

“Can a Writer Critique Uber?: The Gig Economy, Creative Labor, and Ben Lerner’s ‘The Polish Rider’”

Over the last decade, several companies have made use of technological innovation in order to create peer-to-peer services. This trend has also been dubbed the sharing economy, and the gig economy. Such services have repercussions for employment practices and how work is imagined in contemporary American culture. Examples include Uber and Lyft for car travel, and Airbnb for accommodation. These companies profit from connecting customers with workers. Sharing economy workers are not employed directly by the companies, but instead are designated as independent contractors. This new development is rooted in the changing management trends of the 1990’s, which aimed towards outsourcing and self-management. Thus, the gig economy is thus part of a longer history of labor management, rather than an abrupt tech-determined change. Furthermore, the rhetoric around services like Uber draws from discourse of the creative class (defined as the class of workers who are expected to innovate, rather than carry out repetitive tasks). Workers in this field are often freelancers, and almost always put in a position to self-motivate and manage their own projects and careers.

This chapter examines how contemporary American literature is reacting to the gig economy. Such examination is particularly warranted because writing has long been a paradigmatic activity of creative labor. In the rhetoric of the creative class, professional writers (as well as other artists) are presented as role models. This chapter will examine the question of writing and the gig economy through a focus on Ben Lerner, an American poet and novelist whose reputation has soared over the last number of years,

focusing especially his “The Polish Rider.” Contextualizing this short story within Lerner’s other textual productions, as well as with journalistic accounts of the gig economy, the chapter will show the relays between self-management, creativity, and recent development of technology enabled freelancing. “The Polish Rider” presents some apprehensiveness about peer-to-peer services, but also makes a more complex maneuver when depicting it. While critiquing Uber for a variety of reasons, Lerner also seems to accept its ascendancy and seizes it as an opportunity to valorize his own type of work – writing. He takes on the virtualization and networking of labor and its management as a way of positively reassessing literary work. Compared to the visual arts, which appear concrete, the result of actual, even physical, labor, writing seems virtual. However, with ascendancy of the gig economy and the creative class, writing is made to seem to be connected to how most people work. Writing appears to be therefore more relevant and powerful. The story therefore is one of the best examples of how writers interact with the new employment trends.