



WCSA 2024 Awards Press Release

May 28, 2024

Working-Class Studies Association 2024 Awards for Work Produced in 2022 and 2023

The Working-Class Studies Association regularly [issues a set of awards](#) to commend the best new work in the field of Working-Class Studies.

The results are in for the 2024 Awards for significant contributions to Working-Class Studies in the previous two years of 2022 and 2023. The 2024 Awards contest, like WCSA's 2022 Awards, was a biennial event and included many submissions. We are thrilled to announce these outstanding works.

The winners for WCSA's Tillie Olsen, CLR James, Ryan and Sackrey, Russo and Linkon, Studs Terkel, and Constance Coiner Awards are listed below along with comments from the judges.

These new books, dissertations, articles, and essays illustrate the ongoing growth and relevance of Working-Class Studies across disciplines and toward diverse audiences.

Please join us in celebrating them and may they provoke further critical and creative production.

Tillie Olsen Award for Creative Writing

Winner:

Nicole Chung. [*A Living Remedy*](#). Harper Collins, 2023.

Judges' Comments:

A moving, brutally honest memoir of an adoptee's parents' lives cut short by lack of access to healthcare. Fine dialogue and scenes, and insightful reflection. Also a story of an adopted Korean girl growing up in a white working-class community.

The searing narrative simultaneously tells the narrator's own upward-mobility story, while presenting a portrait of the damage done to her adoptive family caused by the U.S.'s entirely inadequate healthcare coverage system. She also explores her experiences as an Asian American adopted by a white family and growing up in an almost entirely white community.

An important story about a devastating breakdown of social infrastructure in our country that deeply affects the working class.

CLR James Award for Published Book for Academic or General Audiences

Two Winners (tie):

Elena Shih. *Manufacturing Freedom: Sex Work, Anti-trafficking Rehab, and the Racial Wages of Rescue.* U of California P, 2023.

Mike Amezcua. *Making Mexican Chicago: From Post-war Settlement to the Age of Gentrification.* U of Chicago P, 2022.

Judges' Comments:

Elena Shih, *Manufacturing Freedom.*

Shih's work examines the attempts of Western Christian groups to "rehabilitate" working women they claim are victims of sex trafficking in Thailand and China through teaching the women to manufacture jewelry. Relying on extensive ethnographic research at factories where the manufacturing took place, Shih found that the assumptions promoted about these women were not true. She never interviewed a woman who appeared to have been trafficked; instead, these were poor women who were not trafficked, but rather chose sex work when there was a paucity of alternatives. Similarly, the jewelry manufacturing that was supposedly "rescuing" them did not lead to useful training, but instead led to another form of labor abuse, although the "trafficking" label provided a profitable marketing device for the groups involved. Shih's book "exposes how the market-based anti-trafficking movement has reinforced American empire and global white supremacy—via humanitarian intervention, ethical consumption, social justice activism, and first-world middle class feminism."

Mike Amezcua, *Making Mexican Chicago.*

Amezcua provides a detailed historical account of Mexican workers' immigration and settlement in Chicago, offering insight into the ways current anti-Mexican racism has a

long precedent in the practices of twentieth century America. He points out how the working-class Mexican American community often was used as a buffer between white and black neighborhoods in a Chicago experiencing white flight and racial tension that was more than a white versus black issue. He also explores how Mexican American politics in the city evolved from a politics of accommodation with City Hall to militant activism. Amezcua discusses the gentrification of working-class Mexican communities in an American context where white ethnic nationalism has become mainstream.

Ryan and Sackrey Award for Best Book by Writer(s) of Working-Class Origins or that Speaks to Issues of the Working-Class Academic Experience

Winner:

Iona Burnell Reilly, editor, *The Lives of Working Class Academics: Getting Ideas Above Your Station*, Emerald, 2022.

Judges' Comments:

The edited volume by Reilly, *The Lives of Working Class Academics*, represents the strongest articulation, among the works entered for consideration, of ways in which working class identity serves to shape, frame and inform the lives of academics in the contemporary academy. The interplay of race, gender and power illustrates the complexities of scholarship and belonging in higher education. This work contributes powerful autoethnographic testimony to challenges and triumphs of working-class scholars and educators as they navigate historically difficult terrain.

