individuals within broader social relations and institutions.
This is an important matter for analysis because under contingent work arrangements, “social inequalities widen, power relations are reinforced and wage polarization occurs […] structured less on labours’ terms” (Peck 1996, 74). Before elaborating further on the theoretical components of my argument I will first introduce some of the relevant literature on precarious work.

**The Rise and Extent of Precarious Work**

The forms of work that are now covered by the term precarious work have been identified by different terms over the past 30 years. Some of this alternate usage is associated with refinements to the conceptualization of the term, others are more regionally specific. Terms like ‘temporary’ ‘contract’ and ‘casual’ clearly point to specific aspects of the employment relationship (Shalla 2003; 2004). In Canada there has been a shift away from terms like ‘contingent’ and ‘non-standard’ towards the broader and more inclusive term ‘precarious’ (Shalla and Clement 2007). This shift in terminology makes a review of the literature on precarious work complicated. However, while recognizing that there are distinctions, for the purposes of this thesis the terms non-standard, casual, contingent and precarious will be taken to mean more or less the same thing, following Vosko’s definition of precarious work presented in the Introduction, in order to signify broad changes taking place in the world of work.

Previous scholarship has traced the development of policies and practices that have shaped contemporary employment relations linked to the increase in precarious work in North America (Kalleberg 2000, 2003, 2009; McDowell and Christopherson 2009; Peck and Theodore 2001; 2007; Rifkin 1995; Ross 2003; 2009; Smith 1997, 2001; Vosko 2000; 2006). Kalleberg argues that non-standard forms of work benefit employers and that growth and demand for temporary agencies has been driven by the needs of companies and the temporary agencies
themselves (2000, 347). Literature on precariousness covers a variety of industries and also pays attention to vulnerable populations, including the exploitation and stigmatization of marginalized groups including those who are ex-offenders, the racially marked, the urban poor, immigrants, and women (Law Commission of Ontario 2012; Purser 2012; Roberts and Bartly 2004; Sennett 1998; Williams, D. 2009). Tucker (2002) argues that younger workers, women, and minorities make up the majority of the precariously employed. However, Vosko’s (2000) historical analysis of temporary work overviews the gradual demise of standard employment relationships and the gendered dimensions of precariousness. Vosko contends that "feminized employment relationships and employment norms are becoming acceptable alternatives to the SER” (2000, 163). The rise of low quality work and the increasing use of casual and flexible employment is a major public issue as it affects a growing portion of the working population (Stapleton et al. 2012).

The growth of staffing agencies that provide client companies with temporary workers and casual employees is well documented (Aaronson et al. 2004; Appelbaum 1992; Gossett 2002; Gottfried 1991; Henson 1996; Parker 1994; Peck and Theodore 2007; Purser 2012; Rifkin 1995; Ross 2009; Scott, A. 1988; Vosko 2000). Those who work for staffing agencies or third parties are employed in a “triangular employment relationship”, as outlined by Kalleberg (2000, 348). Triangular employment relationships reduce the expenses incurred by client companies who would have otherwise employed labourers directly and the associated costs, such as benefits, pension packages, and insurance (Smith 1997; Williams, D. 2009). It has also been argued that temporary work also has the effect of isolating workers from each other, limiting opportunities to discuss work and develop a shared sense of community and identity, due to “communicative isolation” (Gossett 2008, 61). Workers in the arts and media and especially
workers in the production industry, however, typically gain employment through contacts and connections, thus how workers maintain active networks is a crucial aspect of work. Websites, message boards, social media and the sharing of personal contact information are other strategies used within the industry.

**Precarious Work and Employability**

Vickie Smith (1997) has analyzed the development of non-standard and precarious employment in the growing staffing agency sector and temporary help services industry. She shows how contingent freelance work is associated with reduced opportunities for upward movement within a company.

Smith (2010) discusses employability and the impact unstable labour markets have on workers who are increasingly required to invest in their social and cultural capital in order to find work. She suggests that the rise of temporary and contingent work, as specific forms of precarious work, have and will continue to erode the standard employment model. Smith contends that researchers should,

> **Analyze aspirations and identity at the crossroads of production and employment transformation, and corporate restructuring more broadly. We need a deeper understanding of personal experience, subjective interests, and of how aspirations are sustained or crushed as the opportunity structure undergoes changes that appear to be permanent and radical** (1997, 334)

Smith argues that temporary workers must continuously invest more time and resources in order to improve their employability. This includes volunteer work, internships and temporary work. Smith discusses how forms of social and cultural capital, including identity work, networking and other strategies for increasing one’s employment prospects are taken up in various sectors. She argues that developing one’s skills and marketability through internships and volunteer work is typically more suited for and advantageous for middle and upper class individuals. Those in lower level positions are more likely to depend on third party intermediaries, such as temporary
agencies, to find work. This, according to Smith (2010) might often be tolerated during one’s initial career experiences, or when looking for volunteer work experience and internships, however workers have had to rely on these beyond such phases. For people who are in “less-skilled sectors” this process can be limited to finding more work and not necessarily to improve one’s skills or quality of employment (2010, 290). As such, working class individuals, with fewer resources and standing to gain less as they move from job to job, must spend increasingly more time and effort searching for work while making relatively less money and having fewer benefits.

As will be shown in the analysis chapter, these types of experiences occur regularly for non-unionized production workers in Toronto who are often employed as casual labourers. In contrast to working class day labourers, highly skilled and professional workers have more opportunities to mitigate labour market uncertainties and establish themselves within professional networks. Workers in the production industry have few opportunities for advancement and often take on work that is below their skill sets. For some, the production industry provides opportunities to develop skills, experience rewarding work, and to make a decent, if not substantial living. However, for those on the ‘periphery’, the production industry perpetuates precariousness.

Ethnographic studies of various forms of temporary work have revealed the challenges that workers face. According to Damian Williams, ethnographic studies of day labouring companies and their workers show that “the day labour market has been drawn into late capitalism’s flexible network of social relations by private labour market intermediaries that capitalize on the crippling effects of grinding poverty” (2009, 212). Williams suggests that, “the time is ripe to decipher [the temporary/day labour industry’s] socially regressive, lived
consequences for the various poverty populations it draws into its orbit” (2009, 243). Williams’ ethnography of temporary agencies and homeless day labourers highlights the processes that perpetuate precarious employment and flexible employment relations. The staffing or temporary agency links the worker and the client company in what Williams explains as the “flexibilization mechanisms” that formally and informally perpetuate contingency and precariousness (2009, 213). Williams emphasises the role of “micro-dynamics”, the specific arrangements, relationships and processes that shape the employment relationship within the broader labour market and structural constraints experienced by individuals (2009, 215). In chapter 4 I will discuss this in further detail and provide examples of such relationships and processes as they are experienced by freelance stagehands.

Casey and Alach (2004) interviewed female temporary agency workers in New Zealand and found that reduced job security and lower pay were tolerated by the majority of their female informants because of the benefits of having reduced hours and more flexible schedules. This allowed them to balance other parts of their lives. The authors optimistically suggest that this can be interpreted as a move by workers to appropriate contingent forms of work as part of a broader cultural and collective “demand for more emancipatory models of work and life and of new imaginations of equality for women and men [and that it] may head off the current course of economic neo-liberalism” (Casey and Alach 2004, 477). Flexible forms of employment may present benefits and provide individuals with alternatives to standard employment, however, the typically lower pay and reduced benefits means that employers benefit from greater control and the devaluing of work (Kalleberg 2003; Vosko 2000; 2010).

It has also been argued that flexible work also enhances employers control over when and where work takes place. Leach (2008) argues that the introduction of flexible production
practices and contingency have led to reductions in wages and the weakening of working class solidarity (49-50). For operational flexibility (Kalleberg 2003), the network of media companies, production companies, staffing firms and freelance workers in the live event and production industry make use of non-standard forms of work. According to Peck (1996), flexible firms operate “in the shadow of the core firms, exploiting less stable and less profitable markets and absorbing many of the business risks of the core sector” (1996, 62) and play a role in reproducing contingent relationships for peripheral workers. Peck cautions us to avoid oversimplifying the core-periphery models by situating and contextualizing workers’ relative positions and experiences in a given labour market. Description and analysis must show the intricacies and socially constructed aspects of the labour market in question. In the production industry, which will be discussed in more detail in the analysis chapter, the periphery is normalized through industry discourses and everyday speech acts that legitimize precariousness.

**Labour in the Arts and Culture Industries**

Although none specifically examines the kind of work addressed in this thesis, there is a growing body of research that examines the division of labour in what might broadly be considered the art-worlds (Becker 1982). These include the creative industries (Flew 2012; 2013), cultural industries (Fitzgerald 2012), cultural work (Banks 2007; Banks, Gill and Taylor 2013) and creative labour (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010; 2011). These works examine the relationship between media firms, work and the contemporary global economy. They take work in film, television, music, publishing, information technology and the internet as their main sites for analysis and critique. These industries are important areas of study for the social sciences because of the shared “transformations in the nature and experience of work in late modernity”, including the increasing prevalence of flexible work arrangements (Banks, Gill and Taylor 2013,
2). There is, however, little sociological or anthropological literature that pertains directly to labour in the live entertainment and production industry. My research adds to the literature by producing an ethnography of labouring in these industries.

Some writers do examine the consequences of labouring in these industries more specifically and incorporate the use of qualitative methods to outline the economic, physical and psychological impacts of precarious labour (Christopherson 2008; Lewchuk, Clarke and De Wolff 2011). Research concerning workers in these industries confirms some of the same findings found in the staffing and temporary work literature discussed above. Those who work in the arts, more so than workers in many other sectors of the economy, face uncertainty about their long term employment and have come to expect that they will experience non-standard employment (Christopherson 2008). For example, Susan Christopherson (2002; 2008) explains that workers in the arts, film, television and music industries spend larger amounts of time being unemployed between jobs and must invest large amounts of time networking in order to maintain employment. She explains that:

Questions concerning employment in the entertainment industries have always been difficult to answer because of the project-oriented character of production even the most successful entertainment industry worker has multiple employers during the course of a year, spells of intense work, and spells of unemployment (2008, 156-7).

These challenges are compounded by the fact that production workers can experience multiple risks and vulnerabilities throughout their careers as a result of the pervasiveness of precarious employment. This includes part-time, contract, or casual employment in addition to working for temporary labour and staffing agencies. Rather than work directly for production companies as fulltime and permanent employees, many production workers freelance and work as casual labourers. Due to these factors, production workers experience intensified forms of precariousness.
Sengupta et al. (2009) have shown that employees of media firms in the U.K. experience low pay and job insecurity. Their study uses survey and statistical data to assess job quality at small firms. Their findings discuss the increase in precarious and low paying jobs in the “new economy”. Again, the results show that freelance workers lack traditional protections afforded to workers of larger companies (Sengupta et al. 2009, 51). These workers must spend more time searching for work, experience stress related to employment, and have reduced levels of support for unemployment insurance and other services because of their status as casually employed. These are common concerns for those who experience precariousness and “work without commitments” in Canada’s labour market (Lewchuck et al. 2011, 84).

Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011), in their study of work in the culture industries, conducted interviews and participant observation to analyze “patterns of inequality” faced by workers (232). Their study broadly covers divisions of labour and they explain that, “some people take on more creative, demanding, challenging but also rewarding work, especially that around symbol-making and craft skills, and others involved in ‘humdrum’ routine tasks” (2011, 233). Stagehands and labourers are largely excluded from much of their research regarding the culture and creative industries. Granted these authors are more interested in art-worlds than labour in the more traditional sense. They draw on post-structuralism in order to analyse “normativity” and Foucauldian “technologies of the self” to examine the nuanced processes of interaction that reproduce social and economic relations (2011, 46).

I focus on labouring in the cultural industries, whereas cultural work for Hesmondhalgh and Baker covers wide ranging divisions and distinctions in different types of employment in different sectors, including publishing, music and television. They include writers, producers, and the “artistic and creative work in the media” (2011, 165). They recognize that freelance
work in the arts leads some workers to have “some new freedoms in that [they] become independent of traditional ties, but it also leads to competitiveness and isolation” (2011, 225). They discuss the long hours and overwork experienced by workers in the cultural industries as a form of “self-exploitation”. The feast-or-famine experience is not limited to labourers, but is experienced across divisions, sectors and industries. They argue that one way to begin to alleviate the risks and challenges of these types of jobs is to form pathways and connections with existing unions, and thus trade unions should begin to recognize the value of freelance networks and “work alongside and complement them” (2011, 225).

Fitzgerald (2012) analyzes the cultural industries from the perspective of media conglomerates and provides a meta-narrative and historical account of changes that have occurred as a result of neoliberal policies and restructuring (147). As control within the media industry is consolidated, workers are pushed out through downsizing and layoffs (Fitzgerald 2012). Storey, Salaman and Platman (2005) also discuss the organizational changes that have taken place since the 1980's that have contributed to the growth of insecure work in the media industries. Their research covers a broad array of fields and types of work and includes software designers, writers and television producers. They discuss the negative impacts of non-standard work on wellbeing and quality of life, in addition to the financial challenges and risks associated with insecure work. They argue that these changes have increased control over work and workers at the organizational level and have reshaped employment relationships in favor of companies and clients. They also make a connection between the outsourcing of labour in the media industries and the development of discourses and notions of media workers as enterprising freelancers and discuss how freelance work is seen as a form of freedom. They discuss the link between discourses and subjectivities in their discussion of freelancers’ identification with and
use of the "language of enterprise in describing themselves… [and] the notion of themselves as businesses," (2005, 1045) which was in some respects contradictory to their actually existing positions as workers. This includes being able to make choices between a variety of companies and the types of work that are available. However, this point should not be over emphasized or romanticized, as freelance production workers face many risks and challenges. In the analysis chapter, I discuss workers’ understanding of and experience with these positive benefits and the ways in which workers identify as freelancers, or self-employed. In some cases they consider themselves to be small businesses, yet they experience many of the same challenges as the casually employed in other industries. This misidentification as 'own account’, otherwise referred to as self-employed, obscures the employment relationship, which more closely resembles one of employment and casual employment (Law Commission of Ontario 2012, 89).

Moving between short term freelance work and other forms of work throughout the year is considered by many to be the norm in these industries (Christopherson 2008). A key aspect to enhancing one’s employability is to build and maintain networks. Coulson (2012) discusses the “webs of contacts” that those who work in the arts must create and maintain regularly in order to mitigate precariousness and insecurity (252). He explains that working in the arts, “is about acquiring a set of skills, cultural conventions and ways of being that might be called a vocational habitus, of which work practices simply form a part” (2012, 253). For some, this requires a particular temperament and tolerance for uncertainty, bouts of unemployment and risk taking. The emphasis on entrepreneurial skills and identification with self-employment has the effect of redirecting attention from the “risky nature of the labour market for cultural workers” (2012, 258). This requires the expenditure of more energy and resources in order to find work when
compared to other sectors of the economy (Lewchuk et al., 2011). Networking and persistency are required by many in the arts to manage social and professional connections.

**Theorizing Precariousness as Discourse**

Understanding the perspective, rationales, and discourses of the working class is a necessary requirement for a critical and public anthropology of work, especially as it relates to flexible employment. As discussed in chapter 1, the goal of this project is to utilize social theories to inform the analysis that is borne out of this case study. My goal has been to understand how and why precarious employment is made legitimate and to study non-standard employment in an age of deindustrialization. In part, I want to understand how working class people make sense of economic insecurity, and the strategies they use as freelancers to stay employed. Also, I want to understand how job insecurity is normalized. The remainder of this section will introduce the theoretical framework that guides the analysis.

As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, flexible work is linked to the erosion of good paying fulltime work for the working class. Caragata (2003, 575) argues that non-standard employment, rather than systemically empowering people, reproduces inequalities and increases low-wage work and underemployment. Lewchuk et al. (2011, 109) argue that many workers and families are witnessing “a moment of turmoil” as a result of employment instability and losses in household income. They warn that “we may be at the cusp of a big shift in the interrelationship between production and social reproduction in the last century (101)...characterized by the erosion of the male breadwinner model and the growth of the two insecure incomes per household” (105). The negative aspects of “flexible capitalism” have been well documented, however, the “potentially positive benefits” of being able to change careers and exercise more choice over one’s working life should also be examined (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011, 144;
Sennett 1998). In the analysis chapter I will discuss some of the benefits of flexible work arrangements as well as the economic insecurity and other common concerns raised by workers, including the impacts on social and family life.

I make use of critical discourse analysis to examine “social practices and ideological assumptions”, as they relate to and are reproduced by discourses (Schiffrin, Tannen and Hamilton 2001, 27). Critical discourse analyses (CDA), much like the critical theory of the Frankfurt School of philosophers and social theorists, attempt to critique aspects of society, especially in reference to the reproduction of power and inequality (van Dijk 1997; 2001). It is rooted in the post-structuralism thinking of Foucault and is often used to analyze ideology, power and identity. As van Dijk explains, “theory formation, description, and explanation, in discourse analysis, are sociopolitically “situated,” [and that] discourse analysts conduct research in solidarity and cooperation with dominated groups” (van Dijk 2001, 353). This description of CDA shares a fundamental characteristic with various forms of applied anthropology, including but not limited to public issues anthropology, participatory action research and collaborative ethnographic research. By utilizing participant observation and conducting interviews to gather data, I have been able to document how workers discuss their experiences within the industry. As van Dijk (2001) explains, ethnographers who are CDA theorists are concerned with “social problems”, “political issues”, and operate in a “multidisciplinary” fashion in order to explain how “discourse structures enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce, or challenge relations of power and dominance in society” (353). CDA, according to van Dijk, merges micro and macro level approaches by situating language use and interaction, “the micro-level of the social order”, with the reproduction of the social, economic and political (354). This is done by situating discourses and the “shared “social representations” that govern the collective actions of a group” (354). A
concern of critics of CDA is that discourse analysis implies that the historical and material are overly deterministic and thus leave little room for theorizing individual agency. This criticism wrongly presumes that a mutually exclusive dichotomy exists between structural determinism and individual agency. I take a compatibilist view on the matter. My analysis acknowledges the structural role of society and culture, and also takes into account how individuals are, or are not able to exercise agency. I regard determinism and agency as compatible. By analyzing the structures or systems that appear to be deterministic aspects of society, and which produce constraints, while also taking into account individual agency, I hope to document how individual actions and rationalizations contribute to the reproduction of precariousness. It is my hope that by tracing these discourses, as they exist in the context of freelance work, we might be able to produce a coherent rebuttal to the dominant discourses that have the effect of destabilizing the working class. The discourse presented in chapter 4 is a characterization of various ideologies that represent the constraints workers face. It also articulates various forms of rationalizations that are used to justify and accept current practices. This demonstrates how particular subjects are made.

