INVOLUNTARY SELF-EMPLOYMENT: VIABLE VENTURES, ENDURING DISSATISFACTION

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This article examines three case studies profiling single-person (nonemployer) business owners with viable ventures who are nevertheless dissatisfied with their self-employment. These case studies are outliers from my project studying nonemployer business ownership as work rather than entrepreneurship. For this study, I interviewed 40 individuals across two field sites (one rural and one urban) over a 3-year period, as well as engaging in participant observation, and conducting two surveys. Overall, I found that most single-person business owners pursue self-employment in order to achieve greater autonomy, rebalance power in working relationships, and improve work–life balance. In contrast, the three individuals discussed here started their firms in response to labor market constraints, moral commitments, and productivity norms that limited the viability or desirability of waged or salaried employment. Ultimately, self-employment may offer autonomy, flexibility, and material survival, but it does not automatically confer social legitimacy, occupational identity, or a sense of having become the kind of worker one is expected to be. In this sense, nonemployer business ownership does not resolve the contradictions of contemporary labor so much as it reconfigures them, allowing individuals to remain economically active while still negotiating the enduring cultural power of the job.

Keywords: self-employment, work, identity, status, ableism, agency

INTRODUCTION

Self-employment in the United States is commonly framed as either entrepreneurial aspiration or economic failure. Workers are assumed to pursue independent business ownership in search of autonomy, flexibility, and upward mobility – or to turn to it reluctantly after exclusion from waged labor. This article complicates that binary by examining nonemployer business ownership as a form of work rather than as entrepreneurship.

Drawing on ethnographic research with self-employed individuals, I analyze three cases of what I call *involuntary self-employment*: workers who sustain themselves through single-person businesses that are materially viable but affectively dissatisfying. These cases illustrate how labor market exclusion, moral commitments, and ableist productivity norms can make self-employment not a preference but a constraint. By foregrounding dissatisfaction among economically self-sufficient nonemployers, this article argues that autonomy alone does not resolve the cultural, moral, and identity contradictions that continue to structure contemporary labor.

The term "involuntary self-employment" is not new. It is commonly used in economics and labor studies to describe people who end up self-employed because they cannot find or keep waged work, often as a proxy for unemployment or marginal attachment to the labor market (Thurik et al. 2008; Blanchflower 2000). In that literature, it is usually treated as temporary, precarious, or as a sign that something has gone wrong. This article uses the term a bit differently. The individuals discussed here are not trying to leave self-employment, and they are not failing at it. Their businesses are viable and, in some cases, long-standing. I use "involuntary self-employment" to describe people who are earning a living through work they did not freely choose, are not trying to turn into a growing firm, and do not find especially satisfying, even though it works.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK: SELF-EMPLOYMENT AS WORK

Freeman (2014) demonstrates the emergence of entrepreneurialism as an organizing principle of the neoliberal economy, a principle operationalized in labor markets through short-term, precarious forms of work (Ho 2009; Lane 2011). In response to these conditions, alternative work arrangements have proliferated, including temporary employment and independent contracting (Barley and Kunda 2004; Osnowitz 2010). The independent contractor, in particular, has been described as the paradigmatic figure of labor entrepreneurialism, bearing responsibility for both economic risk and self-management (Barley and Kunda 2004; Lane 2011).

This article examines a different, less-frequently theorized configuration of work that has emerged within these conditions. The individuals discussed here pursue livelihoods that are neither waged nor salaried, yet are not oriented toward firm growth or entrepreneurial expansion. They are neither employers nor employees, and their work is not well documented within traditional economic models. Instead, they operate single-person, or "nonemployer," businesses. A nonemployer business is defined by the U.S. government as a firm with no paid employees other than the business owner(s). These tiny businesses exist in every industry sector from the expected (e.g., construction, professional and technical services) to the mystifying (e.g., mining, utilities). Critically, nonemployer business owners, for the most part, do not start businesses because they aspire to grow and manage firms; they do so because they want to assume control over the way they work (Rivers 2023a).

In much of the economics and entrepreneurship literature, self-employment and entrepreneurship are treated as roughly interchangeable categories (see, e.g., Minniti and Levesque 2008). This can obscure important differences. A person may be legally self-employed while operating a firm with multiple employees, while others operate entirely alone with no motivation toward growth. The focus here is on the latter: nonemployer businesses, as defined above, where individuals are working for themselves rather than building empires. This distinction matters because the cases examined in this article are not oriented toward expansion, and are better understood as forms of work than as entrepreneurial ventures.

Treating self-employment as work rather than entrepreneurship changes what comes into view. Entrepreneurship is usually framed in terms of opportunity, growth, and firm-building, with an emphasis on innovation and individual initiative. That does not describe what is going on here. The people in this article are not trying to build companies or scale their businesses. They are trying to earn a living under conditions that make waged work difficult, undesirable, or simply not possible. Looking at what they do as work makes it possible to focus on labor, identity, and constraint without forcing these cases into a framework that assumes ambition, expansion, or even choice as the starting point.

