

An account of labor market inequality in the craft beer industry

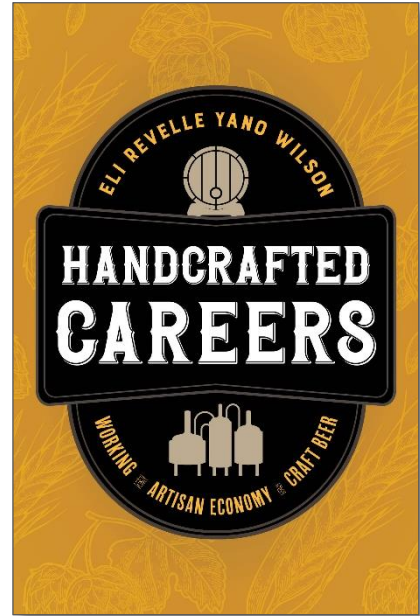
Book review by

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Handcrafted Careers by Eli Revelle Yano Wilson successfully describes the racialized, classed, and gendered dimensions of work in the craft beer industry. The book's research question might be stated as: How does systemic inequality in the labor market manifest in the artisanal craft beer industry?

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Wilson proposes that artisanal jobs in this new economy are much more idiosyncratic and entrepreneurial, and thus subject to more variation, than the expected patterns shaped by structures of race, class, and gender. While most research on artisanal markets suggests the opposite—that whiteness and gentrification shape access to these artisanal spaces—Wilson poses the possibility that maybe, in spite of this research, craft beer will be different. However, he finds that privilege exerts its influence here as well. “Bearded white guys” enjoy access to exhibit pure passion in the creative pathway, whereas women typically end up on the service path, and minority males are assigned hard labor roles, such as distribution and canning. And so: labor market inequality in the craft beer industry must be addressed in terms of race, class, and gender and acknowledge that micro-level inter-

actions reproduce an invisible system of power that shapes career choices.

While the book's efforts are well-meaning, its theoretical and methodological limitations could potentially hamper its impact with industry practitioners. The fault lies less with Wilson and more with sociology of inequality overall, which lacks consensus concerning how micro interactions—that, while being shaped by the symbolic interpretations of ascribed characteristics—aggregate into such durable stability for those same interpretations across the landscape of macro systems shared by humans. How *exactly* are interactions and narratives shaped by “race,” “class,” and “gender”? The implicit belief framing this sociology is that interactions between dominants and subordinates inadvertently reproduces the privileged meaning of whiteness, the undesirability of color, and the submissiveness of femininity for all people everywhere at the same time. How these dynamics linking micro interactions to macro systems might be conceptualized for observation is not known, but this belief continues animating such descriptive scholarship, largely because there is no end to articulating the downstream effects of macro systems on bodies atomized by its power.

Methodological limitations stemming from this undertheorized framework occur when Wilson imposes its implicit belief onto the observations. The methods section claims 128 interviews in the Los Angeles area. Yet it is their “micro-transactions”—meaning the job choices made relative to options available—that explains how the racialized, classed, and gendered dimensions of the space shaped their words. The 128 people interviewed are refracted through a narrow spectrum of interpretation, thus reducing the information their experiences might have offered. This also poses the question that if symbolic interactions are shaping the career trajectories of workers, why are there no observations of interaction? To be sure, we do find colorful descriptions of workplaces, but there is no deep dive into the experiential, symbolic texture of these spaces. Wilson defends this choice, saying, “...sociologists have long argued that people overestimate their own agency and underestimate the influence of social-structural forces” (p. 20). This stance

suggests that it is up to the sociologists to explain what these people really meant when they spoke their words. The “ethnographic” scaffolding design of this research does not really observe the relationships shaping the way individuals are interpellated by space, but instead matches categories of respondents (Black, white, male, female, etc.) to types of work: white guys are on this creative path; women are on this service path; minority males are on this hard labor path. There is no systematic analysis of experience or interaction within these designated spaces.