Precariousness, in the production industry as well as others, is legitimized and reproduced through ideological discourses that normalize the flexible use of labour. While economic processes have certainly destabilized the working class, so too have narratives about remaining competitive in a globalized economy. These serve the rationalizing regimes of capitalist accumulation, and are continually repeated in popular media and in education (Fu 2013; Hardt and Negri 2000; Harvey 1989; Sennett 1998, 47-51). Ongoing ideological process and the destabilizing of the working class have resulted in the rise of precariousness and underemployment:
Powerful discourses such as ‘free market,’ ‘globalization,’ ‘flexibility,’ and ‘individuality,’ are invoked to construct and justify the non-regular way of work. The underlying assumption is that TAW [Temporary Agency Work] results from employee-oriented flexibility, both voluntary and empowering... Flexibility, whether for highly skilled knowledge workers or those marginalized, low status workers, speaks of free choices and individualized needs and lifestyles... it is of crucial importance we examine the perceptions and practices of agency temps, a largely ‘muted’ group, who are directly affected by the ongoing labour flexibilization but not given sufficient space to articulate their feelings (Fu 2013, 29-30).

As Fu explains, flexible production and the flexible use of labour are justified in economic and global terms. These discourses function as representations and manifestations of the ideological and hegemonic functioning of class relations. My ethnography of precarious work examines the experiences and perspectives of workers who are directly impacted by these regimes and are in many respects ‘muted’. In chapter 4, I examine production workers’ encounters with flexibility and the social and economic consequences of non-standard employment. I illustrate the contradictions and limits of “employee oriented flexibility”, and capital centered forms of domination and oppression by documenting what Fu refers to as, “the perceptions and practices... [Of those] affected” (2013 29-30).

Nancy Fraser (2003) outlines how Foucauldian theories can be applied to our analyses of contemporary late capitalism. Foucault’s genealogy of disciplinary domination and power, which will be discussed below, is useful for my study and critique of flexibilization (Foucault 1977; 1978, Rabinow 1984). A case study of the production industry can bring to light how individual self-regulation and social relations are logically ordered through hegemonic practices (Fraser, 164). This occurs, not simply through coercion, but through self-discipline. Flexibilization, as it exists, perpetuates a lack of stability and reduces individual control over the labour process through new modes of governmentality and bio-politics, reproducing “Flexible People” for flexible markets (Sennett 1998). This process normalizes an ontology and masks how power and
discourse operate to marginalize workers who find themselves on the periphery of labour markets. For Foucault, discourse becomes a technology and technique of power that reproduces and normalizes practices of inclusion and exclusion.

Foucault (1977) explains that discipline becomes the effect and outcome of power over the individual. Through examining particular types of subjectivities we can represent the ways power operates to discipline workers (Foucault 1977; Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000). Power becomes internalized through disciplinary and organizing tactics. Foucault states that, “a macro- and micro-physics of power made possible…the integration of temporal, unitary, continuous, cumulative dimensions in the exercise of controls and the practice of dominations” (1977, 160).

Society, according to Foucault, has been structured so as to perpetually organize and observe individuals using active and implicit forms of surveillance with the result of disciplining them. Consider Foucault's description of panopticism and its effect as having the ability:

To induce [...] a state of consciousness and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power…the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary…[the stagehand is] caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers (201)...he who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection. (1977, 202-1).

For the purposes of this study, the techniques of discipline and the “the mobile soldier with his rifle”, as Foucault outlines, can be replaced by the flexible worker or stagehand with his or her wrench. The stagehand, or “the body is constituted as a part of a multi-segmentary machine” (164), whereby there exists, “the constraint of a conformity” (183) and “normalization becomes one of the great instruments of power” (184).

According to Foucault, the technologies and tactics of discipline operate to produce a "subtle coercion…an infinitesimal power over the active body” (1977, 137). Foucault outlines a
way to “map on a series of examples some of the essential techniques… [and to] situate them not only in the inextricability of a functioning, but in the coherence of a tactic” (139). He explains, “Coercions act upon the body… [Via] a machinery of power…, a ‘mechanics of power’... disciplinary coercion establishes in the body the constricting link between an increased aptitude and an increased domination” (138). Constant insecurity in the labour market, deindustrialization and a weakening of the working class are part of this functioning of power. Put another way, it is “at the formation of a relation that in the mechanism itself makes it more obedient as it becomes more useful” (138). This, “micro-physics of power” (139) leads to “the individualizing fragmentation of labour power” (145). The relationship between the employer and freelancer or casually employed labourer is itself a disciplining force. Discourse concerning self-employment and flexible work arrangements are used as an ideology by the dominant classes in the live event and production industry. The peripheral and contingent workforce adopts the dominant discourses of flexibility and individual responsibility as strategies for enhancing their employability and incorporating the dominant ideology. The mechanism of control and sources of this discipline are also found in the structure of employment practices. I argue that the relationship between employers and employees, or capital and labour, disciplines workers, whereby the worker is disciplined into becoming a freelancer:

Discipline is an art of rank, a technique for the transformation of arrangements. It individualizes bodies by location that does not give them a fixed position, but distributes them and circulates them in a network of relations (Foucault 1977, 145-6).

Foucault outlines the way society has been organized by rank and strata and the various techniques and functioning of power. His theory of discipline can be applied to a study of production workers’ experience with the organizing techniques of production and staffing firms. The network of relations functions, according to Foucault, to discipline.
The Arts and Culture Industry as Assemblage

Alternatively to Foucault’s theory of discipline, Deleuze describes the contemporary era as being organized and structured by varying degrees of access within networks. Deleuze argues that networks function to control people within society. I argue that Foucault’s and Deleuze’s theories can be employed concurrently. Deleuze argues that we have moved beyond the disciplinary society and into the society of control (1992). His conceptual framework that describes the contemporary era as one that has shifted away from discipline, to what he names “the society of control” is nonetheless useful and poignant. A structural conception of the production industry as an assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari 2003), combined with a Foucauldian analysis of discourses and modes of power provides a succinct way of explaining and critiquing external constraints, and the degrees to which individuals contribute to the reproduction of precariousness.

Deleuze’s assemblage theory and the structural metaphor and analogy of the rhizome are useful for the theorizing of contemporary social systems (Biehl and Locke 2010; Castells 1996; De Landa 2006; 2011; Marcus and Saka 2006). These systems are made up of individuals, social interactions, networks of people and companies, technologies and capital flows, and the various levels of connections, both material and social which form a totality, that in its complexities can best be understood as an assemblage (De Landa 2002; Deleuze and Guattari 2003; Marcus and Saka 2006; Ong and Collier 2004; Rabinow 2003; Stewart 2012; Tsing 2004). For Deleuze and Guattari (2003), an assemblage is a “signifying totality” of convergences and functions that can be mapped via “multiplicities, lines, strata and segmentarities […]” (4). Consider the production industry as an assemblage and rhizome:

Any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be. This is very different from the tree or root…a rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between
Delanda explains that assemblage theory is, “a social ontology, based on the relationship of part-to-whole and in which the whole has properties, capacities and tendencies of its own that cannot be found in the parts, but emerge from [and] in the day-to-day continuous interaction between the parts” (2011). An assemblage is a structure with particular properties that are the result of its parts interacting. An assemblage is made up of inherently contingent relations and parts. These components form a totality that cannot be reduced to its parts alone, yet is necessarily dependent upon them (Delanda 2011).

In the production industry, these parts are the companies, clients, workers, technologies, and sites, which are interchangeable with other similar parts. Networks of companies and individual workers constitute a totality, or assemblage, that resembles the structure of a rhizome; mapping these parts and the relations that form the production industry into a visual representation would result in a chaotic and multi-dimensional image. Freelancers are called upon to serve the needs of clients in multiple settings. They can be inserted into existing relations and made to work as an extension of companies. They can be combined into teams, dispersed individually, or move from one crew to another. Individuals can also move throughout the assemblage, working for a variety of companies and in a variety of roles. Companies and individuals can accrue capital and build connections with other areas of the industry and are thus able to expand their networks. Becoming densely entangled within the totality of the assemblage/industry helps to build relationships, and lines or flows of capital and resources. These can be short lived or long lasting, they can also emerge and reoccur at varying intervals. Networking and one’s social connections are a fundamental aspect of gaining employment. These properties are true for companies and for individuals. Companies can take the lead on
producing an event, or they can play a secondary role, providing personnel and equipment as needed, through subcontracting and cross-rentals. As companies compete, new lines of connections form and old ones disappear. Relationships of these kinds occur on various scales and for varying lengths of time, ranging from hours to years. This is why a qualitative analysis of such a system at the micro-level is crucial for being able to generate insights into how precariousness is reproduced. Assemblage theory, as an abstract model, is useful for describing the particular processes and unique qualities of the structuring of precariousness in this industry. Marcus and Saka (2006) make the following point regarding the theory:

The idea of assemblage … to express…the relational and the perceptual…the intractably unpredictable and contingent in rapidly changing contemporary life; ... for an understanding of the structural principles of order (and disorder) within the play of events and processes. These strands are evocatively condensed in the idea of assemblage and are indeed what gives the term power in…contemporary research on culture. Assemblage… is thus a mix of the aesthetic and the structural in…modernist thought [and] social theory (103-4).

As stated above, I argue that contemporary society is one that disciplines and controls. The society of control, structured as an assemblage, rather than being wholly distinct from disciplinary society, essentially maintains disciplined workers in the labour market. Assemblage theory helps us to make generalizations about the experience of production workers as they fulfill a variety of roles within a very complex and dynamic industry. Their contributions are integral to the day to day operations and profitability of the entertainment industry, yet the rhizome-like system of employment practices utilized by production firms and staffing agencies keeps workers in a peripheral status. To fully grasp this point of view it is useful to consider the role of discipline and control together. Assemblage theory helps us to describe how flexible forms of labour are administered. For example, Hardt and Negri (2000) analyze workers subsumption under capital in the “postmodernization”, “informatization” and “informational economy”, where “productive flows and networks” establish new mechanisms for controlling
labour (286). There is no commons or square, no headquarters or factory to picket and protest, because these have been deterritorialized. Collective action is made more complicated as, “the network of labouring cooperation requires no territorial or physical center” (Hardt and Negri, 295). The flexible use of contingent labour destabilizes the working class and establishes precariousness as the new normal. Hardt and Negri might as well have been talking about stagehands when they wrote the following:

Working days are often twelve, fourteen, sixteen hours long without weekends or vacations; there is work for men, women, and children alike, and for the old and the handicapped. Empire has worked for everyone! The more unregulated the regime of exploitation, the more work there is. This is the basis on which the new segmentations of work are created. They are determined (in the language of the economists) by the different levels of productivity, but we could summarize the change simply by saying that there is more work and lower wages (Hardt and Negri, 338).

Mobility, flexibility and segmentation are made possible because the mechanisms of control and administration are made flexible and mobile (Hardt and Negri, 343). Stagehands and other freelance workers’ are situated within a system of stratification which is characterized by contingent work relationships, flexible networks and asymmetrical relations of power and control (Castells 1996; Deleuze 1992; Fraser 2003, 169). This type of assemblage functions such that those within and a part of it are either constrained or acting in such a manner as to constrain others. Thus, this industry, as a totality or assemblage is, by design, functioning to maintain oppressive working conditions.

The normalization of exclusions and the limits placed upon the labourer become standard practice and discourse. Workers, as a result, identify this structuring of power and control and either adapt to it by adopting the dominant ideology, as seen through discourse, or by opting for an alternate career path. Normalization is established and maintained through control and discourse, which further leads to action and activities that reproduce the conditions of control which in turn reproduce the assemblage. A convergence of discipline and control occurs as a
result of the structure of relations and the discourses of flexibility, employability and freelance work. The society of control disciplines individuals, “through flexible and fluctuating networks” (Hardt and Negri 2000, 23). In other words, the functioning of the assemblage produces effects much like a Panopticon, in that it regulates behaviors and is an effective technology for organizing and disciplining workers.

The desire to be in control of one’s working life, to be a freelancer, and to work in production functions, in conjunction with the desires of management (and here we might as well say capital). If agency exists, however constrained, it inadvertently reproduces the conditions of precariousness within the assemblage of contingent relations. If we are to presume that agency implies that we are able to dictate and determine the path, if not the outcome, of our lives, then we might be able to agree that some have more agency than others, depending on circumstance. Circumstance can be influenced by an individual consciously taking action to alter outcomes. Freelancers are thus in some respects able to take actions that would, in theory, allow them to find success and fulfillment in their working lives. In the production industry this would imply that one has cultivated the necessary and required skills, as well as networks so as to be able to perform the required duties and reap the rewards.

This chapter has discussed relevant social science literature that is concerned with the study of precarious work. It has shown how discourse and assemblage theory can be applied to the study of precarious work in the live entertainment and production industry. The deterritorialization of employment loosens the connections between employer and employee, but perpetuates employers’ control over workers as they remain freelancers or, more precisely, casual workers without regular pay or benefits. This system disciplines workers to conform to the normalizing of contingency and ultimately precariousness. The next chapter will outline the
ethnographic methods that were used for this research. It further describes the rationale for the study and the nature of the fieldwork that was done.
Chapter 3: Methods

Common knowledge is at best a source of possibly correct perceptions and itself an object of study. This is why fieldwork (in the loosest, broadest sense of the term) is our eternal responsibility. Once we have something to explain, we need concepts and variables, and methods with which to explain it [...] (458). Ethnography [...] enables us, in a complex situation (and all social situations are complex situations), to tease out the issues and then explore the explanatory connections.

-Immanuel Wallerstein 2003, 458-9

Anthropologists are trained to capture empirical complexity, particularity and uncertainty...present complex realities in narratives or stories as compelling and intelligible to a wide audience [and] reflect local complexity, historical contingency, economic constraints and priorities.

-Edelman and Hagerud 2005, 46

As discussed in the introduction chapter, I conducted fieldwork in the live entertainment and production industry to better contextualize the reproduction of non-standard employment relationships and precariousness. Live entertainment is a global industry. One of the limits of this project is its scale and scope. Ethnography of such a complex and massive industry will undoubtedly be unable to adequately represent a totality or include the perspectives of all people involved in production. The aim of this thesis, rather than provide a comprehensive and descriptive analysis of the industry in general is to direct attention to precarious employment, from a critical and anthropological lens. As Leach (Leach 2005, 18) explains:

The strong tradition in anthropology that is preoccupied with theorizing the relationship between global political–economic process and local cultural practices requires a sensitive notion of agency that can capture the kinds of complexity, ambiguity, and often ambivalence that anthropologists observe in peoples’ everyday lives

This inquiry and analysis is rooted in the long standing traditions in anthropology and is informed by the critiques from within and beyond the discipline. To better understand the impacts and effects of the erosion of fulltime employment for the working class as a result of deindustrialization, I opted to immerse myself into the world of precarious work in the hopes of being able to, as Philippe Bourgois (1996) has put it, “convey...the individual experience of
social structural oppression (13) [...] and to show how] humans are active agents of their own history, rather than passive victims” (17). Faye Harrison has provided a comprehensive examination of anthropology's foundations and writes:

A cornerstone in sociocultural anthropology, ethnographic methodology is based on conceptualization and theory of knowledge production in which personal participation and immersion are key conditions for data collection in the real-life settings for research that we call the field… the ethnography of neoliberal capitalist landscapes… must balance anthropologists’ interests in writing experiments, to the extent that they are deemed important, against a commitment to speaking truth to power. That language of truth must convey a historicized social analysis attentive to political economy... there is an urgent need for critical ethnographic research that can expose worldly problems and point the way to interpretative frames that contribute to the formulation of theory bold enough to envision an alternative to established political-economic configurations (2008, 45-46).

The qualitative approach to sociocultural analysis, as described by Harrison, is necessary for connecting theory with the actually existing real world of precarious work. I have attempted to write an ethnography that utilizes participant observation and critical theory to, as Harrison suggests, speak “truth to power”. I do so by combining sociocultural analysis with discourse and assemblage theory. This will affirm the utility of Foucault’s theories regarding power and discourse, as well as Deleuze’s assemblage theory and depiction of the society of control. In doing so, I provide a contemporary ethnographic contribution to the anthropology of work literature.

**Ethnography and Assemblage Theory: A Multi-Sited Approach to Fieldwork**

The breadth of field sites, companies, clients, and workers involved in this analysis gives context to the notion of the live entertainment and production industry as an assemblage. Many companies, technologies, and people combine and converge to make these events happen. The complexity and diversity of experiences in this industry should not be understated. As discussed in the previous chapter, the industry is structured like an assemblage. It is made up of complex relationships between companies and individuals. Remaining at any one site, or following a
particular group of individuals would have limited the scope of my analysis. Assemblage theory helps to describe how power and control over work within the industry is organized and structured. It helps to explain how the system of asymmetrical social relations reproduce precarious employment. An effective way to study an assemblage is through what might be described as a multi-sited ethnography. Contrast the following with what has already been said about assemblages in chapter 2:

Multi-sited research is designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites that in fact defines the argument of the ethnography (Marcus 1995, 105).

I believe this is another way of articulating, through an anthropological lens, a methodology for using assemblage theory for analysing the data collected during the fieldwork. The following is a description of the theoretical underpinning of multi-sited ethnography:

In projects of multi-sited ethnographic research…comparative dimensions develop…as a function of the fractured, discontinuous plane of movement and discovery among sites as one maps an object of study and… posit logics of relationship, translation, and association among these sites…comparison emerges from putting questions to an emergent object of study whose contours, sites, and relationships are not known beforehand, but are themselves a contribution of making an account that has different, complexly connected real-world sites of investigation. The object of study is ultimately mobile and multiply situated, so any ethnography of such an object will have a comparative dimension that is integral to it, in the form of juxtapositions of phenomena that conventionally have appeared to be (or conceptually have been kept) "worlds apart." Comparison re-enters the very act of ethnographic specification by a research design of juxtapositions…This move toward comparison embedded in the multi-sited ethnography stimulates accounts of cultures composed in a landscape for which there is as yet no developed theoretical conception or descriptive model (Marcus 1995, 102).