For the purposes of this article, I have further restricted the definition of a "nonemployer business," to firms that are fully autonomous. By this, I mean that these business owners do not rely on third parties for any part of their business enterprise. I have also excluded "side hustles" or so-called "hobby businesses" in that my informants use their businesses for self-sufficient material support. The three case studies used here are described as "involuntarily self-employed" in that they are examples of individuals who are self-employed due to labor market constraints, moral commitments, and tensions between disability and productivity norms. By approaching nonemployer business ownership as a form of work rather than as entrepreneurial aspiration, this article foregrounds labor practices, identity, and experiences of dissatisfaction among workers who are structurally independent but economically constrained.

Some scholars may be inclined to frame this analysis as an iteration of precarious labor, but precarity is an insufficient investigative frame. While precarity theory does capture some facets of the case studies here, such as risk and insecurity, my analytic lens focuses on individuals who are meeting their material needs through self-employment, who cannot be said to be "failing" at self-employment, and who are not seeking to exit nonemployer business ownership. Yet these nonemployers, for varied and individual reasons, experience self-employment as affectively dissatisfying despite its material viability.

The data for this article derive from a larger ethnographic project in which I examine self-employment as an iteration of work rather than of entrepreneurship. Over a period of three years, I conducted 40 semi-structured interviews with self-employed individuals across two field sites (one urban and one rural), engaged in participant observation

with selected research participants, and administered two surveys in partnership with the Freelancers League of North Carolina.

As I have argued elsewhere (Rivers 2023a), most single-person business owners pursue self-employment in order to achieve greater autonomy, rebalance power in working relationships, and improve work–life alignment. In contrast, the three individuals discussed here did not enter self-employment primarily in pursuit of these goals. Instead, their nonemployer businesses emerged in response to labor market constraints, moral commitments, and productivity norms that limited the viability or desirability of waged or salaried employment.

BACKGROUND: WORK BEYOND THE JOB

A fundamental proposition of industrial society has been a universal idea of what "real work" is: "non-domestic, paid, legally codified, institutionalized and socially safeguarded employment" (Komlosy 2018: 8). The advent of industrial capitalism and the invention of the job helped change our collective sense of time (Thompson 1967), and transformed work from various forms of self-provisioning into a commodity one sold for something called a wage (Marx 1976 [1867]; Polanyi 1977; Weber 2001 [1930]).

Post-industrial jobs have further changed the nature of work during the first quarter of the 21st century. Work is no longer strictly non-domestic, thanks to the ubiquity of the technologies that supports home-based businesses and makes telecommuting possible (Jordan 2008; Youngblood 2008). Alternative work systems have developed that create different categories of work (freelancers, independent contractors, etc.) outside "the job," categories that fit poorly into current legal codifications (Barley and Kunda 2004; Osnowitz 2010). Flexible work arrangements involving temporary workers or independent contractors have de-institutionalized work, introducing instability and precarity into the picture and leaving workers perpetually poised to be liquidated (Ho 2009; Lane 2011; Kalleberg and Vallas 2017). Neoliberal public policies that shred social safety nets are moving work away from being socially safeguarded (Freeman 2014; Lane 2011). Furthermore, recent anthropological work on disability and chronicity has demonstrated how labor regimes structured around consistency and continuous capacity render many forms of work – and many workers – economically and socially illegible (Az 2025; van Blarikom et al. 2025).

Championed in place of waged or salaried employment is entrepreneurial self-employment. In academia, entrepreneurship is one of the most studied phenomena in economics. Scholars and policy makers alike are eager to know why and how successful entrepreneurs succeed and failed entrepreneurs fail. But how well does this model of entrepreneurship fit the realities of self-employment? Most of the people who start businesses in the United States are less interested in the high-risk, high-reward, high-adrenaline entrepreneurial roller-coaster than they are interested in simply earning a living (Hurst and Pugsley 2011).

On the other hand, some people who start nonemployer businesses do so because of structural issues in the local economy that do not favor what they do or how they must do it. Carson, our first case study, is one such business owner.

CARSON: IMAGE VERSUS REALITY

My first question in each of my interviews is usually the same: a simple request for my informant to tell me what it is that they do. Carson responded with this: "The way I describe my primary job, or career, is that I run a business, [my name] Creative Services, and I help small to medium sized businesses take their existing client base and make them their best sales people through communications techniques."

The response confused me, in part because his website seemed to indicate that he was a professional voice actor and in part because this description seemed a bit convoluted. I asked him to elaborate on his work. After a full three minutes of explanation, I was finally able to say, "So, basically, you do marketing."