This edited edition, by Iona Burnell Reilly, speaks directly to the personal and professional experiences of working-class academics. The fourteen contributing authors, who all identify as having working-class origins, provide powerful stories of their fascinating and complicated journeys to, and experiences in, higher education. Utilizing an autoethnographic approach, these authors offer a critical reflection and examination of what it means to be a working-class academic. Drawing inspiration from Ryan and Sackrey's work, and having undergone her own journey into higher education, Dr. Burnell Reilly does a fabulous job of putting together an outstanding collection of stories that I feel many working-class academics, like myself, can identify with and be inspired by. I highly recommend this book to other working-class academics, working-class students who aspire to become higher education professionals, those individuals in higher education who focus on DEI+ work, and anyone else who genuinely wants to see a professorate and student body which is more representative of the general population.

This important and well-rounded book speaks fearlessly to the lives of academics from working class backgrounds in the UK. Like Sackrey and Ryan's book, it illuminates the often-invisible struggles and special triumphs of working-class people moving into or living within a middle-class life: that of an Academic. It covers a wide range of types of working-class backgrounds, illustrating the variety of experiences that can issue from combining working class childhoods with other factors, like ethnicity. Something this book does that some other books of this type may not do, is to speak to both personal experience and structural inequalities, both individual and collective problems and solutions (from a mostly Marxist perspective). It seamlessly weaves together not only personal experience and political philosophy, but it also integrates ethnicity, race and gender as well. Just as these qualities are blended together in a variety of ways in life, in these accounts there is no artificial separation of these different categories, but they work, and are covered, together, all at once. It also emphasizes the living, changing qualities of these categories, of intersectionality, and the living, fighting, dynamic relationships between the classes themselves. *Lives* not only employs autoethnography, but it also interrogates and analyses the form itself, placing value on lived experience as a source of knowledge. Finally, the stories themselves are often deeply moving and highly instructive, illustrating the myriad invisible hurdles working class academics face, how they deal with these hurdles and how some eventually find a kind of peace within and

preference for a “border-land” life. Living on class borders may be difficult and confusing at times, but it affords an extraordinary view.

Russo & Linkon Award for Published Article or Essay for Academic or General Audiences

Two Winners (tie):

Nancy Caronia, “Refusing the Sentimental Italian Immigration Story in Denise Giardina’s *Storming Heaven*,” *Journal of Working-Class Studies*, December 2023.

Giorgos Gouzoulis, “What Do Indebted Employees Do? Financialisation and the Decline of Industrial Action,” *Industrial Relations Journal*, 2 January 2023.

Judges’ Comments:

Nancy Caronia’s “Refusing the Sentimental Italian Immigration Story in Denise Giardina’s *Storming Heaven*” does an excellent job of illuminating the (relatively) neglected story of isolated, rural immigrants, and the generational trauma that came of female immigrants cut off from nurturing communities. Caronia convincingly relates that the immigrant saga (both in fiction and in historical/sociological studies) too often tells of a triumphalist saga of assimilation and making it; the narrative often focuses, too, on male immigrants, without considering the oppression both from within the immigrant community and from capitalist, WASP America, that women (Italian/Sicilians in this case) especially felt. While some of the other work Caronia cites (such as Pietro Di Donato’s *Christ in Concrete*) consider family catastrophe and the ways immigrant women are left to pick up the pieces, most such sagas are set in urban America (New York in Di Donato’s case), where they had many more communal support mechanisms (immigrant

parishes and mutual-aid societies) than in the rural company towns or isolated coal patches of West Virginia (the setting for the novel *Caronia* considers.) This article does an exceptional job of addressing many of the themes of working-class studies (capitalism's many oppressions; sexism if not to say sexual abuse of workers; migration studies.)

Giorgos Gouzoulis' "What Do Indebted Employees Do? Financialisation and the Decline of Industrial Action" traces the correlation between workers' indebtedness and the reticence they face toward going out on strike. Over the last 40 years (the rise of the neoliberal rollback of the welfare state and the decline of union density), Gouzoulis demonstrates that there has been an ensuing household indebtedness that has resulted in a variety of countries (the United States, Japan, South Korea, Sweden, Norway, and the United Kingdom) has caused many workers to think twice before going out on strike. Gouzoulis examines how this fear of defaulting on mortgages or otherwise falling behind in loans of other kinds has depressed instances of what has "historically been one of the main levers of pressure for employees to demand economic, political and social change from employers and the government." His article convincingly demonstrates that this downward pressure on job actions has occurred in countries with hitherto relatively robust social-welfare traditions (the United Kingdom, Sweden), others with more of a "free-market" system (the United States), as well as in non-European, "developing" economies (South Korea.) A Foucauldian disciplining of workers fearful of risking default on their debts – especially in countries that have shredded whatever was left of the social safety net – is one more hurdle to be overcome as we seek to rebuild a vibrant, progressive labor movement.