In the above quote, Marcus describes ethnography that discovers and maps “a mobile and multiply-situated” and “emergent object of study… which there is as yet no developed theoretical conception or descriptive model” (102). Freelancing in the live entertainment and production industry is one such object of study. Freelancing, as it is conceived and experienced by production workers is “mobile and multiply situated”. In this context, freelancing signifies
both a type of employment relationship and a distinct cultural form shared among production workers. However, the asymmetrical, heterogeneous and divergent experiences among workers have been conflated and condensed into the term. As a result, discourses function to mask and reproduce divisions that maintain power and control over work in the hands of a capitalist and managerial class. This phenomenon is not easily captured by traditional conceptual or theoretical forms of description used for representing an analysis of contemporary work experiences and precariousness. To ethnographically capture, analyze and theorize the essence of this “object of study”, workers’ understandings of freelance work and the various sites in which they experience it, which are identified as nodes within the assemblage that is the industry, I have written the ethnographic sections of the data and analysis (Chapter 4) as a series of juxtapositions and comparisons which, when taken together articulate and define my arguments.

As an ethnographer, I have placed myself in various situations and positions so as to document how access to jobs and employment opportunities are found, what they entail, how they are experienced and how workers discuss these experiences. Though my focus is on stagehands, I have been able to situate their experience in the larger context of freelance work in the production industry more broadly. In order to do this, I spent time working with and observing a wide variety of individuals. This included stagehands in a variety of settings, warehouse and shop floor workers, as well as those who work in the offices of production companies and staffing agencies. This diversity of experiences, or multi-sited approach was a conscious and in my opinion necessary methodological decision. It allowed me to learn more about production work and to witness precariousness, for myself and as it is experienced by others. These insights have been enhanced because of the information that was shared with me by countless individuals during my study.
Research Sites

This research took place in many different settings in the production industry. To gain experience throughout my participant observation, I accepted work where and when it was available. As I gained experience and spoke to more people, I began to realize that there was a lot that I needed to learn in order to become both useful enough to keep getting work and knowledgeable enough to be able to write this thesis. Working as a freelancer allowed me to gain access to multiple sites and to work with a variety of companies in a wide range of settings. I also worked with hundreds of other workers over several months. Rather than work for any particular company or follow a small group of workers around, I worked for multiple companies, including staffing companies that provide labour for live events. One of the benefits of such an approach was that I was able to see much of the process that goes into a production.

Through a contact in the industry, I was able to gain employment at a production company in Toronto, and eventually would work in the warehouses of three different production companies. This included spending several weeks working on the shop floors and in the warehouses of various companies where the preparation, packaging, shipping out and returning of the equipment takes place. I worked in a variety of settings, including a shipping and receiving department as a truck loader and in various departments preparing lighting, audio and staging equipment before it was sent out. I learned about how the gear is maintained and used. As I became more familiar with the equipment, I reached out to more companies to gain more access and more experience, so that I could work as a stagehand. I sought opportunities to work during events. I was hired to work in and around the city on many concerts, various conferences and other types of events as a labourer. I had jobs unloading and setting up equipment. I began to see the inner workings of not only how the gear is brought to the venue and set up, but how it is
used. These experiences led to other work opportunities through the various connections of my coworkers. I was given opportunities to stay and work during productions, also known as ‘show-calls’. Some of the locations in which I worked include television studios, hotels, concert halls, stadiums, retail stores, city streets and parks. I worked behind the scenes during live television, concerts and other types of events. These events, the physical locations and sites where I conducted much of this ethnography are where the various strata that form the industry converge. Seeing these productions, from the beginning through to the end, provided me with a more comprehensive understanding of the industry.

As I learnt more about the industry and gained more experience, I worked on larger events and continued to meet people who helped me gain access to more companies and find more work as a freelancer. It also gave me time to observe others, ask questions, take notes, and have conversations with many people. Access to various sites was a key factor that contributed to my knowledge of the industry and the diversity of experiences. During concerts, corporate events and conferences, I crossed paths with employees from dozens of companies that operate in the GTA and internationally. These opportunities helped me to find and develop rapport with participants. This access also increased my opportunities to discuss the topics and issues outlined in this thesis with a large number of people situated in various positions throughout the industry.

All of the jobs that I held were non-union and typically paid between $15 and $25 Canadian dollars an hour. In some cases I was paid overtime at time and a half. Shop work typically paid the lowest, staffing agency or casual employment directly with production firms paid around $20. For special events, including work for the City of Toronto, and on job sites where I was a crew chief or supervisor I was paid in the higher range.
Data Collection

Data for this thesis have been developed from interviews and field notes. I kept a journal and maintained field notes. However, since much of the time was spent working, I would try to write down as much as possible during breaks and after work. During conversations, I would try to remember complete sentences and the phrasing used in order to recreate the conversation later on, in my notes. Some of the work involved heavy lifting and being physically active. I would consume plenty of water and coffee resulting in trips to the bathroom. This was a good time for me to reflect and write down some notes. Many of the field notes, however, were written on my travels from work to home after a shift. During busy periods, by the time I got home I was often too tired to keep on writing and had little time to do anything but shower and try to sleep before waking up for the next day of work. On days off, I would write and try to sort through previous journals and field notes. This inductive practice of sorting and coding helped to inform and shape what would later be my interview questions. It also helped me to focus on particular points of interest when at work.

Work days can be more or less intense, depending on the scale of an event, the time frames and access to equipment and space. There are down times, referred to as ‘standby’, when a crew is waiting for equipment to arrive, or for another department or crew to finish their work, or when waiting for the changeover between different acts. During the workday, on breaks, lunch and standby times, I would take part in conversations that unfolded organically and sometimes I posed questions to probe into certain topics in order to flush out more nuanced perspectives.

As a participant observer I had many informal conversations and discussions that were not recorded but greatly enhanced my understanding of the diversity of experiences within the industry. I spoke to event planners, site, stage and tour managers, account managers, touring crews, lighting designers, and a host of other personnel that take part in the process. I met a wide
variety of people who worked as stagehands, riggers, stage managers, as well as lighting and audio technicians. I also spoke with drivers, shop workers, and college students preparing to enter the industry. Spending time before, during and after work with other stagehands and freelance workers led to a better understanding of the diversity of experiences as well as the commonalities shared in the community of freelancers. These experiences have informed my analysis, including how I have pieced together the narrative threads that describe precarious work. As noted earlier, I was fortunate to gain access to several companies and key informants early on in my study.

In addition to the numerous informal conversations that I had throughout the study, I conducted twenty semi-structured interviews that were digitally recorded, transcribed and then analyzed for particular themes. The dialogues that take place between the informants and me, are creative acts, stories, and interruptions and these situations allow us to express who we are and what we do (Little 1995, 356). I used the interviews to understand what freelance work meant to those who worked in the industry and how it impacted their lives. In interviews I used open ended questions to learn more about individuals’ lives, their histories and reflections on their circumstances and experiences and to situate and contextualize their motivations, desires, and perceptions that influence and direct their actions (Fine and Weis 1998; Sennett 1998). Being able to get to know people, interview them and then continue to work with them gave me greater insights into their experiences. This process helped me to sort through the data and refine my questions for subsequent interviews. Interviews typically lasted just over an hour, with the shortest being forty minutes and the longest over two and a half hours. Most of the informants remained in contact and I was able to have follow-up discussions.
In order to protect the identities of informants and the companies that I worked for, I will refrain from naming actual people or organizations. The naming of places, events and work sites could compromise confidentiality, and so I have changed names and some details in order to honour and respect the confidentiality of those who participated in interviews and those who spoke to me informally.

The participant observation phase lasted for several months, and included over five hundred hours working as a freelancer and casual labourer. It was a useful method and tool for acquiring firsthand knowledge and numerous accounts from other workers. Working directly for several different production companies, including work in the shops that house and distribute equipment, meant that I was able to document what working life entails for those who labour in various different capacities throughout the production industry. I directly experienced what became many of the topics that I explored through the many conversations that I had with those who work in various capacities in the industry, the interviews that I carried out, and the observations that I made. Learning how to be a freelancer and work in the industry as a stagehand, allowed me to shape my research questions and develop my analysis of how production workers experience and manage to cope with economic uncertainty, how they optimize their chances of finding work, what leads some to have more work than others, and how the structure of the industry maintains precariousness.

The arguments that have been outlined in the preceding chapters are brought into a sharper focus in Chapter 4. In it, I present firsthand accounts and descriptions of how precarious employment in the industry is understood and reproduced. These examples and dialogues represent the various experiences of workers. As discourses, they describe and reflect worker’s experiences with precarious work and how it is reproduced. They are also used to show how
employment practices in the industry, as an assemblage, function to do the same, thus showing that workers are disciplined and controlled through discourses and the assemblage-like system of employment practices. Both discourse and the assemblage-like characteristics result in the disciplining and controlling of workers and the reproduction of precariousness.
Chapter 4: Data and Analysis

Dudes have been stagehands for years and years and years. I want to do more than that. I got into this to do audio. If I had a choice, I’d choose fulltime, long term work. I just got married. I’m 28. We’re going to have kids at some point. It’s not an industry for guys to have a family. Lots of guys don’t get married, can’t afford to.

-Stuart, 28

We’re all animals. We just go to wherever has the most food. When one company has work everyone goes to them. As far as freelance goes, if you want a day off, you don’t book yourself. It’s as simple as that. My shifts are not scheduled ahead of time. Well, it’s not set in stone. I am asked. I’m not told. Where other jobs you’re told you will be here from 9-5 or whatever it is. Nobody is telling me, even after today, I have nothing booked. I may never work in this industry again if I wanted to. I’ll probably call tomorrow to get some more work.

-Ted, 24.

Chapter Overview

This chapter describes and analyses labouring in the production industry from the vantage point of those who work in it. I have inquired about peoples’ career paths and how work is organized, and describe the challenges, risks and rewards of freelance work. Throughout this chapter I present the various ways freelancers encounter challenges and limitations that impact their professional and private lives. This ethnography of labouring in the production industry includes what individuals have to say about how they understand their particular situations as freelance and casual labourers. The ethnographic vignettes and analysis in this chapter provide the reader with a description of what being a freelance worker entails. The excerpts and narratives have been pieced together from various interviews and conversations that I had with informants. I have used an inductive approach to organizing the information and have grouped related topics into common themes that emerge throughout this analysis chapter. The accounts of freelance stagehands and technicians included in this chapter describe their labour market
experiences and emphasize the importance of self-reliance while also pointing to the role social and professional networks play in alleviating the ebbs and flows of the market, as well as the whims of the dispatchers who make schedules and book the workers. The workers also discuss the reasons for their employment status and their understandings of how the industry operates.

Their reflections and personal stories give shape to our understanding of how power is made legitimate (Fischer 2007; Weber 1958). Specific attention is given to the emphasis on control over work schedules, the role networking plays in structuring the industry and the significance of freelance and temporary work as both an ideal form of employment and as a problematic reality that leads to economic uncertainty. Particular attention is given to the interaction between structural constraints and individual agency within the production industry. Anthropologist Faye Harrison (2008), in outlining the objectives for a critical anthropology, states that:

The objectives for the holistic critical anthropology project is the pursuit of a socially responsible ethics and politics of ethnographic research for producing ethnography and ethnographically informed social analysis that, among other things, illuminates the interlocking dynamics of culture, power, and political economy within a framework nuanced by historical depth, local-global linkages, and the dialectics between structure and agency (44).

The agency of freelancers is situated within the context of power relations within an apparently flexible, but highly constrained structure of employment practices. It is this system that contributes to the reproduction of precarious employment, not only in production work, but in other industries and sectors as well (Bujold and Fournier 2008; Vosko 2006; 2010).

**Discourses in the Production Industry Assemblage**

Throughout this chapter, the contradictions between the discourses and the actually existing circumstances experienced by workers are juxtaposed to show the ways in which workers have been disciplined into accepting precariousness. These discourses, as part of the
dominant ideology, function to discipline workers into accepting employment practices that are not in their best interest. Foucault’s (1977; 1978) concepts regarding technologies of power and discipline are applied to this analysis of freelance work in order to explain how individuals are organized and controlled within a system that distorts, but is nonetheless formed by class relations. The discourses of freelance production work are a form of ideology that disciplines workers and reproduces complicit subjects within a regime of precarious employment.

In the live event and production industry, understood as an assemblage of companies and personnel, is a network of asymmetrical and contingent relations that privileges some and places limits on others. Workers, as casual labour, are disciplined and controlled by the widely used practice of continuously shifting and temporary employment relations. Williams (2009) argues that “interactive dynamics” and “processes” within agencies “remain hidden” and that ethnographic work focusing on hiring practices as well as strategies used by workers to gain work can “illuminate both the ways in which they coproduce the regime of workplace discipline that regulates the temporary-labour process, and contribute to the reproduction of the day labour industry’s micro-foundations” (2009, 212). In this chapter, the ethnographic descriptions of the complex and often contingent nature of how employment comes about, demonstrate that workers are not only disciplined into believing that precariousness is an inherent aspect of freelance production work, but they are quite literally constrained by how employment is organized.

I draw connections between discourse and ideology throughout this chapter to show how notions of individual responsibility, freedom, control and choice, along with notions of self-employment and an entrepreneurial spirit, are linked to the transferring of risk onto the individual (Sennett 1998). These themes are specifically brought into focus because they reflect the ways in which individuals are both constrained by industry practices as well as contributors
to the processes that reproduce precariousness. As Marx (1859, preface) argues, material conditions give form to how people think and act:

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness (3).

I explore the social existence of workers, as regular employees and as freelancers, in order to analyze how the mode of production and employment relationships shape their consciousness. I focus on how individuals discuss their induction into practices which reproduce their subjectivity, as subjects, within contemporary discourses and regimes of precariousness. I claim that individuals are caught up in and implicated as complicit participants in the processes that shape employment practices. Both the individual and the system of employment practices are entangled in a mutually constitutive process. This theoretical approach to a political economy of precarious labour avoids an emphasis on an overly deterministic system or structure of relations and instead, this chapter presents a description of the interaction between individual agents within and as co-producers of the social arrangements that perpetuate the aforementioned employment practices.

By analyzing industry practices and the ideological rhetoric of discourses regarding flexibility and self-reliance that continuously normalize, legitimize and reproduce insecurity, we can uncover how the status quo of precariously employed casual labour in this industry is perpetuated. I highlight the ways production workers situate themselves through a logic and discourse that maintains hegemonic practices that normalize precariousness. Analyzing these discourses is crucial because:
The capacity of language to denote, to represent the world, is not considered transparent and innocent... but is fundamentally implicated in relations of domination. Whether the term is hegemony, symbolic domination, [etc...] the central insight remains: Control of the representations of reality is not only a source of social power but therefore also a likely locus of conflict and struggle. (Gal 1989, 348)

Examples of personal experience of workers and descriptions of their relative abilities to exercise agency over their employment experiences illuminate how the ideological discourses of the socially constructed employment practices and the hegemony of dominant classes function to reproduce precariousness. It is through ethnographic descriptions and narratives that we begin to uncover how discipline and control function to shape the experiences of workers in this industry.

**Ethnography of Freelance Culture in the Production Industry**

In trying to understand the experience of the workers, I learned that the entire industry is structured around, and succeeds because of, freelance labour. Freelance culture, much like the working class culture that Willis describes in Learning To Labour (1977), “comprises experiences, relationships, and ensembles of systematic types of relationships which not only set particular ‘choices’ and ‘decisions’ at particular times, but also structure, really and experientially, how these ‘choices’ come about and are defined in the first place” (1977, 1). In the following sections of this chapter, I present a critical examination of what it is like being a freelancer and describe the diversity of experiences within the industry.

I have composed selections from interviews and anecdotes that came up during conversations with informants. I also provide some descriptions of events and experiences from my participant observation. The dialogues mostly come from recorded interviews, while some of the quotes come from my field notes. As stated in the previous chapter, I have taken care to remove any actual names and references to specific places, companies or other details that may compromise the confidentiality of those who participated. The variety of settings and cast of
characters that I encountered during my fieldwork helped me to formulate an understanding of how precariousness is reproduced. In several instances, I have removed myself from the dialogue to make the flow of ideas more fluid and because the excerpts provide sufficient details so as to make the inclusion of the questions redundant.

Though my focus is on freelance workers, I also introduce several informants who hold prominent positions as owners of companies, managers, and as salaried employees. As I have already mentioned, there are many types of jobs in this industry and it became necessary to explore this diversity. To understand the experience of being a production worker, it is useful to begin with a discussion of how employment and opportunities for work are structured. It is through these dialogues that we can uncover why people let themselves get precarious jobs. The remainder of this chapter attempts to articulate the dialectic through which workers identify as freelancers and their actually existing experience as precariously employed casual labour.

Morgan, a key informant, began working in the live entertainment business as a teenager in the early 1990s. He runs his own production company and employs several individuals on a fulltime basis and hires freelance workers to assist on larger productions. The following is from an interview in which we discussed the type of work involved in the industry. He touches upon several key issues that arise for production workers and the significance of freelance work:

HS: When we talk about production work, and the industry, how would you describe it to somebody?

Morgan: It is very unique. It’s a very highly skilled labour force that is working on a freelance basis. As far as the uniqueness of this business, there are a lot of people that have a lot of different, or a variety of skills that use them to their full advantage, in all of the trades. Some people work film, stage and television. Some people just specialize in film or lighting, or staging and audio. A lot of spaces they can fill, and do it in a lot of different ways. We all for the most part work on a freelance basis, where we pick up jobs as jobs occur and most people work for a variety of different companies to sustain their living and that’s how the industry operates for the most part as a whole.
The fact that “the labour force works on a freelance basis” has become a common sense part of how people describe this industry. It is also taken for granted that workers must “pick up jobs” and “work for a variety” of employers. This discourse implies that regular fulltime employment with particular companies is not an option and, as will be discussed later in this chapter, in some cases undesirable. The unique qualities of the industry, including the diversity of jobs, the varying time frames and scales of different productions and the mobile/touring aspect are also part of this discourse. I asked Reed, who has been a freelancer for 4 decades, about the uniqueness of the industry and he said:

> It moves around. It’s not like it’s a static thing, like sitting in a factory and making switches. You do this event here at this time. You do another event there next time. You do this event somewhere else next time. And it’s an interesting industry to get into. It’s never boring.