"Marketing, advertising… but I come at it from a communications background, so that's why I emphasize communications," he replied.

Carson absolutely refused to refer to what he does as marketing and, when I mentioned the word, he corrected me, saying, "It's building and executing communications strategies to help them make money, yes." He started his career in radio news, then moved to serving as community relations and advertising director for a newly formed local sports team. After two years in that position, he "earned" (as he insisted) the position of director of sales before climbing to vice-president of operations. Meanwhile, his wife had been repeatedly getting laid off due to the soured Rust Belt economy, but she finally got a job offer in Raleigh, NC. Carson considered that his skills were highly transferable, so the couple moved east. Once there, Carson found a similar communications role with the Durham Bulls. The move seemed to be a great success for him, too, until the economy crashed in 2008. Carson was let go but he was able to connect with two of his contacts from that position who served as the first two clients in his new nonemployer business.

In many ways, Carson is typical of the other nonemployer business owners I interviewed in the Research Triangle. He is unapologetically casual in his dress and bearing. He told me that he is less concerned about making buckets of money than he is about doing interesting work and doing it well. Most of his business comes from referrals. His favorite things about being self-employed are owning his time and choosing his workmates. His least favorite things about being self-employed are prospecting for clients and the lack of employment benefits, especially health insurance. In some other ways, though, Carson was very different.

In fact, Carson was a rare find among the nonemployer business owners I talked to during my research, in that he is what he called "an unwilling entrepreneur." Carson says decisively that he is not committed to self-employment. He would prefer to have a salaried job with benefits such as health insurance and retirement savings, a respectable distance up the corporate ladder. He never envisioned himself as his own boss; he says that he started and continues to run his nonemployer business because he has not been able to find a job. He is still looking and he says the job market for him is still tight. That may have something to do with his insistence on avoiding the word "marketing" when referring to what he does. Then again, perhaps the problem is that he is fifty-two years old; he believes that he has been a victim of ageism.

When I asked him how long he had been self-employed, Carson said it had been almost eleven years but, in fact, seven of those years were spent in a traditional job when one of his client companies hired him as a salaried employee. This is what he told me about that experience, unsolicited: "It's not necessarily pertinent to this conversation, but I started as a contractor, one of my clients, they hired me. And I grew their operation from one site to sixteen, ended up having five direct reports inside that company. They were fueled by a venture capital firm, who then cashed out, and the parent company outsourced us all. So, I was a victim of my own success." That was two years before we had this conversation. At that time, he was still rebuilding his business and, for the moment, doing rideshare driving to make ends meet.

When I was asking him about his typical clients, he broke off what he was telling me about those small and medium sized businesses to mention the time he did a project for General Motors. In his narrative about his years in radio, he interrupted his description of the small stations in which he had worked to ensure that I knew that he had also worked in radio in Houston and Detroit, which are major media markets. I believe Carson so struggles with the relative obscurity of so many of his employers and clients because of the niceties of his own adopted culture of success. Working little jobs for no-name companies brands him a loser in his own eyes. Running a business that does not grow and might more accurately be dubbed an alternative form of work does not seem to fit his idea of the educated, skilled, successful masculine archetype. He is uncomfortable in his work.

Carson also seems to believe that business owners do not attend networking meetings and he told me that none of the people he encountered at the networking groups he had attended were decision-makers. As a business owner, Carson does not appear to be familiar with the collaborative community culture I encountered at Freelance League of North Carolina happy hour celebrations. Thus, he has created an isolated and isolating experience of business ownership for himself.

At the same time, Carson also sometimes talks about perhaps following the standard growth trajectory for his business. "If I continue on this path, my goal would be to build a portfolio of clients that I can either manage and service myself, or I could bring somebody on to work with me. And if that works well, then add another person and then another

person," he told me. This sort of talk stems from the same impulse that causes him to insist that he has been in business for more than 10 years, even though he spent the majority of that time employed by a company. If he is not to be a successful corporate executive, then perhaps he can be a successful business owner. Yet, he has been in a position to hire his first employee and chose not to, for reasons that echo what I have heard from other nonemployers.

As he recounted, "I was in the process of [growing my business] when I got pulled into my client's company but I was mostly working with vendors. It was much easier for me to use a vendor for a particular project than it was for me to hire somebody. I didn't have to make a commitment to payroll, health insurance, all of the things I complain about not having, I wouldn't have to provide. And there was another element that I ran into as well, and that is [...] in the first year of my business, I was working very closely with a guy that I thought I was going to make a job offer to, to hire. And he just didn't have a work ethic that was compatible with mine." He went on to explain that it wasn't cost effective to hire someone who did shoddy work that would damage his own reputation.