Instead of carefully privileging workers' voice, the implicit frame imposed on selected interview quotes drains the rich insights we might gain. This effectively robs workers of their agency, rendering mute the lessons they may teach us about the texture of their lived experiences in this emerging new form of entrepreneurial, community-focused capitalism. For example, we hear the words of (bearded white guy) Brandon, who appears to be answering the question: “Why am I here?” (p. 66). He goes on to describe how the pay “sucks,” and the work conditions are grueling, but the satisfaction of all the brewers working together—and then directly engaging with consumers enjoying the fruits of their labors—is intrinsically rewarding. Wilson analyzes this quote by explaining that Brandon is unaware that his access to “pure passion” as a career path results from his unacknowledged whiteness. Brandon's voice is replaced by the undertheorized, but appropriately signaled, interpretive lens. Brandon does not realize that his hard work and sacrifice come from the privilege granted by his access. Rather, individuals who took dramatic pay cuts, risked their futures, and spent countless hours learning the skills and knowledge needed to create a meaningful product from scratch for local consumption instead become another lesson in how white men reproduce the macro system of inequality.


What is it about craft beer that makes it a *desirable* employment destination for women and minorities? Wilson's respondents are trying to give us this information, but the author continually imposes categorical labels upon their experiences, finding domination they are not aware of. For example, in Chapter 3, we meet Maya and Shelia,

both servers in taprooms. They said that their jobs are intrinsically rewarding because they design menus to reflect their knowledge of the beer styles enjoyed in those locales, gain knowledge of the history and intricacies of beer flavors and feel like work is a constant party. Wilson explains that these women do not realize they accommodate a less rewarding service career since they are women—even though these intrinsically meaningful experiences are literally the words the respondents used to describe their work identities. Another example is Jorge, a 23-year-old Latino person with a high school education who loves his job on the hard labor path: “I’ll say it over and over again, this is the only place I feel like it’s a family” (p. 106). Minority workers with otherwise poor labor market prospects seem to enjoy working in these spaces. However, rather than seeing this as some endemically progressive energy within the craft beer industry, it is framed as reproducing the macro system’s hierarchy, where the “privileged white men ... pursuing their self-centered passion for brewing” (p. 105) dominate others.

The irony is that by abstracting the variables of “race,” “class,” and “gender” as separate causal phenomena detectable in the interviewees’ “micro-transactions,” Wilson does the opposite of what Patricia Hill Collins (1999) famously argues for in *Black Feminist Thought*. Rather than “intersecting” these variables nominally as categories, Collins calls for an epistemological shift *away* from the causal power of abstractions. She argues that what the matrix of domination *actually* is and how it functions is not yet observable by any epistemology in the social sciences—a point she reiterates in her review nearly 20 years later (Collins, 2015). Privileging the concrete, lived experiences of flesh operating against domination is needed—Black women are the logical point to *begin* seeking the subjugated knowledge necessary to fashion

this alternative epistemology, but are by no means the end. By allowing racialized, gendered, and classed categories to substantively frame the interpretation of interviews, Wilson implicitly attributes causality to these abstractions. These oppressive systems are reproduced implicitly by the interactions of people who do not know better.

An entirely different interpretation of these interviews is also possible: Craft beer could have been theorized as the vanguard of resistance against the industry’s corporate, state-backed power. Lessons on fighting the legal and monetary resources controlling market spaces—where “bearded white guys” *use* their privilege to create open, inclusive, communal environments that give people informal, collective spaces to express themselves—could have been learned. It would also have been interesting to hear from the woman of color who owned a brewery (mentioned by a respondent on page 69, but never addressed by the author) or examine how owners found ways to subvert, skate, or avoid the corporate power tactics that inhibit tap and shelf space in grocery stores and sports bars. Regrettably, the concrete struggle between scrappy, resourceful individuals fighting macro agents seeking to monopolize the production of beer for mass markets is rather invisible to the theoretical frame applied. The book will likely be lauded in sociology circles as another example of how inequality manifests at the micro level. Meanwhile, the people who advocate for craft beer entrepreneurship, seek to build inclusive urban micro economies, oppose corporate lobbyists, or work in craft beer spaces will likely struggle to apply this research. For sociology to be useful in these applied circles, fresh theoretical approaches linking “upstream” macro systems to many possible expressions of inequality in micro spaces are needed.



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