It should be noted that the qualities that make working in the industry interesting and unique are not experienced by all workers in the same ways. Workers may or may not experience a qualitative difference between jobs when working in different venues and for different clients. The discourse concerning the uniqueness of jobs in the industry is part of a romanticized version of what actually occurs. Before unpacking these discourses and analyzing how they operate to reinforce precariousness, it might help to describe the variety of work involved:

Morgan: There are various departments and depending on various sort of sects of the industry, whether you’re in television, film or events, or stage related, and various departments in behind all of those, such as sets and carpentry, lighting and electrics, and you know, sound, and you know, video, and all those different things, but for the most part people specialize in different things.

Now, there’s a lot people too, that are working fulltime jobs for particular companies, and doing more departmentalized work where they specialize in their one field, and they stick to that. Then even beyond that there are various unions that are involved, that I wouldn’t say control, but are, you know, representing workers and you know whether those workers are in particular departments or in particular fields, but even those people for the most part can be freelance.
Morgan explains that there are fulltime jobs and unions that represent some workers. He states that union workers can be understood as freelancers. However, there is a significant difference between union workers that “freelance” within the union framework and freelancers who labour outside of it. Union workers are able to secure work based on seniority. This system ensures that members, and certainly the more senior and experienced workers are able to make a substantial living, receive benefits, and earn a pension and protections that are afforded through collective bargaining agreements. I asked Reed, who has worked in union and non-union venues about the difference between union and non-union workers and he explained:

They’re doing the same work, absolutely. They are doing the exact same thing. The union [workers] have a bit more of, they tend towards the theatrical things here (in Toronto) because they have contracts with the theatres as opposed to some of the convention centers. There’s a bit more of a heavy emphasis on theatrical production, but it’s not anything that freelancers couldn’t do.

The labour end of it is the issue. In the past I’ve worked on events with the union and events that are non-union. I get to pick the best freelancers that are available. The union turns to me and says, “Well we can put together a crew with skills that will blow away any freelance crew that you can put together.” So, I say, “do I get to pick those guys?” Well, ah-NO. Its seniority, you don’t necessarily get the best, you get the people that you get based on seniority, not on merit. I don’t get to pick the guys. Ya, you have very talented guys in the union. I don’t get to use them. I don’t get to say, “Send me Bob, because he is the best sound man you’ve got.” It’s whoever is at the top of the union’s seniority list that decides that they want to work that day.

Reed suggests that freelancers are able to get work based on merit rather than seniority. This is a misconception rather than standard practice. Freelancers can and do get jobs based on, however informal, seniority and relationships with their employers. In most, if not all cases, they receive none of the benefits and protections afforded to fulltime and union workers.

Allen, 37, like many in the industry, has a passion and background in music. He is well positioned and recognizes that he is often one of the first people called for work. When I asked him about his transition from standard to non-standard employment, he contrasted the working
conditions in order to make the case that the quality of work in the production industry made it worth the risk of uncertainty:

For myself personally, I worked for a larger company for nearly ten years. That was your 9-5 cubicle office job, couldn't stand it. That was the worst job I ever had. I hated it. There's something to be said about knowing when you're going to be working and having the same schedule all the time. But, being trapped in the same place with same people, day after day.

Allen’s distaste for full-time waged employment in clerical and service sector jobs is shared by many people who freelance. Freelancing as a stagehand is often contrasted with the monotony and repetitiveness of what are considered typical working class jobs. Although, as Allen explains, the work is not always that unique and exciting:

You know at least with this industry it changes. You’re always doing something different. It’s not like it’s a totally new ball of wax every time. A lot of the stuff repeats itself. It’s the same gear. It’s the same truss; it’s the same you know cast of characters that sort of gets changed up now and again. You know. But, ya, a lot of it is repetitive to some extent.

Some of it can be exciting for sure and some of its fun. Sometimes you’re doing really cool stuff, a massive production and to be part of that. This entire industry, the way it is today, evolved from Rock and Roll shows. You know, touring bands with roadies. Roadies are pretty rough neck, heavy drinking party type of people. That’s sort of the seed culture of the industry you know and even though the industry has branched out into other things, like what we've done recently, Christmas set ups and corporate gigs for banks and stuff at hotels, and annual general meetings and stuff that doesn’t have anything to do with Rock and Roll other than the stage and lights and PA. So, from that perspective, they've just branched out into corporate events so that they can make money. There are only so many rock shows you can put on.

Allen describes some of the repetitive and mundane aspects of labouring in production and contrasts it with the variety and novelty. The “corporate gigs” he is referring to are conventions, trade shows, exhibitions and company meetings where the technology used in television and concerts is applied to enhance and record these events. There is a qualitative difference between corporate and “rock and roll”. Corporate gigs are typically more tame and monotonous in comparison to concerts and festivals. They tend to be indoors in hotels and conference centres, as
opposed to concert halls, stadiums and other music venues. They tend to be quieter. In many ways the workflow is more structured and they tend to have less complicated set ups. Often the lighting is set up around the perimeter, as well as on any stages or areas where products are being displayed. This erases the sense of being backstage and onstage. However, there are large scale corporate events that are on par with major touring acts and television productions, however there are only several of these that occur throughout the year in the city.

The novelty and feeling of accomplishment associated with being a part of a large scale production was often cited as a rewarding aspect of the work. However, the excitement does not always last for everyone, nor does the bulk of the work entail doing exciting things. Morgan discusses the cyclical pattern of the work and alludes to the exhaustion experienced during long days that can sometimes turn into weeks and months without time away from work:

It is a lot more monotonous than you think. The days do end up being the same. Because, at the end of the day, the truck rolls in and the cases come off the truck and the things go up in the air and the show happens, and the show ends and its down from the air and back in the cases and back in the truck, and all right well see you tomorrow. You come to it with such an open mind and wide eyes, and it ends up beating you down. Because it is sort of the same thing over and over again and it doesn’t matter what the show is for, to a certain extent. I guess you just sort of sum it up to, once you’ve been doing something for a particular period of time, it doesn’t really, I guess there’s monotony in everything, even if there was diversity at first. And the next day there’s a show, and the show must go on. Ya, it’s a grind out there, that’s for sure. The show must go on and no rest for the wicked.

Here, we see the contradictions that exist between romanticized notions of laboring in the live entertainment business and workers’ actual experiences. For myself and my informants, a struggle emerged between the dilemmas and the contradictions concerning ideal conceptions of working in the industry and the problematic and risky nature of working as a freelancer. An alternative for those that do not like working as stagehands, perhaps because they did not want the uncertainty, or because they are not able to find steady work is employment in the shops of various production companies. I began my fieldwork doing shop work. Steady work in shops, however, is not without its own challenges.
Shop Work

Many people have a variety of experiences, including working as stagehands, technicians, and doing shop work. The “hands” are, in my estimate, actually the majority of workers in the industry. Another large segment of the industry are the people who labour in warehouses and shops of production companies. Kent provides his take on the situation:

We are all freelance unless you can get a fulltime gig. And those are few and far between. The whole industry is mostly freelance unless you work in a shop for peanuts. But if you live at home are young then a shop is good work. You can learn a lot if you are patient, in a shop. Some of the best operators learned their skills by working in a shop. It’s just not for everyone. When I started in the industry I was too old to work in a shop cause of the low pay scale.

Another downside to working in a shop is the monotony. Jane, in her early 20s, described it thusly, “What kills me about a shop, after 6 months I was always in the same department doing the same stuff with the same gear, repeating the same things over and over and over.” Though a shop provides stability, the low pay and limited opportunity for advancement reinforces freelancing as the better alternative. As Garth, 34 explained, “People who work in shops, like Lighting Company X, work there because that’s the only place they can work, the only job they can get, it sucks there. I went crazy working there.” Regular employment at a production company can provide steady work. However, many of those I spoke with complained about the monotony of being in a shop, being overworked and underpaid. Shop workers, like freelancers, are in most cases not unionized. Those who work in shops are also constrained, have limited benefits, and in some cases little job-security.

Megan, in her first year working in the industry, spoke to me about wanting to gain experience and move beyond working in the shop. She shared her worries about not having enough work in the future, as well as being fatigued and physically worn out. She explains her
reasons for being overworked by the shop managers, who rather than hire more fulltime workers, will call in day labourers to help during busy periods:

They (managers) make me do the shittiest work, it was like that for the first two weeks, I try not to disappoint, I work hard, and once they trust me they’ll give me more for fun stuff. After the last few gigs I’ve been doing more specific (left out so as to not identify the person) stuff and that’s fun. I guess I care about the work. Temp guys, just in for a few hours, they're lazy. They don't care. They’re here and then they’re never going to see this stuff again. Guys (temps) get paid more than me and they're lazy. I don't care about bossing people around. I want to do more of the fun stuff. Design stuff, have my own shows to build. That would be sick. Right now, I'm physically dead, I go home and I don't get enough sleep, I wake up and I haven't recovered, lately, if I get 8 hours I'm okay, mentally I've recovered, my legs are still tired. It’s the season, until mid-December it’s going to be like this, after that it’s going to be slow. I got to get my hours while I can. I still work here in January. I’ll probably get lots of work hopefully 40 hour weeks.

Though her work is crucial for the success of the company, her pay is only a few dollars above minimum wage. She hopes that the experience and hard work will provide better opportunities in the future.

Jane is in her early 20s and has a diploma in theatre production. Early on in her career, she began to work in the shop of a production company in Toronto. She describes the low wages and the alienation that results from doing mundane and repetitive tasks in the shop and in doing so explains why she would rather work as a freelancer:

H: You couldn’t see yourself there for 20 or 30 years? (Sarcastic)

Jane: I would kill myself.

H: what about a 9-5 in an office.

Jane: I would kill myself. I would do a 9-5 gig easily as long as it was..., I could never work in an office. I could go back to a shop. I could do a shop. I’ve tried to get shop gigs, but the pay isn’t that good. The pay is horrible. It’s pretty hard work and dirty cables, but I still like it. Depending on what gear you’re working with, like I wouldn’t want to work in conventional (lighting). Many people end up quitting because it’s a horrible department. It’s terrible and the pay makes no sense. One person makes a lot of money and everyone else makes so little.
The low wage shop work does not often lead to advancing into a salaried position, or being promoted into a technical or management position. Yet, Jane would rather work in the shop of a production company than explore other industries. Jane explained to me why she continued to work in the industry and take on jobs that are far removed from what she trained for in theatre school:

I like that we do different things all the time, different situations. It’s not like you’re doing the same job every day. Even when you work in the same (theatre) house, there are always different things going on, the day is never the same when you go there. It’s good and I like that. Also, it’s just not my, I’m not the type of person to do the same thing all the time, even though in a way it would be nice.

Workers dislike doing the repetitive and boring work that is required in the shops of production companies and in other industries. They also want to be able to make more money than what is offered to workers in these settings. Freelance work typically pays higher wages than shop work, but unless one is working consistently throughout the year, there is no guarantee that a stable income will result.

When asked about freelancing, Ted made the distinction between an ideal form of freelance work and the casual labour he had been doing since he entered the workforce. He states the contradiction inherent to the way workers describe themselves as freelancers:

No, I don’t want to do freelance. Freelance is what I thought I wanted to do and it’s great. To me, basically, freelance is working for yourself, but ahh, having to always, I guess always kind of, I guess working for yourself, but always kind of only rely on yourself for your source of income, because I have absolutely no guarantee of work. No job, not really, no job security, no benefits. You know, obviously, you’re not in a union. So, no benefits, no umm, no real representation, no collective bargaining over my wages, you know, things like that. Just, I couldn’t see myself, I didn’t think that I, I didn’t want to constantly be looking for my next pay cheque. And it, I think it was too much relying on myself, rather than relying on other people who would have my back, like an employer or union. And, just, I mean, if I want a pension I have to set it up myself, pay into it myself.

Ted affirms that production workers who freelance regularly experience many of the risks associated with precarious work, including what appears to be a permanent lack of job security.
(Lewchuk, Clarke and De Wolff 2011). Allen, a self-described freelancer in his mid-thirties, and I discussed some of the challenges posed by job insecurity and the use of staffing companies. When asked about job security he told me that he is able to get “enough” work.

Allen: Umm. Ya, job security in this industry (Allen shakes his head side to side, indicating no). It’s getting really, really competitive. Especially the labour market and you know people are getting cheaper and cheaper and cheaper. Well, production companies are not willing to spend any money. Like for that (Large Event) half of their labour was from a (Temporary Labour Company). Ya, strictly temporary day labour, generally unskilled, very, very low wage.

There's a lot of turnover in this industry because most people are not very well paid. Anyone of any skill or ability that realizes that they deserve more money they go and find something else. They get promoted, they move into better things. So there's this constant turnover of people right. You know. And you end up with a lot of people who don’t have a lot of experience. But, who else are you going to get to do that job for that wage?

It is not only labourers that are paid low and stagnating wages. In the industry, stagehands and skilled professionals have also experienced stagnating wages. Peter is 44 and a well-established professional technician in the industry and he explained his concerns about wages, "Eventually you price yourself out of the market. I've been getting paid the same for 6 or 7 years. It’s okay. I'd like to think I'm worth a bit more, but there's all these young guys coming in and their willing to work for less. I've got experience and enjoy what I do, so it's okay." He explained to me that he was not going to try and get more money for the work that he does, even though he has been paid the same amount for several years. This reflects workers’ lack of control and influence over how they are compensated. It is also an example of how workers complicity in how work is organized and how employment relationships are managed maintains precariousness.

**Getting Work and Learning to Labour**

Companies typically use freelance labour, either by directly employing individuals or through staffing agencies that employ them as temporary and casual employees. Many of the freelancers that I spoke with stated that they had worked for dozens of companies throughout the
course of a year, though some typically relied on just a few for the bulk of their income. Workers must maintain their own informal connections with companies and other workers. Staffing Companies, or temporary labour service providers, also employ workers as casual labour throughout the industry. One owner of a company explained the role of what he refers to as “Labour Companies”:

Labour companies are supplying large numbers of bodies that the production doesn’t have time to find, generally speaking. If I’m coming in with a show and I need 50 guys, I got my problems bringing the show together. I don’t want to spend four days on the phone trying to find 50 people. So the labour service provides a very timely thing for providing labour that is specialized or trained, to whatever extent that they’ve got. The production companies just don’t have the time to do that. In the past, I would have to find my own labour and that is okay if I live in the city. It’s not okay if I’m traveling into the city and don’t know anybody. How do I find 50 technicians when I don’t know anybody that lives there? So, the labour services provide that service to people that don’t have the time to find the bodies. It’s out of economic necessity. I’m not going to hire labour services who provide guys who don’t know what the fuck they are doing. I need guys that know what they are doing.

These labour service providers work with production and entertainment companies throughout the city. As has been discussed in previous chapters, the various relationships, contracts and networks between companies are difficult to map because they are very fluid and multidimensional. The diverse and polarized work arrangements within the industry complicate analyses of freelance labour.

There are many avenues into this industry. Formal training is not always required, though many colleges and universities offer programs and formal training in the theatrical arts and technical production. Though not all production workers have gone to a technical school or university to study production and theatre, many have and those who have not will often learn much of the skills and knowledge required on the job. Reed shared with me his story of how he got into the industry and his opinions about the current state of learning to work and learning to get work:
Reed: I got into production management by knocking on doors and finding a mentor and saying, “I want to learn to do what you do”. That was the point in my career were I realized I can’t learn how to do this without some kind of a mentor. You have to have some type of mentoring system. I had to talk him into doing it and you do that by showing up ready to work, being inquisitive and willing to do anything. I remember my first job, I showed up and said, “Hi, my name is Reed. I have a car. What do you need? I’m here to learn, what do you need me to do?” That kind of attitude in people is what allows you to get that kind of training.

You might eventually get that training by falling into it, but if you need to kick-start your career you need to be proactive about it and go find people. Because, like I’ve said, the training aspect is a slow process, because it’s not a formal process. It takes ten years to learn what you need to do and then another ten years to learn how to get paid for it. You have to learn the skill set first and have the experience and the contacts and that only comes with time, after you’ve got the skill set. Some people, who are really, you know, really bright do learn it at the same time. But usually you get the skill set first.

When I first started in this business there was no training and the technology wasn’t as evolved as it is now by any means. Now, people have to be way more educated in the process of all of the tech before they get anywhere near all the gear, because it’s just way more complicated. Before, if you knew how to unload a truck, you were qualified. Now, you’re qualified to unload the truck, but that is it.

Learning on the job is a very common experience. It is also a very collaborative process:

Nicole: Knowing which gear does what, where, when, you know all of that stuff I picked up just sort of doing gigs. I didn’t never get taught any of that. I mean that stuff where people took me under their wing and went, “this is how you do this, and this how you get more work because this is what your good at.” There are definitely people who have done that for me.

People are often willing to show others how to do things and to explain how things work. In order to gain access to more field sites, I needed to learn about the different types of technology involved. Fortunately for me, people shared different techniques with me throughout my time working in the industry. I was shown how to do things throughout my fieldwork. I learned many things about rigging, stage building and how to safely handle different types of equipment.

Wrapping cables, packing away gear, and knowing how to effectively and safely load trucks were important skills to learn. As noted earlier in the chapter, much of the work involved can be quite mundane, however, what may seem routine and basic actually requires training. During my
first day working on a job site, another stagehand showed me how to wrap cable. This first lesson turned out to be one of the most important. Albert makes it very clear how important cables are:

Learn how to wrap cable, totally, that is one of the most important things in this industry. If not the most important. Everyone’s got to know how to wrap cable. You stick out like a sore thumb if you don’t. You’re no good to anyone if you can’t wrap cable. If you can’t get wrapping cable then you don’t belong. This is my career, so you need to know how to wrap cable.

Every light, speaker, microphone, motor and anything else that uses electricity needs to be plugged in. There are dozens of different types of cables, all with varying lengths. On any given job site there might be thousands of feet of cables that need to be organized. Though Albert stresses the importance of cables, there are many other important aspects to being a production worker. Earlier in his career he started working for smaller production companies and eventually became a salaried employee at the medium sized firm where he now works. He told me about how he got started as a stagehand:

I started working for all those smaller production companies, small end, the small end of the larger production companies. They were big, but still private, you know what I mean? When I started with the production company I didn’t know anything. I just kind of, you just teach yourself while you’re there because you have the gear at your disposal. You know what I mean, you pick it up. I had to pick people’s brains and find their ways of doing things. I walked in there not knowing anything. All I knew was a little of audio and some video.