Studs Terkel Award for Media and Journalism: Single Published Articles or Series, Broadcast Media, Multimedia, and Film

Winner:

Madeline Ostrander, “[After Oil](#),” The Nation, 14 Oct. 2023.

Judges’ Comments:

Madeline Ostrander’s February 1, 2024, The Nation cover story “After Oil” skillfully describes the necessity of advocating for the elimination of fossil fuels while engaging with workers employed in the oil and gas industries and who face the prospect of job loss brought by energy transition. Ostrander uses a case study of refinery in Richmond, California to examine the real meaning of “just transition” when thinking about how everyday workers can deal with the gradual elimination of fossil fuels when they are working in industries that are focused on those energy sources. This analysis shows the urgency of ensuring that workers can maintain their standards of living as the United States moves to a green economy.

Constance Coiner Award for Best Dissertation

Winner

Brandi Lee Perri, “The Unseen Worker? Rethinking Who and What is Invisible in the Blue-Collar Workplace,” Sociology, University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2022.

Judges' Comments:

Perri's dissertation flips the scholarship on invisibility on its head: rather than workers being invisible, the processes of work are invisible, intangible, and provoke a feeling of powerlessness that nevertheless can be mitigated by union organizing. This is a rare dissertation that challenges accepted thinking in its field. I hope it is published as a book! This project will change how many people approach the questions addressed here, questions that are fundamental to the field of working-class studies.

This is an impressive dissertation that discusses the very large amount of ethnographic data collected by Perri. The 2000 hours of participant observation and the many interviews with school janitors bring the workers' experiences to the centre of the project and provide a detailed understanding of how the janitors experience the issues outlined in the work. Perri's discussion of 'unseen' service workers brings the workers into focus and shows how the workers respond to their working environment and the effects on the workers of neo-liberalism and the subsequent privatization of their jobs. Perri outlines the power relationships between the janitors, the bosses and the school staff that the janitors interact with and points to the powerlessness that is often experienced. At the same time Perri also shows the importance of collective action and solidarity, and how this can make such a big difference to the workers. Perri is placed directly in this world as a participant observer, working alongside the janitors and is connected to the workers through this work and her own circumstances and family background. This dissertation illustrates the effectiveness of working-class background researchers working on projects about working-class people as Perri has the trust of the workers and understands their situations. This is a very engaging dissertation.

Perri's dissertation, "The Unseen Worker," examines the concept of invisibility as it applies to janitorial workers. Perri flips the concept of invisibility from a personal condition experienced by individual workers into a structural description of a corporatized management. This significant shift allows for a sharp critique of neoliberal privatization of public sector management and its effects on workers. This ethnography thoughtfully documents the experiences and struggles of janitors at a public-school worksite through interviews, participant observation, and research and analyzes how

workers' intersectional identities can impact their experience on the job. The conclusion that workers laboring under nebulous privatized management feel powerless, not apathetic, because of the disconnection of that structure shows how organizing efforts to increase worker solidarity are possible and necessary to improve workers' experiences.

Review Process and Gratitude

The review process for the WCSA Awards is ordinarily chaired by the immediate WCSA past-president and submissions are judged by a panel of three readers. In academic year 2023-2024 however, Dr. Lisa Kirby, At-Large Executive Committee member, served as the Awards lead. The WCSA Executive Committee expresses deep gratitude to Dr. Kirby for her leadership and service, as well as to the many judges who served.

Contact:

Dr.s Lisa Kirby and Jen Vernon, WCSA president at awards@workingclassassn.org

Thanks to All the Judges:

Sarah Attfield, University of Technology Sydney, Australia

Renny Christopher, Washington State U, Vancouver

Carrie Conners, LaGuardia Community College, New York

Jamie Daniel, emeritus, U of Chicago, IL

Jackie Gabriel, Western Colorado U

Scott Henkel, University of Wyoming

Barbara Jensen, community psychologist, Minnesota

Cherie Madigan (Rankin), Heartland Community College, Illinois

Christopher Martin, U of Northern Iowa

Raymond A. Mazurek, Pennsylvania State U, PA

Asia Muhammad, Robeson Community College, North Carolina

Joy Priest, U of Pittsburgh, PA

Jason Russell, Empire State College, State U of New York

Joseph Sciorra, Queens College, City U of New York

Claude Taylor, Monmouth U, New Jersey

Michelle Tokarczyk, emeritus, Goucher College, New York

Christine Walley, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Robert M. Zecker, Saint Francis Xavier University, Nova Scotia