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Citation for final published version:

Kidd, Jenny 2018. Angela McRobbie, be creative [Book Review]. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 21 (6) , pp. 761-763. 10.1177/1367549416685719

Publishers page: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1367549416685719>

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Book review in *European Journal of Cultural Studies*

Angela McRobbie, 2016, *Be Creative*. Cambridge & MA: Polity Press, 2016. Paperback pp. 224; ISBN: 9780745661957 £16.99

By Jenny Kidd, School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, Cardiff University
kiddjc2@cardiff.ac.uk

I began reading *Be Creative* on the day following the UK ruling that Uber drivers were no longer to be classed as self-employed and consequently should be paid the national living wage. The ruling that those working in the so-called 'gig economy' should be entitled to more traditional forms of compensation was a landmark decision, opening the door to other similar cases. On reading *Be Creative*, the questions that the ruling was prompting for cultural critics, journalists and academics alike were crystallised in McRobbie's own assessments of the increased precariousness, insecurity and 'intensification' of labour in response to the 'overcharged rhythms of contemporary capitalism' (156). This is a text incredibly well-attuned to the ongoing casualization of work, especially as it translates within the 'creative economy', McRobbie's specified area of interest here.

Key themes one would expect to be covered in a book on the creative economy are here, including definitions, an overview of creative cities and the gentrification process, and insights into entrepreneurialism (including social entrepreneurialism). In addition there are considered accounts of inequality, gender, and a broader perspective on the European context. The book includes an introduction, conclusion and 6 chapters, some of which originated in previous publications; the first from 2002. As such, it is a thorough overview and mapping of the discourse and the policy terrain, and how they have developed over time. McRobbie is a masterful and authoritative guide and her early analyses show uncanny foresight. She is careful in her application of the discourse, proposing that the incessant use of buzzwords ('creativity', 'innovation' and the like) serves only to obfuscate; 'A whole new vocabulary was put in place [after the New Labour moment] and repeated so frequently it became a mantra of common-sense' (65). Her use of the term 'creatives' to describe workers in these sectors is not incidental, nodding to the fact that multi-skilling is replacing specialism. (27)

As I work through the chapters I begin to feel that I have been waiting for this book. That it might help to work through and articulate some of my own discomforts about being engaged in Higher Education pedagogy in this area; as myself a part of the 'teaching machine' (188). Each year I lead a module on The Creative Industries for undergraduate students approaching the end of their three years of study. It is strategically placed, of course, given their increased concern at

that stage with their employability. Like McRobbie I am excited and enthused by the students I meet, their ideas and ambitions, but I too am troubled by their lack of connection and concern with the uncertainty they may face if they decide on a career within those sectors. As McRobbie notes in reflection on her own Wednesday Masters level supervisions over time, 'What I observe... is something like a euphoria of imagined success, relatively untainted by a reality of impediments and obstacles in the creative labour market.' (4)

Within my own department, the creative economy strand of our pedagogy, certainly at undergraduate level, has sometimes sat uneasily within a mostly academic programme. McRobbie reflects on that tension noting that it is an 'unexpected outcome of cultural studies ... to have found itself canonized as a curriculum for the new creative economy' (9), especially problematic where it has been aligned with business studies also. McRobbie proposes that we can and should 'put the teaching machine to work in order to interrogate how its own critical thought is taken on board and turned into an instrument for economic growth and renewal' (9). This kind of 'reflexive cultural studies' I like the sound of (9).

McRobbie is concerned by recent developments in the creative labour market and what they tell us about the move away from mainstream employment and its protections; a 'de-proletarianization' that works in the interest of élites. Young middle-class people electing to 'bypass mainstream employment... in favour of the challenge and excitement of being a creative entrepreneur' at precisely the moment when there are fewer jobs around that offer secure employment results in a 'magic formula' (11) for neoliberalism. Labour reform becomes possible 'under the rubric of the encouragement to 'be creative'' (11). In sum, 'the new art of governmentality is doing its work of championing risk and innovation while otherwise letting go of the reins' (71). A part of this analysis includes an eloquent and impassioned response to Richard Florida's vision of the creative class; a critique that is as good as any I have read (46-7).

The question becomes one of how far we are prepared to allow the creative and cultural sector to itself become a gig economy, and moreover, one where dissenting voices are unwelcome. These include the voices of academics which, over time, have become occasional and by invitation, for 'What warrants the presence of those who are not 'good for business?'' (29). If one looks at the line up for high profile cultural and tech conferences and now 'un-conferences', especially those that frame themselves as future-oriented, the absence of academic voices from the arts and humanities is notable. In referencing 'single sourced income' academics McRobbie

only gives us part of the picture. We know that for many early career scholars especially, academia has also become a gig economy; the realities of portfolio careers, multi-tasking and uncertainty all too familiar. The casualization of academic labour has been the focus of ongoing union activity in the UK at least.

The book reads throughout as a call for those involved in – and teaching about – creative labour to effect a more radical voice.¹ This, as McRobbie points out, will not be easy given the fact that such voices tend to be excluded from the mainstream and have to seek alternative avenues (13). ‘Critical creativity’ (27) might be an enticing goal, but it is difficult to sell. I am reminded again of those 60-70 bright faces that annually look back at me whilst I recount the backdrop and bemoan the discourse as problematic and I can understand why their hearts and minds are not in critical mode. This is their habitus (Bourdieu 1984), and to actively place themselves outside of its emergent norms by imagining a ‘new radical voice’ (16) must to them seem an even more untenable precarity. Having read McRobbie’s book I am reminded that it is my ethical and social responsibility to nurture that critical capacity.

Bourdieu, P. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Massachussets; Harvard University Press, 1984.

¹ In the area I work closest to in my own research, the museums and galleries sector, I sense there may be some positive change here, at least when it comes to the capacity of those within the sector to make noise and perform their activism on these themes without being ‘privately managed’ (25) as McRobbie fears. These questions are tentatively being explored in public debates such as #MuseumWorkersSpeak and #MuseumWomen, and at sector-wide conferences. Whether they will be able to inform or lead real change within the sector of course remains to be seen.