Some may dismiss stagehand or grip work as low skill, however, it requires familiarity with a wide variety of equipment. There is a difference between novice and experienced workers and the latter often add value to a job site. To become established as a freelancer and find work on an ongoing basis, workers must become and then demonstrate that they are knowledgeable and reliable. Albert has gained experience and established himself in the industry and in the process
he has secured a fulltime salaried position with a production company. This gives him job
security and predictability when it comes to his working hours.

I ended up making contacts with other companies and from there kind of, you know I
branched out a little bit. When it was slow at the company, I did a little freelance job here
and there for you know (here he names a few production companies in the city). And then
it came to the point where I couldn’t stand doing this work. I didn’t like working for them
anymore and everyone else was asking me to work, and I was like I’m going to do real
shows and real jobs and whatever. So, I quit.

When Albert is in the shop, at his current job, he often prepares the equipment that will be sent
out to an event. At the event, he also organizes and sets up the equipment, making use of his
technical knowledge. He describes his responsibilities at his current job:

My deal with them is, you know I basically go to the shop Monday to Friday, 9-5, when
I’m not out on shows, and I just basically you know put in the regular type of hours. But I
don’t have a regular, I don’t have a, like there is nothing specific that I have to do, you
know? We all do our part you know and we’ll help each other, but when I have a show on
my plate that is pretty much all that I concentrate on when I’m in the shop with my shop
days. I know I have something coming up, then I’m there preppeing it and all that kind of
stuff. If I don’t have anything, sometimes I just play with the gear and learn stuff,
whatever, cause there is always new stuff.

Albert is a fulltime employee, whereas freelancers go from one job to another. He is able to
continue his learning, experience the excitement of working on productions, and he has a stable
income. This is not the case for freelance production workers who must continuously find work.

One strategy freelancers use to gain work is to share contact information with others.
Another is to become employed by staffing firms that specialize in live events and production.
Working for staffing agencies that specialize in production is another way for people to find
work, gain experience and supplement their income. Reed explained to me the role labour
companies are playing in directing the career path for people beginning a career in production:

They have people in various disciplines, lighting, video, heavy equipment operation,
carpentry, all that kind of stuff. The labour companies draw on the same pool of people,
because they are not fulltime employees. They are labour service contract freelancers.
I’ll see some of the same people working for different companies. It’s just a matter of
who booked them. They go where the work is.
It just requires a specialized knowledge and the crews are getting better, because they have to and safety is more of a factor. I would say over the last twenty years, I believe, at least, the crews have become better educated and better trained as they are coming into the business. Some of this has to do with labour companies, in that you get called on and for the first few months maybe all you do is unload trucks and you’re a truck loader guy and then they will see how you do with unloading lighting trucks. They’ll see if you can handle it, and that you can do the cabling okay, and you do okay, and then maybe they’ll let you be a dimmer technician on the next one, or eventually. There is a progression that is happening now in the labour services that did not used to happen because the labour services weren’t there.

Generally speaking, for anything more involved than just loading trucks, there’s a process involved with putting together truss, and cabling. You need to know, and you need to identify the cables and make sure that the truss is rotated in the same direction, and that all kind of stuff that you learn as you do it. There’s a process to doing that and the labour services are providing that training to a certain extent because they have too. It’s usually to do with what you get hired in. When you first approach them, you usually start out as manual labour. They say, “Come on you’re going to hop onto some trucks or haul scaffolding.” and gradually you get slotted in. So, they are providing a training process, although it is not a formal one.

The bulk of the work available does require manual labour. He explains that novice workers are hired to do the heavy lifting that takes place at the beginning and end of any production. For stagehands it usually involves pushing cases, plugging in lights, lifting things, placing things and repeating the same or similar tasks. These jobs are common to most events and the amount of work available is usually proportionate to the scale of the production. However, as will be discussed below, workers of all varieties and with varying levels of experience and training also take on these jobs.

Reed suggests that labour companies are improving the quality of workers by providing them with training:

Reed: They also ensure, however informal it may be, a training process. Because, they’re not going to send somebody out to do sound who is incompetent to do sound, because as the production manager that hired them, I’m going to bitch at you, that this guy doesn’t know what he is doing.
However, if training does happen, it is informal and takes place out of necessity at the job site when new workers are unfamiliar with how to do things, rather than being the result of the staffing companies’ efforts to train and develop the skills of their employees.

Mark, who is in his early twenties, also views staffing firms as a starting point, rather than a primary way to make his living. Others view working for staffing companies simply as a job for them to make money, rather than as a pathway. When I spoke to younger workers like Mark, many in their early twenties, they told me that they worked for staffing companies and worked as casual labourers in order to gain experience. Mark began working after he graduated from a college program in theatre. He told me about his time in college and how it prepared him for work in the industry:

Mark: It was all free labour. It’s a lot of labour. But it is learning.

HS: You learnt to labour.

Mark: Ya, exactly, and that is what a lot of this industry is, a lot of it.

HS: What do you mean?

Mark: The industry is labour. Unless you’re operating a gig, even if you are operating it’s still labour.

HS: In that sense, did school, for what you got into, did it prepare you?

Mark: It did because when you go there, to a job, and you’re getting paid for it, it makes it a lot more worthwhile. In real life we’re just working the gig, we don’t have homework. In school they just threw everything at us and so now it’s easier to just to deal with the work. I knew that they knew that they weren’t teaching us the work.

Mark explains that his college program did teach him some skills and he gained knowledge about the industry. However, rather than learning about the gear and the technology, it mostly prepared him for how to work in production and by this Mark emphasizes that it is all about labour:
Mark: I used to get harped on for being late, like no tomorrow at school. In the real world if you’re late you’re not going to get a call. If you fuck up on a call, sorry for swearing, you’re not going to get a call.

HS: No worries.

Mark: The industry is just so much of who you know and how you work with them. Also a lot of, like we had to do peer evaluations and It’s all about really understanding, like a gig will get stressful and if you don't like working with somebody it can make it ten times worse. And it’s like that in any job, but specifically in I guess theatre because it’s like really timed deadlines. And I don't know it’s different from any other industry, especially in theatre. And that's what they were trying to push on us, but I don't know. I'll go to work a rock and roll gig and it is just way more laid back. Something's they wouldn't even, you wouldn't even, there's something's that I didn't even get out of College. That I actually got on the job.

He learned how to work with others and the different roles involved in theatre production.

Theatre shares many characteristics with television and concerts, thus many of the skills involved are transferable. Finding it difficult to get a fulltime job, he started working as a freelancer and for staffing firms. He gave me his take on staffing firms:

Even though I don’t like staffing calls, they helped me in my career, and I’ll somewhat be in debt to them, because they gave me work, when I was right out of college. I’m saying those companies, even though they are what they are, they still help you gain perspective on the industry, in terms of being able to get work like that down the line, and if you’re going to start somewhere.

People who become production workers have a variety of education backgrounds and end up working in a variety of settings in the live entertainment and production industry. Rather than a starting point, people begin and continue to work as casual labourers for staffing firms because production and entertainment companies increasingly utilize them to supply workers, rather than directly hire their own staff.

**Satisfaction and Pride in Precarious Work**

The work is physical at times and it requires technical knowledge and skills. One of the more tedious tasks requires workers to pull apart heavy knots and tangles of industrial sized cables, and then wrap them into large cases throughout massive halls in a convention center at
the end of a conference or on, under and around a concert stage. In some cases crews build the stage itself, or help to set up mobile stages. They connect metal scaffolding and build the structures that support stages and the “front-of-house”, where the lighting and audio mixers would sit and spot lights can be perched at indoor and outdoor concert venues. Some jobs also involve constructing elaborate set pieces for major touring concerts. Crews work with the production company and touring staff to precisely unpack and repack their trucks to return equipment to the shop or for the next show. Other tasks include assisting touring acts with their instruments, building sets and setting up commercial displays for marketing events, conferences and festivals. Piecing together and installing video screens, video walls, and dance floors were also part of some events. Many varieties and configurations of lights, speaker systems and video-screens or video-walls were used, including custom designs used by major touring acts.

A common sentiment that is shared amongst workers is the feeling of great satisfaction and pride that results from the combination of their labouring to build a production and their witnessing of its completion. On many occasions this was said to be one of the most rewarding aspects of the work. Production workers who labour on events also find their work to be less alienating than other jobs, such as working on the shop floor. In a very literal sense, they are less alienated from the final product of their labour. This is especially true when they know that they have satisfied their client/employers. Production workers, including those who identify as freelancers, also prefer to work on events and productions because the work is more satisfying than shop work and the pay is generally higher. The work being done is quite impressive, especially because of the scale and complexity of the events and the short time frames in which they are executed.
The process of building a stage and working during and after a concert allows the worker to see the process of building a show from beginning to end. Only some have this experience. Some workers are called in on an as needed basis and are mostly utilized for load ins and outs. This can include unloading the gear from the trucks and assisting the various departments with the more labour intensive aspects of laying out cable and placing lights and speakers where they need to be. These stagehands may or may not be scheduled to come back at the end of the show to take it all apart.

A typical workday begins by finding the worksite and meeting with the crew, supervisor and client. The client is often a representative of a production company, venue or touring act who is in charge of setting up an event. Fewer people are required to stay during the preparation and event, otherwise referred to as a show call. These show calls require stagehands to help with changing sets and instruments during live shows and concerts. For this, workers are often given all access passes to event sites. These are often coveted positions because they mean longer work days and more direct contact with industry professionals. I helped to build set pieces for television studios and various live events that included major sporting events, trade shows, conferences, and fashion shows. As a stagehand, I was employed to work during events and was tasked with moving set pieces, changing musical instruments between acts, and in some cases operating spotlights, also known as follow-spots.

Workers often describe a sense of pride that results from their contributions at worksites. Show calls are less alienating than shorter shifts and shop work. The jobs are much more rewarding, not only because workers are being paid for the full day, rather than just a few hours at the beginning and at the end, but also because they are able to participate in and see the event itself. It also means that stagehands are able to work with the equipment rather than just to push
cases on and off the trucks. Technicians and operators of the equipment will stay throughout the day to fine tune the set up and work during the show. These workers see the event through, in some cases from the planning and preparation all the way through to its completion. These stagehands and technicians are less alienated from the final product of their labour. In a literal sense they experience less alienation than shop workers and the workers whose only job is to unload trucks and place equipment around the work site.

Larry is in his fifties and has been working freelance since the early 1990’s. Larry has almost three decades of experience as a freelancer. He regularly takes on casual work with various companies. Larry stresses that he enjoys the industry and that the schedule “works” for him. In the following excerpts he discusses his views of being a freelancer. He alludes to the financial challenges, describes the physical demands of some jobs, and he emphasises that he takes pride in working in such a dynamic sector of the economy:

Coming back to thirty years later, or at least in the last fifteen years, or the last twenty years actually, being involved in music, or the entertainment industry, whether television, or concerts… it’s a real passion. Of course, I don’t indulge myself to the extreme that I could, you know, make a really good, good living out of it. I’m happy, I’m comfortable, you know with how I live my life and not too tied up with anyone thing. For example, you know when I was in television, being in the business, I did a lot of lighting and set design, so you know, that was a lot of fun, because here is, you know, you’re designing and putting up a set for celebrities, big names.

It was clear to me that Larry enjoyed his work. Having worked with him on several occasions, I was able to see him put his knowledge and skills to use. He works in a variety of settings as a stagehand and is often the most senior crew member. At times he is hired to be a stage manager and in other cases as a crew chief where he supervises other stagehands. He does not shy away from working and will often be the first person to get his hands dirty and do heavy lifting:

You’re in an industry, that’s what you’re doing, physical work. You’re pulling a lot of heavy cables, and you know, you got to mix it up. You’re not a big shot. Especially guys who don’t have the knowledge and experience, but you know what I mean. For example,
me, I’m one of the oldest guys working and people don’t always realize that. I am twice the age of a lot of those guys out there and here I am, and nobody wants to pick up that heavy case, and you’ve got that feeder (heavy cables that can be over a hundred feet long), and for some reason I always end up hauling it, and it’s just, I even end up saying, hey you guys want to help? You know my back is like, my body takes a banging.

He explained to me that he appreciates that he is part of building something, as opposed to the alienation experienced by shop workers in the industry who prepare and ship the equipment, but may not be involved in the set up and completion of an event. It is this connection to the event that production workers find rewarding. Larry describes the satisfaction he gets from his work and how he values doing his work well:

The biggest thing, in the end, it is work and you should have a little pride in what you do. You should really enjoy it, embrace it, you should feel good about it when you do something. There are a few times where I haven’t, but mostly, I have those. If I walk away not feeling good, I shake my head. Anything I do I want to do to the best of my ability. I don’t want to do anything half ass. I think for anything you do, whether you’re doing a show, a concert, whether you’re a guy in the band or a guy setting up the equipment, or the photography, you want to do it well, because it’s your work. If more people had pride in what they do in this industry, I think a lot of things would be easier. You’re all there to do one thing, to make this thing work. I am there to do one certain thing and I know I’m working. I think the biggest part for me, and I might just be a little guy in a small part of the production doing one little thing, is giving the client the satisfaction of what they were looking for. I think that’s what I get out of it. To see the satisfaction when it comes together and goes off really well and the client is happy. It’s that satisfaction to give the client what they really wanted.

In the end it all comes together for one thing, to make it all work. You were asking me about things that I like and I started off by saying things that I don’t like. But I guess what I do like about it is yes, you do meet a lot of people. Because I’m into music and entertainment and that, depending what we’re working on, you know, with bands and D.J.s and whatnot, you get to experience a little bit of that. Whether you get to see the show or not, you might get to see the sound check, I like that.

The access to “behind the scenes” and having a role in the building and operating of a production reduces the individual’s experience of alienation, especially when compared to shop work, other industries, and various forms of low-skill labour. The relatively high hourly wages and day rates, and a reduced sense of alienation make work in the production industry feel satisfying.
The touring crew (roadies) or local production company employees lead smaller teams of local workers to set up particular departments, such as the lighting or audio. The end result is often a technical marvel. The work of a stagehand and workers in different departments involves physical labour that varies from pushing cases, lifting equipment, maneuvering large objects into place and loading trucks as equipment comes in and out of venues. Some jobs involve heavy lifting and fast-paced non-stop work. Production workers are assigned particular tasks, which most typically began with unloading trucks and placing cases of equipment around the worksite to be used during the set up. The typical day involved setting up truss, which is the metal structure that supports the lighting and video equipment. Then workers set up the lighting and audio, including “running cable” that would power the lights and speakers. The loading and unloading of trucks, hanging lights, placing speakers and the laying down of many tons of cable, as well as the building and striking of stages and truss are usually the most common tasks and the most labour intensive parts of any event. Several crew members are responsible for operating the sound, lighting and video on an event. They operate mixers, or boards that control the equipment. They are responsible for making sure a show runs smoothly and must troubleshoot and resolve any problems that might arise during an event. They oversee stagehands and are often responsible for making sure all of the equipment is properly maintained, used and packaged away at the end. Their work cannot be done by unskilled labourers who have no training or experience.

“Labour is a Dirty Word”: “Freelance” is a Better Signifier of the Work

Crews working on the main stage during concerts and live television, changing sets and moving audio equipment and instruments are given access to behind the scenes and back stage. One of the lighting technicians I was working with on the main stage during a major outdoor
concert event told me that, “labour is a dirty word”. He was referring to our access passes, otherwise called credentials that all of us had to have to gain access to the sight of a four day concert event. Voicing his frustration, he told me, “We’re not labourers. Most of us are trained technicians. Stagehand would be better, or ‘local crew’, but were not labourers. You have to know what you’re doing.” As a master electrician and head lighting technician, this individual’s name tag that read “Labour” was an insult to his identity. It may also hinder face-to-face interaction with event organizers and clients. Many share this sense of pride and dignity associated with the work that is being done. Others also commented on this and some went as far as covering their credentials entirely. I also found the label demeaning and took some promotional materials for the event and cut out a slogan and placed it over the word labour. This was less of a problem on other sites, especially concerts, where name tags, id-badges, and credentials typically read “All-Access”, or “Production”.

Why is it that the word labour caused so much grief and insult? However skilled the workers might be and however technical the job, it was all work. Could this be why production workers prefer the term freelance rather than labour? Freelance, for the workers I spoke with, is not only about work arrangements and scheduling. Rather, and I believe more importantly, it signifies the type of work being done and it represents the types of jobs more specifically than it does the employment relationships. In fact, in most cases it represents the job and not the work arrangement. The work arrangement is more accurately covered by the term casual work or casual employment and thus, by definition, is more closely associated with precariousness than with freelance.

Another crew member told me that labour is associated with being a “grunt”. He prefers to be identified by the department or role he assumes on the job site. The concerns and
frustrations over the label are linked to notions of pride, prestige and status in the work place. Distinguishing oneself from ‘labour’ is how individuals are recognized as quality stagehands or techs. Those who consider working in the industry their primary career are more likely to be concerned with such labels, and as a result they adopt the term freelance to, in part, describe their mode of employment.

Some, however, purposefully reinforce the dichotomy and misnomer, suggesting that they do not wish to take on more responsibility or provide ideas on the job site. They prefer to work “from the neck down”. They recognize that they are being paid by the hour to be stagehands, not managers. Taken to its extreme, some will purposefully slack off, which is otherwise referred to as “fucking the dog”. In some cases, individuals refrain from providing input or showcasing their knowledge and abilities in order not to stand out and also to avoid finishing the work faster than needed. Another reason for this can be that they do not wish to overstep any boundaries and insult the person in charge. Consistently, some crew have stated that they are happy to work “from the neck down”, following instructions when given, and “thinking” as little as possible. People openly discuss not wanting responsibility when it is not theirs. These strategies are also used to avoid added work. Others choose to contribute more, whether based on an internal sense of pride or in order to secure future work, because demonstrating a keen interest in getting things done and supporting the technicians and department leads is a strategy to get noticed, learn names and showcase one’s experience and abilities.

Kent has worked in variety of settings, including live music, theatre and television. He explains the industry and describes some of the challenges and benefits of freelancing:

It is an industry of professionals who take pride in their work at the upper levels, which I am proud to be a part of. It is not much different than other industries in the fact that there will always be “tourists”. Those who want to be in it but don’t have the stamina or patience for the uncertainties. These are all the challenges. Too much time working when
it’s busy, not enough money, and no social life. No time for family or friends. And when there is no work, then it sucks. But I wouldn’t trade it. It’s all what you make of it.

