

Volume 3, Issue 1, 2019

Book Review

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To cite this article: Piercy, Gemma L. 2019. "Book Review". *The Ethnographic Edge* 3, (1): 63-65. <https://doi.org/10.15663/tee.v3i1.58>

To link to this volume <https://doi.org/10.15663/tee.v3i1>

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Book Review

Masters of craft: Old jobs in the new urban economy

Richard Ocejo. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2017 pp. 368; Ebook;
ISBN: 978-1-400-88486-5; Price US\$15.18

I first came across Richard Ocejo's engaging ethnographic writing when I was looking for articles focused on hospitality in the American Sociology Association journal *Contexts*. In his 2015 article *Bar fights on the Bowery*, he raised a number of important issues on the changes to urban landscapes through the trends of gentrification and destination consumption. His study of conflict between long-term residents of downtown New York and new businesses wanting to revive and rebuild the city landscape highlighted how changing consumption practices have important spatial implications for the less powerless. The research that informs the book *Masters of craft* grew out of this investigation.

Ocejo's deep and detailed ethnographic study of barbers, bartenders, butchers and whiskey distillers occurred over a number of years and sought to fill a gap in literature mentioned above by highlighting the role of workers. His insights were gained from the observations he made in his transition from customer to worker and then researcher in the craft cocktail context that began when he was still a PhD student. Ocejo replicated his participant observation of craft cocktail making by completing internships in the three other occupations. Ocejo's autoethnographic accounts are delightful and include embodied insights essential to understanding the craft context. These observations were also deepened by being a customer/observer. His observational work was given breadth through interviews with key industry stakeholders, colleagues and business owners.

Ocejo thematically analysed the findings from his interviews and fieldwork and used these themes to structure the book. A lengthy introductory chapter locates the work in a wider body of research, canvasses the range of topics investigated further and defines important concepts such as the 'cultural omnivore'. The middle of the book is split into two parts. In Part I, Ocejo draws the reader into the worlds of each occupation in an engaging and evocative style. These chapters also introduce the reader to the thematic findings from Ocejo's fieldwork in terms of the key ideas and contradictions. The occupations represent specific issues to different extents, so Ocejo matches issues to specific occupations. For example, Ocejo uses the cocktail bartenders in Chapter 1 to trace the occupation's shift from a working-class job to a role inhabited by cultural elite taste-makers. Distillery workers are used to discuss the cultural omnivore's desire for authenticity in Chapter 2, while in Chapter 3 barbers are used to discuss masculinities. Here, Ocejo grapples with the concepts of gender performance and masculinity and makes important and useful connections to the work of Raewyn Connell. Ocejo defines masculinity in relation to the notion of threats to illustrate how the occupational practices and the workplaces allow workers and customers to manage these threats to individual gender performance.

The cultural omnivore receives the most attention in Chapter 4, which is on boutique butcheries. Ocejo outlines the way in which the customers' pursuit of authenticity is also shaped by the businesses themselves. Workers, as well as owners, seek to change the behaviour of consumers, effectively creating demand for rather than responding to demand for their products and services. Business owners and the workers they hire engage in storytelling and relationship building to convince customers that their consumption identity matches the business location and the services/product they provide. The four case studies Ocejo presents are redolent in detail and provide a wealth of insights. Contradictions are



signalled and theoretical concepts discussed, mostly in footnotes so that the reader can focus on the stories if they so choose.

In Part II, Ocejó shifts from the occupational and exemplar emphasis of Part I and instead draws out the commonalities he notes across the occupations. In Chapter 5, Ocejó creates a potentially useful typology in order to classify ‘how and why’ individuals enter these occupations. The *how* of individuals entering into the work is classified as either: (1) drifting into the role, (2) changing careers, or (3) striving towards the occupation as a cultural seeker. The *why* of entering these occupations Ocejó characterises as the search for meaningful work, a common theme in literature discussing the occupational ambitions of ‘millennials’ or Gen Y. He also draws on Besen-Cassino’s research on cool ‘bad’ jobs to discuss the role of glamour, or ‘cool’ being a drawing card for middle-class workers to behave in what first might be seen as a contradictory pursuit of or drift into working-class jobs. In contrast to Willis’s *Learning to labour* (1977 cited in Ocejó) where group behaviour censors outliers into class-based taste compliance, Ocejó highlights that these workers often move into these occupations in the face of family opposition. What concerned me, however, in his explanation of middle-class workers’ colonising these occupations, was that he only noted, rather than analysed, that the entrance of different workers would displace working class individuals who traditionally took on these roles. I would have liked a little more discussion on the implications of this shift for the individuals categorised as the working class.