Kent succinctly summarizes his take on freelance work and in doing so he identifies the link between flexibility and the prevalence of precariousness. He lists the challenges and then quickly dismisses them as normal aspects of the work. Like many others, he enjoys the work and accepts the trade-offs between being a freelancer and working in another industry. He also suggests that “you”, the individual are capable and responsible for “what you make of it”. The problematic and harmful aspects of being a freelancer are not called into question. Class relations and exploitation are never brought up. Instead, individual agency is assumed and perceived to be the most significant factor that will determine the quality of one’s career.

Throughout my research, people stressed the importance of individual agency, control and choice in the face of uncertainty and the strain freelance work places on workers. These depictions of freelance work normalize the uncertainties and risks that workers face on a regular basis and distort the actually existing dominant practice of casual employment. Rather than identify as labourers, many refer to themselves as freelancers or self-employed. These romanticised notions rationalize and idealize what is in reality precarious work. How and why then, does the notion of being “freelance” become part of the standard discourse of production workers?

People enter into freelance work from a variety of backgrounds, including theatre, television, radio, and various trades, while others enter into it without any formal training. Reed, has been working in this industry for over 40 years, and has extensive experience. His perspective comes from the diverse set of vantage points he has had throughout his career. He is well informed and clear about how the industry functions. One of the things he told me was, “it is called show business, not show art. You need to do the business part, economically and in
terms of the technical skills. That’s how it has to happen.” He told me about his career as a freelancer and he explained how things work from a planning and organizational perspective.

Well, some people are freelancers because they like freelancing. I mean, I think I’m one of those. I like doing a job that is two weeks long and then moving onto a different job that’s two weeks long. Its different people, different projects, different things. You get that with some companies, but the company will, when you’re working with that company and they don’t have a show, you’re working in the shop. Right now, when I don’t have a show, I’ve got a day off. Unless I’m doing paper work for something else. If I decide, like I did today, that I’m going to sleep until noon, like I did today, because I’ve done four 20 hour days, well I can do that today. Like, if I was working for a shop, I would be back in there at 9 o’clock this morning. Some people are more geared towards the freelance. There’s also not that many fulltime jobs out there. You couldn’t absorb everybody into a fulltime gig in the city, there are just not that many fulltime jobs. And yet, there is enough business here for people to make a living at it.

Many people are drawn to freelance and it has been said to me that they are able to make a decent living. Unfortunately, I have not been unable to find statistical data regarding the employment numbers and incomes of people who work in the industry. However, based on my observations and discussions with people throughout the industry, the majority of freelance workers do face economic uncertainty which leads to stress and negative impacts on family and social life.

There are a limited number of jobs that include the stability of shop work and the variety of being a freelance worker with financial security of fulltime salaried work. Albert, in his mid-twenties, has been working in the industry for several years. Now in a supervising and management role, he oversees various events that his company supplies equipment for. Part of his work is to supervise crews of labourers. The labourers are primarily casually employed workers who identify as freelancers. Yet, there is a significant qualitative difference between Albert’s role and theirs. The crews assist him with the unloading of trucks filled with equipment that will be used for an event. The crew then helps to set up the equipment. This includes positioning various cases around the worksite and the piecing together of the equipment,
connecting all of the cables and removing empty and unused cases from the worksite. At the end of the event crews return to help dismantle the equipment, pack it back into cases and load it all back onto the trucks. Respectively, these shifts are often referred to as load-ins and loud-outs, or “the in” and “the out”. On the odd occasion, workers might show up to dismantle the equipment used at an event and only be required to stay for a short period of time, less than an hour in some cases, and are still paid for at least four hours of work. These types of shifts are most appreciated when the start time is late at night. Concerts and most other events typically end between 10 and 11 in the evening and completing work early means that workers can go out after or go home for much needed sleep.

Albert stays during the event to operate the equipment and to make sure that everything that his company supplies works as it should. He explains the way work is organized from a management perspective:

The whole industry is driven by freelancers, by freelance work. There’s very few (salaried workers), it’s usually those key players at any production company that, like the account managers. There’s a little bit of shop staff, and whatever it takes to run the company, usually the other people there are freelance. Every company has their seasons, their ups and downs. That’s the thing. It’s never steady all the time. Always, there are busy times and dead times. It’s just, there isn’t enough work at any of these companies to have a certain amount of people busy all the time, you know what I mean. That’s why you try to have as few full-timers as possible and they hire guys, just ‘hands’, to work when you need them. You have to put yourself in a labour coordinator’s position and think of it from that point of view.

These workers, or as Albert calls them “hands”, are in many ways marginalized. The lower pay relative to their fulltime counterparts and unionized cohorts in this and other industries, as well as the insecurity and strain of not knowing when they will work and if there will be enough work to pay the bills is a constant worry for some under these conditions.

Flexibility, Choice and Control: To Be Employed and Unemployed
How work in the production industry is organized is of particular importance because it plays a significant role in the reproduction of precarious employment (Kalleberg 2003; 2009; Peck and Theodore 2007). Employment in the production industry is decentralized, with many companies and independent contractors providing equipment, personal and other types of support for various productions. A distinct form of flexible specialization (Piore and Sabel 1984) has developed within the production industry. This specialization involves the compartmentalization of technical departments, management positions, event management and production and the various strata of technical and labour positions. Flexible specialization of diverse and dispersed organizations and individuals is economically advantageous for firms and disadvantageous for workers (Piore and Sabel 1984; Walton 1993). Flexibility should be understood as operating on two distinct levels. The first is the flexible use of labour by capital. The other can be understood as flexibility from the vantage point of the individual worker. The latter is linked to a worker’s ability to dictate the schedule of their work hours, leisure time and personal lives. Workers describe this flexibility as the ability and freedom to choose and control when they work and what they do.

Having more control over one’s time and thus opting to work in an industry that provides multiple options for working arrangements, locations and hours appears to be more freeing and stimulating than a typical “9-5 job”. Being able to refuse work and taking time off were common responses given when I asked about the best parts of this type of work. The challenge for production workers is not only to find work, but that they must continuously demonstrate their “employability” by being available on short notice and willing to do a variety of jobs. Work opportunities in the industry are predominantly based on contingent relations and facilitated
through informal channels. Jobs are often organized on short notice and through informal conversations.

Reed: There are parallels in other industries. In construction, they contract people to build the building and then when the building is done they don’t have work. Other industries are not as sporadic as this one. You might get a four year contract to build a building, nothing we are doing takes four years. If you’re one of the elite technicians and have the opportunity to work with somebody on that scale (concert tour, television production), but again, that’s a really small group.

Production workers more commonly find casual employment that can be as brief as a few hours, rather than long contracts.

Stagehands often lack access to information about potential jobs, because they are rarely made publically visible, and hiring is at the discretion of others who often make arrangements on short notice. Access to information and hiring decisions are limited to a select few. These informal practices discipline workers into accepting precariousness rather than challenging it.

This is, firstly, because it is unclear where and how to challenge it and secondly, because doing so could lead to losing future work opportunities. Larry juxtaposes the idea of individual agency by describing the possibility of “doing very well” as a freelancer and becoming an “ace lighting guy”, with the “grind” of the industry:

I’ve known these guys for twenty years. It’s come full circle. If I had really applied myself to one thing, from knowing these people, I could have been, I would have done very well. I would have had to have devoted myself, my soul, because they work! They put so much into it.

Look at Henry [not his real name], with his company. I was having lunch with him at a gig, years ago. Just me and him sitting at a table and I asked him how long he had worked at the company, and he goes, “well, actually I’m the owner”. It was interesting. If I really wanted to get into this stuff, I could have been an ace lighting guy.

But, it’s a grind. I like my freedom too much. You know, if I don’t feel like working for a month, you know. I could be working a lot, sometimes, because I know a lot of people and they know I do very good work. I work hard. If I were to call the office, I would get the gigs before they call somebody else.
He contrasts devoting himself and his soul with the freedom of not working and taking time off. Freedom is here not used to describe work and a career, it is used to describe the ability to not work and the choice to be unemployed.

Working for multiple companies can lead to more opportunities and to the ability to exercise some choice over who to work for and how much to work. During busy periods, some people can have many shifts in a short period of time, including multiple jobs in a single day. This type of “feast” work can take its toll on one's social and family life. Being away from one’s social life makes it difficult to nurture relationships and substantially reduces one’s leisure time, both of which can add additional stress to the already physically demanding aspects of the job.

The short notice and lack of predictability can also be frustrating. For Kathleen, the inconsistency and lack of control over her work schedule led her to avoid ‘gigs’:

It’s hard to say I enjoyed the shows. But I liked the shop because it’s guaranteed. You know when you’re going to be there, when you’re going to leave. So it’s hard to plan stuff around shows because, the thing with them is that for shows, Hazel is the one that would call you up. She would call and ask you, "What are you doing in two hours?" and it’s [the job starts at] like 1 am on a Tuesday. And it’s like come on, what are you doing? And if you say no to her once it’s like you’re pretty much in her bad books, at least I found that. So that was kind of hard. But, I guess the more you’re doing shows, the more you’re expected to… it becomes more routine and more natural. So I guess it was hard for me being in the shop and doing some shows. It’s easier to be one or the other.

As Kathleen noted, saying no can have consequences because a dispatcher or human resources person is going to want to hire people who are available and willing to take on work with short notice and at odd hours. Choosing to say no can have a negative impact on finding work in the future. In addition to this limited amount of control and predictability regarding work, is a lack of information. Employers have access to more knowledge and information about what work is available and thus they have more power and control over who will work.
For people like Allen, work in the production industry is satisfying because he is able to balance his personal interests and family life. For him, the production industry is more enjoyable and rewarding than other forms of employment. Being an experienced and well-connected individual allows him the flexibility to pursue his other interests. Not everyone, however, is able to get the same jobs that he does, nor do they work as consistently. In the following excerpt from my interview with Allen, he describes the ambiguity regarding choice and control over work that most people in the industry do experience:

You just say yes or no to work. If you’re busy you just say no, I can’t do it. If you want to go away for two months to Europe, you just go away for two months to Europe. Ultimately it could end up affecting the work that you get. Like, if you’re saying no to everything people are going to stop calling you.

The choice or opportunity to say yes or no does occur, but it is not commonplace throughout the year, nor is it experienced universally. Albert shared his experience with uncertainty about work.

With respect to what you were just asking me, you were asking about the, how, when you turn down a lot of gigs and your phone stops ringing, that sort of thing, I kind of experienced that. When I did a lot of freelance for one the larger lighting companies, there was a period where they were calling me all the time and I was doing a lot of work with them and I was really happy about that and did a couple stops on one of the tours and then never heard from them again, unless that show was running again, every time that show came up was the only time I heard from them. That was because I was the guy for that job. They weren’t calling me for anything else.

After witnessing the ups and downs of work during my fieldwork, I noticed that certain people were consistently working and worried less about not having enough work. I tried to identify the factors that contributed to this division. Thirty-five year old Jim told me, "I used to be afraid to say no. Some companies, they move you to the bottom of the list if you do. Now I have a wife and a kid so I need work, but if one company is offering me work I'm going to say yes. That means if another one calls for the same day I have to say no." Those who work as stagehands in non-standard employment relationships, however, often do not know when or where they will be
working their next shift, let alone where they might be working the next month. Employment for freelance production workers is unreliable and unpredictable:

Albert: It’s something you see in smaller companies. Smaller companies, put it this way, when I did a lot of work with [a company] at least a couple of times a week, or something like that, when I they would be like, “oh, we have this gig coming up” and I would say “oh, sorry I’m not available for that”, sometimes they would give me a hard time or they wouldn’t like that. It might be because I had another gig or whatever, you know, just because. The more you work and develop a certain relationship with a certain company they start to lean on you and expect some kind of loyalty, which is right, because they give you so much business, that you should have, like I should definitely look out for them. But, sometimes, they’ll have something, they’ll have a two day show, and the same time another company has a six day show that they want me to do, well, dude I am going to take the six days of work. Sometimes they’ll give you a hard time, but any other bigger production companies are the ones that operate on a much larger scale, understand that is, you know, kind of one of those things, that, if your available your available if you’re not you’re not, its business. Bridges are not really burnt. It’s just a pain in the ass.

At times, simply being available and accepting work can lead to opportunities and more work. While working during an event, a co-worker was trying to find people to work for another company that needed several people for a three day event starting the next morning. With little notice on a weekend during a busy time of year, it was proving to be difficult finding enough workers. I inquired about the possibility of me working for the company, one which I had not worked for in the past. The company agreed to hire me and I ended up working the entire event. Had I not been in that spot at that time, I would not have heard the conversation and may not have had that chance to work for that company. Knowing who to call and when, can lead to more work if one is able to take advantage of informal networks.

I asked informants about the choice and control they exercised over where and when they worked and they spoke of opportunities to choose between different offers. However, this was less common and not typical for many of those labouring as casual workers for staffing companies and as contingent or casually employed freelancers working directly for production
firms. Instead, people are typically called and asked to work on certain days at various locations. However, this is not how workers describe it:

Nicole: You get to book all of your own hours. You get to have complete control over your schedule. No one is telling you, like people are saying can you do this, can you do this gig, and if you can then you can say yes. Normally people aren’t saying “you have to be here at this time or you no longer have a job” because there’s always other companies who want to hire you and who want to give you work. I work a lot because I have to, because I have the choice to say yes or no. And I chose to say yes most of the time. People give me a lot of opportunity.

The discourse of choice and control, which reflects a sense of freedom and agency workers have as a result of their status as freelancers, is not entirely consistent with how employment is structured and how access to jobs occurs.

One complaint that came up throughout my research and in interviews was that there was often a lack of information given about the work people were being scheduled for. Workers are often not given particular details about an event, the specific job they will be expected to do, or how long to expect to be there. In some cases there was a definite time given for a shift and the day would end as scheduled. In other cases rough estimates of how long the work day would be might be discussed. However, plans could often change and the information was not always accurate. This aggravated people because it made it difficult to plan their schedules around work. Many workers, rather than being able to exercise their freedom to make informed decisions about the types of jobs they were taking on, actually lack control over scheduling.

Ted is in his early 20s and has some college experience in theatre production. As I sat with him after we had worked through the night, we started the second round of a semiformal interview we had begun the day before. At the time of our interview, he was planning to go back to school to study a trade. He found it difficult to find steady work and was beginning to become disillusioned by the labour market. We spoke of the need for a stable and predictable income,
and of going back to school to solidify career prospects. He told me that he would not be working the following few days in order to spend some time with his brother. That weekend ended up being full days of work with several hours of overtime each day. He could not have known that the days would be that long and that we would get that much more overtime. By refusing employment on Friday, he was not offered Saturday and Sunday, as it was easier to have the same crew for the whole weekend. While he exercised choice he lacked control over future work and the flexibility of working as a casual labourer meant not knowing when he would work next.

At times, employment in the industry seemed to be a serendipitous event. The phone would ring at the right time, or I would bump into someone with information about a company needing workers. The network of production workers works rather fast. Often, a person finds work through a contact in the industry. When companies are busy and they become overwhelmed with work, they rely on their network of contacts to find bodies on short notice. I was able to get somewhat frequent work from a few companies and more sporadic calls from others. Conversations about work and what companies had jobs were commonplace. Through word of mouth, I was able to find out about upcoming work and information about which companies were looking for people. As time went on, I began to work quite frequently, weekends were especially busy. In some instances, I worked for three different companies in one day or on two job sites for the same company. Working twelve hours or more in one day occurred often. As intense as this may seem, there were also periods of time with little or no work. Companies had their own ups and downs and I was competing with other workers. Sometimes I would see that I had missed a call, while I was at a job site. By the time I was able to get back to the company, they had already filled the position they had called me for. Other
times, I would see workers checking their phones or receiving calls about work and this would alert me to inquire and follow up.

On rare occasions, I was given the choice between different “gigs” for the same company. During the busy summer and autumn months, I would have to turn down work if I was already booked for concerts and festivals, which typically occurred on weekends. In my case, work was not typically scheduled more than a week in advance. The odd time, I would be confirmed to work a couple of weeks ahead of a scheduled event. It was more typical that I would be contacted the week of, or on some occasions less than twenty-four hours before a shift would start. Other times, I would call ahead of time if I knew there was upcoming work, especially if people I was working with had mentioned it. I would ask if the particular company had anything coming up and sometimes they would book me for something right away and other times I was asked to call back. Work was often unpredictable and sometimes, I would be asked to work longer at a given job site or asked to come back the next day. This uncertainty and lack of control is a fundamental characteristic of precariousness.

For young adults such as Ted, flexibility can be an advantage and welcomed alternative to standard employment. However, as he explained, the inconsistency and lack of stability is coupled with a sense of isolation and alienation:

I started working for the [staffing company] through networking with other people who told me, “you’re not going to be able to pay your bills just working for one of these companies”. It is common in this industry. I wasn’t sure I wanted to do this for the rest of my life. I know a lot of guys who do other things on the side to supplement their income, part time work, repair work, etc. I mean were sitting here and it’s the end of November now, but in a month that’s it. It’s going to be dead, that’s it. Not exactly a month from today, but the end of December through January it’s quite dead. If you’re freelance and you made enough money during the previous year and you saved it, then wow, that’s a great time to take a vacation, but to take a vacation you need to have money. You need to know that you’re going to have work when you get back. Scheduling a vacation is one thing.
A major concern of his is the lack of opportunity to advance beyond labouring. He aspires to do the skilled and technical work that he had trained for in theatre school. Most significantly, Ted alludes to a feeling of isolation and a lack of power over his career. He describes his feelings of anxiety that have resulted from employment insecurity. He alludes to his desire to move beyond precarious work by finding stable employment and representation in the form of a union. Ted explained to me why he continued to work in the industry as a casual labourer:

Right now it pays the bills. I don’t think it pays as good as it should, but it pays better than minimum wage. Way above minimum wage. I’ve never really discussed my wage with anyone else, not even with people that have been there for ten years. It’s frustrating. When you walk into a gig and you don’t know exactly what you’re doing, you don’t know how long you’re going to be there. You don’t know what’s expected of you. The person booking you may have the wrong information, they may not know, it may change afterword. Sometimes, well especially recently, I’ve been getting feelings of anxiety over work. I want to know when I’m going to work, the amount of hours, where, and an employer, maybe a union, that cares enough to tell me these things. I’m not trying to blame the company. I think you know what I’m saying. You’re basically to work from the neck down. You’re not paid to think. In many cases it’s because of people’s egos. They’re the boss and they’re paying you and you should shut up and do what you’re told, we’re paid from the neck down.

He articulates many of the challenges production workers face and voices his frustrations with freelance work. Among these, is the lack of information he receives about what he is expected to do on a job site. He also articulates his dissatisfaction with the quality of work he has been getting. Ted is clearly not complacent being a freelance production worker. Yet, his account reflects how workers are in fact complicit in the processes that reproduce precariousness.

**Feast or Famine**

During the “feast” period, which in Toronto begins in the warmer months of spring, one is able to work more often because there are more outdoor events. In these busier times of year some people might find themselves having to turn down work. Work can be draining during these busy periods. In "feast-time", workers must decide between accepting work or spending time with family and friends. They also risk missing sleep in favor of working as much as
possible. Uncertainty about future work is still a common concern during these times and it motivates some workers to “binge work”.

The commonplace experience of freelance workers being employed by several companies throughout the year, in order to make a living, means that there is no lasting responsibility or relationship between employees and employers. If one is available on a constant basis and performs well, they are more likely to be called in for more work, until the work dries up and they must find work elsewhere. At some point they may no longer be available to work for a company and the frequency with which that company may call them goes down. There are periods of intense work spells and then the opposite experience of not enough work. I experienced both of these periods for myself. During some stretches, I worked every day for over a week or more, and sometimes worked through the night. However, opportunities for work become limited in the fall and in the winter months, when the amount of work in the industry diminishes significantly. As competition within the job market increases, more experienced and highly networked individuals will often have the first opportunity to work.

Uncertainty about work is commonplace for freelancers and so I inquired about how individuals coped with it. Morgan, who earlier in the chapter explained that freelance is an inherent part of the industry, described the complicated challenges of experiencing “feast or famine”:

Morgan: Well, especially in particular, with entrainment there is certain times of year there is just more work than others and so, the term “feast or famine” comes from there’s too much work for you to either go around and you can work yourself to death, or unless your properly scheduling yourself, you know, you’re too busy for your own personal life by any stretch, and then there is other times of year, i.e. mostly in Canada, is the dead of winter, when there’s just not enough work to even sustain your livelihood. So if you’re not smart with your money in the times of feast, than you end up in the time of famine, where you don’t have enough money to keep it going. So, it’s all about you know properly budgeting and scheduling your time in those times when you’re making a lot of
money to be sure that you have enough saved to accommodate for those times when there’s no money at all.

This talk, “about…properly budgeting and scheduling your time,” came up time and again during conversations and interviews. Consistently throughout my research, individual agency regarding the responsibility for acquiring work and saving enough money for the “famine” times is stressed. This emphasis is part of the discourse of normalizing precariousness by implying that people must and can exercise control over their schedules and income. Working as a stagehand often means one is offered work with little advance notice and is not guaranteed future work.

Reed explains just how significant the uncertainty can be for young people and those trying to have a family:

You have to learn to make the money when you can and understand that there are going to be slow time periods if you are going to be a freelancer. Otherwise you find a fulltime job at some company and there are a lot people who do that, because sometimes they just can’t. Sometimes, you’ve got to take the job because you’ve got to keep making money.

You can’t have a slow month when you have three kids. It’s hard to be a freelancer and have a family and a normal life. It’s just not, especially in the very beginning. For me, at my stage of my career, I work when guys unloading trucks aren’t getting work. But, if you’re 25 years old, breaking into the business and you just got married, you know, and you’ve got a two year old or a one year old, it’s really hard to say you’re not going to make any money in November, December, January. It’s a tricky business. It depends on the economy and when and if things are happening. They got married, they’ve got kids, and a mortgage. People in this business aren’t just solo individuals with no families.

Freelancers often talked about the arbitrariness of getting or not getting work. Sometimes, while at work, their phones would ring and they would get offers to work that same day, from the same company that they were already working for. Others would talk about not getting phone calls for long periods of time and having to call in and request work. Steve, 25, describes his experience and understanding of freelance work in the industry:

I live on freelance. It’s the whole Feast or Famine where you’re extremely busy like working double twelve hour shifts for a month straight or it’s just totally dead. I don’t want to be a roadie, this is just for the money. We’re wage slaves. You don’t realize until you don’t have enough money. Then you know. You say to yourself, ‘gee, I need to work
a lot more’. For four months it was dead. I had to find work somewhere else, whatever pays the bills. I did driving, contractor stuff, painting, moving, some shop work. I made a lot of money this summer, probably paid three thousand in taxes. I live comfortably. Got a few thousand saved. Don’t get me wrong, I’ve had a lot of rice dinners. I don’t spend a lot. It’s enough to survive for six months without working. I need all the money I can get by December 1st. I need to be three months ahead to save money for January, February and March. It’s not that I want to hibernate and not work in the winter, it’s just the way it is.

The feast aspect of work that Steve describes is not a positive experience. The work days can be extremely long and while the money may seem substantial at the time, workers must consider that they will not know when they will work next and if they will have enough money moving forward in the immediate future and during the periods when work begins to slow across the industry. Others, who are less reliant on binge working and are well established, can opt out of some "gigs" and refuse work knowing that they will be able to make enough money throughout the year.

Working through the night and at various locations around the city was a common occurrence during my fieldwork. Sleepless nights are not unheard of. Neither is working for more than twenty-four hours. I personally worked for twenty-four hours or more on several occasions. In each instance, I was willing to do so and was motivated by the added hours and overtime, not only because of my commitment to conduct fieldwork. On several occasions during my fieldwork, I worked consecutive days where I would get very little sleep, sometimes less than three hours of sleep a night for several days. Occasionally, I would not be able to go home between shifts. During one such period, after working several long days in a row, I found myself becoming irritable and easily stressed. During my interview with Larry, I asked him about his own experience with being exhausted and losing sleep:

Since I was 21-22, I sleep 4 hours and I wake up. But, that’s not normal for most people I don’t think. And I would feel fine. Like, sometimes if I get an hour or two before a gig and I may work late or something and it’s almost like a power nap or something. And, ah,
I’ll be refreshed, you know. It’s like a siesta in a sense. But, um, you know, I guess when my body’s really tired that’s when I’m passed out on the couch, or you know eating dinner and put my head down on the table. It’s just the way I’m programmed. What can I say, you know, I’ve been doing this, working, working, working a second job and getting little sleep and getting up, and I’ve been doing this since I was like, you know, early twenties.

I don’t know. I won’t say I’m stressed, I kind of do that to myself, where I should get in bed at a certain time, even if I don’t feel tired, you know and just go lay down and maybe if I’m lucky, I would fall asleep because sometimes, I will go lay down in bed at an early time and I don’t fall asleep, I just toss and turn. I might have been a little tired. It’s not, it wouldn’t be a surprise, I am little tired a lot of times, because I don’t sleep much and I do it to myself because I stay up late, and I know I have a gig.

Like tomorrow, I’ve got a 6am gig. You know, I get up an hour before, to prepare, get all my gear, and so, 6(am) start time, by 5 o’clock I should be up. I should be out of my house by 5:30 (am), cause you now it’s not that far. You know, it wouldn’t surprise me, you know, 3:30 (am) comes and I’m still kind of awake. Because you know, I’ll do that call and I’ve got the afternoon to come back and doze off, but I actually have plans for tomorrow evening.

People sometimes go days and weeks with little to no work in what are typically busy periods. This was true for some of the more experienced individuals, not just new entrants. Periods of “famine” typically begin in the winter months, however, in some instances they can occur during the summer and fall months. Not all freelance workers must spend as much energy and time finding work. Some individuals have said to me that they have worked for several weeks without any days off and at times they are booked for events weeks and months ahead of time. For some, this is the case. Others are not as fortunate and to find such consistency they might be required to manage working for several companies or more. 27 year old Raymond summarized his experience for me:

I was working weeks where I had 18 hours shifts and then nothing, and I call or speak to the office and I don’t here from there at all and eventually I’ll get a random shift or he’ll call out of nowhere and ask me to come on a random Saturday, and then three weeks will go by, and I’ll call and say I’m available you got anything? He says I got a call for you. It’s at midnight, and its outside. It sucks, but I’ll do it.

Mark, who is relatively new to the industry, explained to me his experiences:
It’s definitely hard. You have to commit yourself to doing it. It’s stressful knowing that you need to make money and then there are days that you’re not doing anything, like today. The days you don’t work, you can’t really think about them as days that are days, you’re thinking about them as days that you’re not working. But other times, we just fucking chill and we still get by, but other people are working nine to five for shit money in some shit job, so… it’s like, because you need the money, that’s the reality of the work. Like the festivals, it just needs to be done and who the hell is going to do it. There are definitely some weeks when I’m like oh, why don’t I have any work, this week. I remember when I called in last week, and said I have all this time, what do you have for me? They had five nights of all night shifts. I hung up the phone and said, damn why did I do that?

Even the most senior and successful of freelancers have their ups and downs throughout the year.

Reed, a veteran freelancer with over 4 decades of experience including management and technical expertise, experiences down times in the fall and winter months. He discussed his experience with the ups and downs of the industry:

I’ve been around it a long time. People recommend me and I become part of the productions. I spend time getting things going. The problem is, is that these things are one-offs. I have clients that eat up six or seven months of my year. I find people that I bring onboard. Sometimes I can’t take on jobs because I’m already booked. I’m maxed in the summer time. This summer, spring actually, up until now, I’ve had maybe a dozen days off. I did a few shows this summer. I’m going to try and find something for the winter. It’s very thin this season. It’s the same for everyone. Everyone’s got the same sort of problem, it all sort of stops right about now.

There’s not much going on for the fall and the winter. It’s like that for everything, not just concerts and outdoor stuff. The last couple of years have been sort of, every year is different in terms of when the work happens. Last winter was very slow. November, December January I made next to nothing. It’s looking like this winter is going to be slow too. Oh well, keep well and recoup. A lot of them, ya, for a lot of people who are doing the physical labour of things, the winter is a slow time period. Everybody will work the big events during that time, but there might not be much going on until March.

Nicole, 24, graduated from college two years ago and has been working on and off in the production industry. She explained her perspective on freelance work and her view on personal freedom and agency to me as follows:

You know, it’s more of a life philosophy the reason that I’m in this industry rather than I like the work or I like the people. I do like the work and I do like the people, but I had to learn that. It’s more I get to choose when I work, I get to choose what I do, I get to say yes or no, and I’m always in demand. I’ve worked for dozens of different companies,
theatres, tours, productions; each production is its own sort of thing, staffing companies, freelance work, all freelance. Lots of companies, but there are lots companies. That the thing, that there are lots of companies. That’s why Toronto is the place to do it.

While there are many companies to work for, there are few opportunities for meaningful fulltime employment. Nicole, who in the first of two interviews told me that she was able to find stable employment in the industry, would eventually discuss the challenges of finding enough work as the shift from feast-to-famine began. She shared with me that she was applying for various part-time jobs outside of the industry to supplement her income.

Even for those who are able to find lots of work during the “feast” periods, there are down times that pose significant challenges. For Nicole, who early on found it relatively easy to get work, began to notice a sharp decline in her working hours. In the follow up interview she gave me an update and described her understanding of what freelancing means to her:

The last few weeks, I haven’t really worked that much. To tell you the truth, Umm, I’ve had to call in three or four times to pick up a shift here and there. But it is starting to be the slow season. So, I’ve been searching for a part-time job. Either at a bar or, I applied to a couple of other things.

But, I mean work is... when it comes right down to it, work isn’t what I revolve my life around. So, even when there isn’t that much work I don’t revolve my life around money, I don’t revolve my life around work, that’s why I like this job specifically. Because I don’t have to revolve my life around it. I can choose to do what I want. I can choose that, if you know, that I decide that I want to take three months off, I can do that and no one can hold me accountable for anything, no one can tell me they’re going to fire me. It’s not like I’m going to be without work when I come back. I like the freedom to be able to choose that.

Having an unstable job in an unstable time isn’t giving you an expectation, you’re not giving yourself, you’re not fooling yourself into believing you’re going to be okay, you’re not fooling yourself into believing you’re going to have this much money, or going to have a pension, by the time you’re done working you’re going to have this much set aside...you’re going to be able to live the rest of your life Scott-free. No one is fooling themselves into thinking that anymore.

Unfortunately she might be absolutely correct about people accepting personal and financial instability. Nicole, like many others, has been able to learn quickly and network with many
people in the industry and yet she continues to face the uncertainty and risks of precarious work. Employees who find themselves lower on the totem pole or strata may find themselves making compromises, such as accepting work in less than ideal conditions, including labour intensive work that can be far removed from what they are qualified to do and have been trained for. They may also have to tolerate sporadic start times and locations. Although this keeps things unique, it is an added complication which can cause various personal, financial and health problems. It often results in fatigue, stress and strain on personal relationships.

For those who labour to make an income, there are many challenges. People experience a significant drop in work as the fall and winter months begin. Companies that had previously been busy with work start to have their own slowdowns. Festivals and other events in the city, as well as corporate and holiday events became all the more important for workers who were previously able to work consistently during the warmer months of the year. Getting opportunities to work requires that one has experience and maintains connections. This is why networking is recognized as a key aspect of establishing and maintaining one’s employability. Networking and job-seeking are part of the process, along with gaining practical work experience and training.

**Learning To Freelance: Networking, Training and “Making it Happen”**

Though individuals are constrained by external conditions beyond their immediate influence, relations between individuals and between companies and networks of social ties and connections have been shown to help facilitate access to work (Stack 1974; Sullivan 1989; Uzi 1996; 1997). Networking and job-seeking are part of the process of maintaining one’s employability and being employed. The significance of developing a reputation and one’s networks becomes increasingly important as the opportunities for work diminish throughout the year in what is commonly referred to as the “Feast-or-Famine” cycle, which is characteristic of
work in the arts (Christopherson 2008). Workers utilize various strategies to solidify networks and showcase their employability. Conversations can often be opportunities for freelancers to secure future employment. Face-to-face and other forms of personal networking are one level or strata within the assemblage. In the production industry, these take place on the phone, in the office when one is picking up a cheque or inquiring about work, and most certainly at the job site. The ability of companies to determine the type of work relationship that occurs with employees, also perpetuates the way new entrants are inducted into the industry and has a disciplining effect. These aspects of work in the industry are part of what give it its character.

One of the strategies that workers use is to talk with each other and inquire about recent jobs and about upcoming work in order to find out which companies might be looking for workers. Having knowledge about specific trends and which companies do particular events help experienced workers to schedule their time by knowing which people and companies to contact about upcoming work. As Reed explains:

It’s a very word-of-mouth business. The vast majority of jobs I’ve ever got are from word-of-mouth, some guy phoning me up and going, “Hi, I was talking to Bob, two weeks ago and he said you did this for him. Can we talk?” 90% of the business I’ve done in life is done this way. It’s about networking and having a good enough reputation, so when a job comes up and they can’t do it, they recommend you. And to do that, you need to be known as competent in the business and not a pain in the ass to deal with.

Networking is a key aspect of the industry and in some regards one can argue that the industry operates by reproducing networks. It was said to me on many occasions that, who you know can matter more than what you know. Some people explained to me that it is often the individual who must take responsibility for themselves and learn not to rely on others. Yet, the resourcefulness of any individual in this industry must be enacted via relations with others. This is especially important, as Albert explains, for those who have yet to establish a reputation and a network of contacts:
Like if you’re actively looking for work as a freelancer you have to first of all make sure that you’re doing a good job. Reputation is obviously key. You have to keep a good reputation. You have to keep your name fresh in the minds of the people doing the bookings you know? I find that a lot of smaller companies kind of take it to heart when guys that they lean on the most are not available sometimes.

Networking and social relations are key aspects of the production industry. Nicole emphasizes the benefits of working as a freelancer and her approach to networking:

It’s about work ethic and being personable, being able to talk to people about things, being able to let people know that I’m a nice person. If I go around and I talk to people, then they remember me. I get opportunities. I could go anywhere, I could do anything. I talk to the right people when I’m on gigs. I talk to the people who look like they are approachable, and a lot of times the people are in charge of something important, and then the important person knows my name. Because I want to approach the person who looks like there in charge so I know what’s going on.

The more people meet you on every gig you go to, it’s not so much that you get more work because, If you get more work because you said yes, it’s because you go to the gig, and all those people that you didn’t know the names of, know your name now. And then the next time it’s more people that are like, “oh this person’s cool, this is a person we want to work with next time”. And then the next gig you go out to you meet more people, because there are so many people, but there’s so not that many people, you know what I mean?

I asked Morgan about how people went about getting work and tried to determine what differentiated the people who worked consistently from those who did not:

HS: There is a variety of jobs, there is also a hierarchy of positions based on technical knowhow and experience. What effects people’s ability in those feast periods to sustain ongoing employment?

Morgan: Absolutely, there are ways of achieving consistency in the industry. Whether you decide to take on a fulltime position with one company where you’ve established enough of a reputation with that particular firm, where they want to keep you there and have your time, specifically designated to them. And the flip side to that, is if you’re a well networked freelance individual who has been able to show his value to a variety of companies, than your famine time starts to go down a lot, more so than your, you know, than your average person. Then, again, with any freelance business, it’s all about networking and who you know and showing that you are competent and trustworthy and a good person to have on the team on all points of time so that you’re not going without.
I tried to understand why so many people were experiencing precariousness on a regular basis and why stability and consistency seemed to always be out of reach, even for the more established workers I interviewed. When I asked Morgan, the owner of a company, about the difference between those who make it in the industry and those who do not, this was his reply:

Because maybe the drive isn’t there, maybe the communication isn’t there, maybe the organization skill isn’t there, or maybe a variety of things. Right, so, it’s again, all about what’s in us as human beings and what we possess within our own self to make it happen. Especially in a freelance sort of environment, and with networking, any career, especially this one, it’s about who you know. You know what I mean? That’s a huge advantage people could have in their favor, that’s how I started my career,

Morgan explains the role of individual agency, or as he puts it, the ability to, “make it happen” and the truism that, “it’s all about who you know”.