Chapter 6 focuses on the conscious and refined focus these workers have in relation to the technical skills, cultural repertoires and specific aesthetic that illuminates how these four occupations fit the notion of ‘craft’. This chapter highlights how the storytelling of the occupations intersects with broader consumption trends in ways that are compatible as well as contradictory. Here in Chapter 6, and in the occupational stories from Part I, the theme of education and teaching comes through very strongly. In Chapter 7, this process is unpacked as an occupational practice using the concept of windows. These are opportunities that workers may utilise to teach customers about the occupation, the product they are providing and the brand or cultural story of their work context. This is where the strength of Ocejó’s multi-sited ethnography comes to the fore, as not all worksites are the same and so the cultural repertoire that the workers need to embody has firm and site-specific aspects.

The stories that had the biggest impact on me from this chapter were the conflicts that arose from broader consumption story-telling. Ocejó’s observations on the conversational windows between worker and consumer illustrate how the workers’ technical skills are showcased and customers are brought into the workers’ communities of practice. However, this process is not always a smooth one and may not happen at all. For example, customers would walk out of Dickson’s Butchery because their products were not all ‘organic’. These customers were not open to stories of authenticity that come from relationship building; instead they relied on markers provided by distinct labels to make choices.

The final chapter in Part II brings together the themes of the previous two chapters by detailing how there is a right and wrong way to doing things in these four occupations. These elite workers need to embody very specific cultural repertoires. Here in Chapter 8, through the idea of *getting the job*—shifting from the periphery of the occupational community or business context to the core as an elite employee—that the exclusion of some workers becomes obvious. Ocejó takes us through a couple of examples. One was a distillery intern who could talk the talk but did not walk the walk and as a result missed out on opportunities to create business connections. Another was chop shop barbers who struggled to make the transition from speedy ‘short back and sides’ cuts to the longer ‘experience-based’ haircuts of the ‘craft’ barbershop. However, it is Ocejó’s evocative portrayal of Aldo, a highly skilled butcher, that most starkly depicts the reality of how workers who do not understand the cultural repertoires get excluded when Ocejó discusses how Aldo was fired. The protest masculine identity Aldo embodied did not translate into customers’ and owners’ expectations of the polite servitude required for customer service in the craft context (Messerschmidt and Messner 2018).

In the epilogue, Ocejó resolves Aldo’s story, sharing how he was re-hired by the craft butchery. Ocejó explains that working in other butcheries, which embodied different aspects and degrees of the elite, authentic, craft aesthetic, helped Aldo acquire the cultural repertoire he had previously ignored. Significantly, Ocejó now makes clear what was previously implied—that opportunities do not exist for

other workers who work in the same occupation in businesses that are not part of the elite craft contexts showcased in the book. His argument reinforced the observations from the stories in Part I and II that the practices in these craft contexts also reproduce structural inequality along class, ethnic and gender lines. However, Ocejo's pattern of *noting* inequality rather than *discussing* it in more depth is a troubling quality of this book.

Ocejo's positionality is discussed in the methodology section that ends the book, where he describes the layers of privilege that enabled him to negotiate the different sites of research with success. He also acknowledges the biases that could have occurred due to his acceptance into the different communities of practice that characterise these occupations. Regardless, the lack of criticality in Parts I and II feels like a glaring omission. Although such is my engagement with the book, I do sympathise that this decision was perhaps prompted by the desire to only represent the field rather than interpret. However, Ocejo does not make it clear why he chose not to discuss the ways that the cultural repertoire these workers need to acquire and embody reproduces inequality explicitly.

One of the starkest examples of the reproduction of inequality is the way in which the four different work performances included actions that privileges some workers and silences others (workers and customers), particularly through banter. Ocejo highlights how the use of banter effectively silences the women who work within these occupations. Ocejo makes clear that it is not that women are unwelcome. Women's names feature in all four case studies and Ocejo notes that his main barbershop fieldwork site of Freemans has employed more women over time. However, by defining masculinity as a gender performance focused on the resolution of threats, Ocejo limited the capacity to engage critically with masculinity in terms of gender relations. The different forms of masculinity embodied by these masters of craft could provide opportunities for positive forms of masculinity that seek to address the inequalities within gender relations, which is hinted at by Ocejo (Messerschmidt and Messner 2018). Instead, what is made apparent when gender relations are considered, is that to become a master of craft as a woman, one has to be prepared to be silenced, and as an ethnic minority, one needs to put any protest masculinities to one side or risk being fired.

Despite my misgivings, I think this book is making a very important contribution to understanding the changing nature of work in urban knowledge economy settings and to the concepts of masculinity. I also think that Ocejo's research provides useful in-depth empirical insights on different forms of occupationally based gender performances. Furthermore, because the book is deliberately written in a style accessible to Ocejo's research participants and industry stakeholders, it is very engaging. Based on Ocejo's extensive literature base and important empirical insights, I recommend this text for academics who study urban landscapes, and/or organisations and the actors within those contexts. More importantly though, I recommend Ocejo's book for students studying contemporary life. This is a world that traditional middle class university students know well, as workers, customers and budding cultural omnivores. In my experience, students are far more likely to engage with sociological texts written by researchers, like Ocejo, who seek to understand everyday life and experience by creating a basis for resonance.

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