Reed told me about how he got started as a freelancer and described to me how freelancing works in this industry. He was very clear and direct in articulating the processes involved in gaining experience and how freelancers can maximize their potential. His insights are included below. He provides a coherent description of how freelancers can improve their career prospects. I have taken the liberty, as I have throughout this chapter, to combine and condense what he has been said and in this case, I have also removed myself from the dialogue.

Reed outlines a very pragmatic view of how to make a career as a freelancer:

I got sucked into lighting in a high school play when I was fifteen. They made us all do something. Everybody had to be an actor or something, I became a lighting technician. They showed me how to use the lighting systems. I ended up improving the set up at the high school and got really interested in doing that. I always just did that kind of work on the side. I went to University, and when I went there, I did it on the side there. When I decided to make a living, well, there was this stuff I was already doing. I just kept doing it.

Young guys who ask to be shown how to do things are the ones that go from loading trucks to setting up the lights, to running the console, to having a freelance career where, I’m not just a labourer any more, I’m a lighting designer, or a board operator instead of a truck loader.
The very best of the guys who get involved on these will take the opportunity to get on stuff and they will take the opportunity to ask as many questions as they can possibly ask of the people who are in charge. They will ask why things are done a certain way or how things work, who to make things function.

You need to work at that. You need to learn what you’re doing well so that you have the expertise first and there are people out there, who people will reluctantly hire because they know what they are doing but god they are a pain in the ass to work with. They are a small minority of people who have an attitude, and they get hired usually because they have a speciality. If you’re a pain in the ass and you’re a guy who loads trucks, you’re not going to get hired. Or, if you’re lazy, or keep disappearing for an hour to have a cigarette or that kind of stuff. People are going to notice.

Depending on the individual, you rise to your level of competence. There are guys who try to become directors and designers, as much as they want to be one, the personality, the skill set, they haven’t learned how to organize people and use their time, they try to get organized, and it just doesn’t work. They decide to focus on their skill and where they belong.

Not everyone can do it all. You sort of rise to what your personality, skillset and experience will allow you to do. There are guys who are never going to do anything else but unloading trucks. I’m sorry, but they’re just not that smart and they are just not that motivated. It’s not a derogatory observation about them. I don’t have a problem with people who don’t have that intellectual capability, but it means they’re going to unload trucks. They are not ever going to learn how to run a console because they just can’t understand that part. And you could say the same thing about guys who run consoles, but they can’t manage a crew to save their life. They’re too soft, their focus is much more on the gear rather than on the people. So again, it depends on your personality and your skillset.

Part of it is going to be determined by the business, because you get hired to do the things people know you can do and you won’t get hired to do things you’re unsure about. And, partly it’s up to you to find a way to get the experience, to ask the questions, to try and put yourself in the position, where you can do more than loading trucks and follow people around and learn. You can talk your way into things like that.

The common understanding among those I interviewed was that individuals have choices to make and a personal responsibility to gain experience and find work. How then can we find a way to reconcile the discourse concerning individual agency with the systemic constraints that workers face? The feast-or-famine cyclical pattern presents one serious risk for workers. The lack of control over work schedules and pay rates is another concern. Combined with being marginalized and dependent on others to find work, it seems reasonable to accept that workers
have little power to influence broader trends within the industry. What possibilities might exist for workers if they were to engage in collective action that places more influence, choice and control over their work in their hands?

**Conflating Freelance with Casual Labour**

I found it odd to hear from informant after informant that they considered themselves self-employed and entrepreneurs, when in many instances, the work relationship resembles an employer-employee arrangement. The production worker who considers himself or herself to be self-employed and in some cases an entrepreneur distorts the material and social relation that exists between the production firm and the individual who works for the firm. Smith has shown that the working class utilizes different tactics than white collar middle class workers to gain employment and make advancements in their careers. What is similar though is that in the current economy, few can avoid the “entrepreneurial, self-starting rhetoric about employability” (Smith 2010, 281). Those who use their bodies to manufacture a production are being employed as wage labourers. The discourse about flexibility, control, variety, novelty, and the rewarding experience of creative work reflects an idealized imagery that is more free and liberated than their fellow workers in other arenas of the economy who are viewed as being shackled into repetitive and stagnating jobs that provide little or no stimulus, prestige, or benefits other than a stable and predictable income. Production work offers an alternative. As Mark told me:

> I mean it’s all legitimate work. And if you’re going to complain about it you shouldn’t be there. It all needs to be there. Somebody is paying you to do that for a reason. You have to think of yourself as a contractor no matter what. If you were a Plummer you can’t complain about how or who does the plumbing job. I don’t know, it’s just work in the end, if you’re going to complain about it. Like, I’m complaining about it, and actually be complaining. I complain about it but whatever, I still like doing it. It’s not for some people. It’s just work.
Identifying as a self-employed entrepreneur and small business as opposed to a worker normalizes the isolating self-reliance mentality that limits the possibilities for collective action that might begin to challenge the status quo of precarious work.

Non-standard employment practices are typical in the operations of most companies. The modus operandi of companies in the industry is to employ casual workers to labour building productions. Employing a fulltime salaried or waged work force can be costly and potentially less efficient than using short term casual workers employed through staffing agencies. This leads to disproportionate risks and challenges for the individual worker.

In some respects, the flexibility and variety experienced by production workers have elements of a utopian work arrangement, where one can take on multiple roles, develop experience, hone a craft, travel and take pride and joy in work. Morgan and his company have reached a level of success to the point where they are well known throughout the city and are part of major productions and events, in Toronto and beyond. I asked Morgan about what motivates him and how he has managed to remain successful.

I think at the end of the day, it goes back to saying “the show must go on” and I still keep my, I guess, at this point, I’ve gotten this far, I keep my finger in the pie a little bit on it. But I don’t over exert myself to chase it down. You know what I mean? I’ve gotten to the point where I, and I’ve been lucky enough and successful enough where things started to come to me, and I’ve got a business and management system where I really only have to oversee what’s actually going on with my own employees, and I don’t have to be entrenched in it every day to make sure it’s coming in and going out. And I’ve been able to liberate myself with a lot more freedom towards my personal life about it, in that sort of sense because I’ve got a management team that looks after what’s happening within the business itself. I would sum it up in one sentence, and that would be “good on ya”. I made something of it. Because this is the type of industry where you of only got one person you can rely on and that’s yourself and if you’re not going to be able to rely on yourself than you’re not going to be able to get too far.

HS: Something stands out to me, you said you have the freedom now. It seemed very significant, your eyes kind of lit up, a satisfying aspect to that.
Morgan: Well, Ya. Just because I’m not tied down to that, having to go to 11pm four hour load out calls on a Saturday night. And not load four trailers in the sideways rain on New Year’s Day.

Sometimes work also takes place outside in the sun, mud and rain, or in hotels at four in the morning. Accepting precarious work and doing a good job, with pride and professionalism, while being paid a relatively lower wage and receiving fewer if any benefits are the norm for freelancers.

A rewarding feature of production work is being part of a team that produces spectacular events. The work is often cooperative, and made up of project-based tasks that have little to no direct oversight from management. The relative autonomy on the job site and opportunities to develop rapport with others also enhances the experience of working on a production. During my field work I was employed to work as a stagehand on some of the largest events in the city and with major television and concert productions. The scale and impressive technical marvels were stunning achievements and I found it exciting to be a part of them. I crossed paths with television personalities and interacted with producers and stage managers on global tours. I met celebrities, government officials and rock stars. For many concerts, I was able to watch the event from the stage itself, either at the side or nearby off the stage or behind it. The satisfying aspects of the work, the relatively high wages, the ideal of worker centered flexibility, the social aspects and the experience of “being there” during the events all contribute people’s complicit acceptance of the precarious nature of production work. However, these only tell part of the story.

Another well connected and successful individual I interviewed, owns and operates a firm that specializes in a particular technology and has large contracts around the world. We discussed employment practices in the industry. He said to me, “there are those that cannot do anything else, they couldn’t, they couldn’t dream of it. This is all they ever wanted to do, and
then there is us, the people that take advantage of them. That is all there is to it.” He plainly states that owners and managers of companies are able to dictate the terms of work arrangements and benefit from casual employment. This advantage is also the result of being able to leverage workers’ desires and their complicity, as demonstrated through the discourses of flexibility, choice and control. These, along with the cyclical “feast-or-famine” patterns and the dominant practice of hiring workers as casual labour are complimentary components of the reproduction of precariousness.

**Summary of Analysis**

Learning to labour as a stagehand allowed me to become familiar with and document the challenging, as well as the rewarding aspects of careers in the live event and production industry and how production workers experience and discuss the dominant practice and discourse of freelance work. While my own account and that of my informants are partial, they do provide insight into the inner workings of the employment practices and discourses that reproduce precariousness. Through selections from interviews, and descriptions based on my fieldwork and participant observation, I show how individuals understand their position in the labour force and the ways they navigate the complexities of *freelance* employment.

There exists, from the vantage point of workers, a trade-off between stable employment that is less personally rewarding and what they refer to as freelance work, that is idealized and understood to be less alienating than typical work arrangements. Production workers experience varying degrees of alienation from the final products of their labour. This, however, is typically only true in that they are not always alienated from experiencing the final product. They are however, in most cases, alienated from capital. Freelance production workers’ distaste for and “rebellions” against standard fulltime waged labour prepares them for their engagement in the
feast-or-famine and cyclical nature of work in the live entertainment and production industry. Rebellion is here used in reference to Willis’s (1977) argument that working class students’ “rebellion” against school culture is part of their preparation for, and the reproduction of their status as working class. Through their rebellion, they paradoxically use their agency to prepare themselves for working class jobs and thus are partially responsible for the reproduction of the economic and class structure of modern capitalist society. Production workers resistance to fulltime waged and salaried labour, through their approval and pursuit of casual employment relations, perpetuates the risks and uncertainties that they face on a daily basis and prepares them for precarious work, vis-à-vis various forms of casual work arrangements.

There exists a standard prescription of individual responsibility for finding work and developing one’s employability. The ability to determine and control one’s work schedule is often cited as a defining feature and benefit of work in this industry. However, the feast-or-famine discourse shows how workers, as a direct result of casual employment practices, fundamentally lack control and choice, experience insecure work, have stagnating wages and few, if any, benefits. A sense of freedom and control over working life needs to be contrasted with what I have described as individuals’ actually existing agency, especially for marginalized and peripheral workers.

Transitory relations serve to benefit the employers by placing more control and ultimately more power over the labour process at their discretion. Rather than finding stable employment with a company, workers must constantly seek out work in order to reduce the time they spend being unemployed. The historically precarious nature of work in the production industry has contributed to the establishment of particular expectations for stagehands, with an emphasis on individuals’ will to work being emphasized.
If the discourses associated with freelance work, which I have traced throughout this chapter, continue to face limited resistance on the part of workers and changes to labour policy are not made, the likely result will be the continuation of the status quo and an increase of the risks associated with non-standard employment.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

The group of people that I worked with, studied, and have written about are not easily categorized as homogenous; however, the identification as freelance is shared by many of those who work in the industry. Freelance, as a cultural form, is part of a dialectic between an ideal existence and precarious employment. People pick up work when and where they can, when and where they need it, if they can. The positive aspects of being freelance often make a return to standard employment daunting and unattractive. With all the risks and stresses associated with freelance work, namely the uncertainty and taxing demands of the work schedule, the strain on personal lives, the economic instability, stagnating wages and the lack of benefits, those who stick around long enough to make a career for themselves in the industry develop a complex understanding and personal connection with their work.

In this thesis, I have explained how freelance production workers in Toronto are implicated in processes that reproduce precarious employment. These workers experience several of the common risks and challenges associated with precarious employment, in various ways and on a consistent, if not permanent basis. This includes unpredictable working schedules, minimal benefits, as well as high incidences of part-time and temporary work, all of which contribute to economic uncertainty, strains on family life, as well as physical and emotional stress.

I have shown how precarious employment in the live event and production industry is normalized. Individual agency is significantly constrained by structural, material and social conditions. Rather than challenging these constraints, workers typically place responsibility on themselves as individuals, rather than as a collective. Workers induction into the industry establishes precariousness as the status quo. Discourses function as ideological manifestations of
a hegemonic system of exploitation and influence the ways individuals rationalize the various constraints that shape their relationship with employers. Insights into the industry such as this, took time to develop. Had I been able to identify the themes that ultimately became part of this thesis earlier, I would have explored them in more detail. Moving forward, collective action and policy changes need to be established, along with new practices and discourses that can resist and challenge this system.

In chapter 2, I outlined how this thesis combines the use of ethnographic research methods with political economy, cultural production/structuration theory, and discourse analysis and assemblage theory in order to critically examine individual agency and material constraints. Deleuze’s theory of the society of control and Foucault’s theories of discipline were used to explain how workers are simultaneously constrained by an industry structured as a network of contingent relations and through practices and discourses that normalize particular relations and behaviours that discipline workers into accepting precariousness. With this in mind, individual agency and freedom must be understood as being constrained by the hegemony of companies that organize and direct the material and social relations, which inform and shape the discourses/ideology of being freelance.

Chapter 4 presented discourses that inform and shape workers’ induction into a culture of intensified experiences of non-standard employment. I have described how discourses and employment practices perpetuate these experiences. The chapter also outlined how individuals become complicit in the reproduction and normalization of precariousness. Workers are constrained by the dominant employment practices that perpetuate their status as casual labour. They are also disciplined into accepting that their oppression as precariously employed labourers is normal. However, rather than identify as workers, labourers or employees they see themselves
as self-employed freelancers. This misconception distorts their actually existing position as vulnerable workers. Thus, people who labour as production workers are disciplined and controlled by employment practices and dominant discourses. They idealize and romanticize their experiences and rationalize their continued exploitation by adopting discourses that misdirect attention away from the structure of the industry and place the focus and onus on themselves. It is under these conditions that we can say individuals exercise agency and control.

The structural arrangement of the industry, as an assemblage, is dominated by media companies, production companies, various corporations and a class of entrepreneurs who have made casual employment the standard form of employment. This results in limited opportunities for workers to challenge the dominant discourse of self-employment and freelance work. These discourses, even when they appear to originate from informants, are rationalizations and in many ways reflect a compromise that is made under the constraints of the hegemony of the production companies and those who are strategically situated in various nexuses and nodal points. Freelance labourers have been disciplined to accept various forms of flexible employment that legitimize and reproduce, both in practice and consciously, a standard acceptance of precariousness. This means that people’s consciousness and subjectivities are produced, or at the very least, are being influenced by these systems of discipline and control.

In addition to the physical demands of work, those who freelance or work as casual labour must navigate the complexities of having several employers throughout the year, periods of unemployment and the strain on one’s personal life due to the unpredictability of work hours. People that I interviewed highlighted various strategies that help them reduce the strain of uncertain employment that they face on an ongoing basis. They emphasize the importance of networking and building relationships as significant factors in determining one’s access to, and
the quality of employment. There exists the possibility for these networks and relationships to be used to cultivate a politically organized community of freelancers that can begin to challenge the hegemony of the dominant classes within the industry.

Limitations of this Study and Recommendations for Further Research

I set out to understand how work in this industry is organized. While I was able to experience some of this first hand and spoke to many people about it, there is such a diversity of companies and positions, that I was undoubtedly not able to fully capture it all. I would like to have been able to track several people, from different companies, over the course of a year or two, to analyze their experiences. Spending more time in the offices of various production companies and interviewing human resource personal would have added some more depth to the analysis regarding how people “get” work. Also, a comprehensive “study up” that explores the perspectives of owners and management of production companies, media firms, and other businesses involved in the industry would also help to round out the analysis.

More information regarding the economics of doing business in the industry would also be insightful. Detailed statistical data regarding employment in the arts is scarce. I was unable to find reliable data regarding employment levels, incomes, or company revenues. A statistical analysis of freelance and casual labour in the production industry, including incomes and types of work is nonexistent. A statistical analysis of the demographics, incomes, and employment levels of people in the industry might be insightful. Statistical analyses of incomes, days and hours worked, travel time, as well as analyses of health factors would help to illuminate the diversity of experiences and challenges of working in the industry.

In documenting discourses, I have tried to conceptualize and explain how working class individuals understand their status and freedom in the face of economic uncertainty and
Towards the end of my fieldwork, I noticed more and more people discussing their dissatisfaction with employment practices. Dissatisfaction with stagnating wages and insecurity did come up during my fieldwork, however, I would have liked to have explored these issues more specifically. Collective resistance to stagnating wages and how rates, if at all, are negotiated is of importance. From my understanding, most rates are predetermined by employers and there has been stagnation and in some cases a decline in wages throughout the industry.

Workers, rather than negotiate their rates are more likely to accept or refuse work based on their desire for work, their short and long term prospects, and their relationship with the company.

Further studies should also aim to include the perspectives of unionized workers, as well as solicit the advice and or participation of various unions in related industries. A collaborative research project should be designed with individuals from within the industry and be carried out. This may lead to political action and policy changes that work to the benefit of “freelance workers”. There is little evidence that collective action or organizing takes place within the community of freelancers in Toronto. Investigating possible routes towards establishing pension funds and other benefits might have a positive impact on freelancer’s quality of life.

Future studies should also include a representative and systematic analysis that concentrates on specific problems, challenges and risks associated with freelance and casual work. This can be done through the use of surveys, focus groups and interviews. Further studies of labour in this industry should be conducted in order to make precise recommendations. Though I gathered a number of anecdotes and some firsthand experiences, a survey would complement the narratives. Documenting the common concerns and challenges faced by workers should be used to inform those responsible for drafting labour policy and laws. Finding ways to alleviate these challenges should be teased out in future studies and they should be done in
partnership with unions, policy makers, freelance workers and also the companies that they work for. Establishing clear and relevant rights and protections for the precariously employed freelance workers should include ways of improving job security, training, establishing benefits and increasing wages. Regulation that is attuned to the needs of workers in this industry and the establishment of more respectful and equitable practices should be a priority of legislators, production companies, labour unions and the workers.

My contribution to Public Issues Anthropology has been to outline a way to combine and apply critical theories with empirical research and analysis in an accessible and practical way. This has been done with the aim that this ethnography and subsequent research may be extended to more formal critiques and activities in the future. Furthermore, I have started to plot out the ground that needs to be covered by Public Issues Anthropologists in order to make a contribution to understanding precarious work. There also exists the possibility of taking this research forward and mobilizing the information and knowledge that has been developed with various stakeholders, including workers who may seek to unionize as well as those who wish to lobby for regulation and policy reforms.
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