At moments, Carson sounded almost desperate to find a "regular job." He confessed to me that he had even considered applying to Lowe's or to a Honda dealership, confident that he would be hired immediately in spite of being vastly overqualified for such sales floor positions. He told me that he was in search of stability and of decent employee benefits but he also seemed to be looking for a way to rid himself of the responsibilities attached to being his own boss. Let someone else deal with those headaches, his attitude sometimes seemed to say. I just want to do my work and go home. In any event, that impulse came to nothing. "To throw away 30 years of experience working in a kind of a white-collar environment to go and be a clerk somewhere? I have trouble stomaching that," he said.

There are large populations of working adults who maintain the credo of the sense of belonging and social status attached to Fordist connotations of work (Muehlebach 2011; Roberman 2013), and it is probably safe to include Carson in their number. Muehlebach refers to workers feeling "the capacity to belong and be useful to the world through waged work" as a "locus of sensibility and yearning that leaves crucial traces in the neoliberal present" (2011: 62). This sense of belonging and status is one of the things individuals relinquish when they walk away from capitalist labor markets in the U.S. Roberman observes, "Despite the growing structural lack of work and the decrease in secure, full-time salaried work for all, the ontology of work paradoxically still prevails" (2013: 3). Carson does not measure his success in terms of his earnings, but his conversation reveals a continuous grasping for work-related, status-based indicators of occupational success.

It is difficult to say whether Carson was even aware of the many contradictions in the things he told me and it would be presumptuous to claim that he was unhappy. It would be a more accurate description of the way he presented himself to say that he gave the impression of discomfort with the appearance of how he works, even though he had been

materially successful. That is, the way he has been "forced" to work seems to have left him without a way to measure his own occupational status or economic identity that is both apt and familiar to him. There are ways that he seems to believe he is "supposed" to interact with the economy, either as a corporate employee or as an entrepreneur, that he does not. Carson may spend the rest of his working life as a nonemployer business owner, but the cultural scripts attached to maleness and dignified self-sufficiency could rob him of the satisfaction of a social and economic identity from which he can find meaning and feel accomplished.

ERIN: ADULTHOOD DEFERRED

Erin was another nonemployer I met thanks to the helpful zeal of another of my colleagues in the anthropology program at UNC. When we were introduced, I discussed my research with Erin and she responded as many other nonemployers do; they often seem delighted that somebody somewhere is paying attention to what they do and seems to understand the joy of doing it. I accepted a business card from her and added her to my list of prospective informants.

Erin is relatively young; she was 33 years old at the time that I interviewed her late in 2019. Things had changed since I had initially spoken to her and, while she was rather reserved about her life and her work history, I appreciated her candor. The best way to describe her adult working life so far is swirling chaos. As is usual with these interviews, I started with, "The first thing I want you to do is to tell me what it is exactly that you do."

To which Erin replied, "Um… great question. I am still constantly in progress figuring that out. So, I have done a whole lot of things. Do you want to know what I'm doing for money as of this week?"

In Erin's case, the answer to that question turned out to be much more complicated than might have been expected. She is a member of that unfortunate cohort of young people who graduated from college directly into the economic catastrophe of the Great Recession. She was interested in social justice work in a non-profit but eventually found work in a low-wage retail position. She stayed just long enough to discover that she never wanted to do that again. From there, she decided to volunteer for AmeriCorps for two years, following which she accepted a part time position with her church as a resident caretaker, a position that included housing, as well as a part time project management spot with a small, young non-profit. She told me that the pay wasn't great but it was a good way to get in the door and to get experience managing staff and working through needed projects. Still, she was short enough on funds to need to spend her weekends babysitting and doing tutoring to make herself more comfortable. "I've never done just one thing to make money," she told me.

The caretaker role was a temporary position and the term ended after three years. Erin decided to leave the nonprofit at the same time. "There were a lot of great things about that [job] but it didn't feel like the right fit and so I left and I've been sort of freelancing, sort of floundering," she said. Without a job or a stable source of income, Erin had some things to figure out but she still needed to be practical about it. As she describes it, "I was not sure where to live in Atlanta, rents were going crazy, and decided to do this experiment where I would go [...] while I was working out my next steps, I would go housesit for a year. And that turned into more than a year."

The housesitting worked out well for her at first. In fact, at first it was all a wonderful adventure. This was approximately the time when I met her and she was still very enthusiastic. She was able to travel pretty extensively across the country, her personal living expenses were relatively minor since her housing costs were nonexistent. Still, she needed some additional income for food and other incidental expenses, so she returned to transcribing (which she had done in college), and added editing and fact-checking to her repertoire. She also made up for the gaps in her income with bartering.

> I've had jobs where... if you want to call them jobs... like this summer where I was living, I was doing a work trade where, instead of housesitting for free housing, I was helping with a farm for free housing. I had physical therapy this year with a physical therapist who gave me her sessions for free and in exchange I painted a bedroom in her house. I currently have a financial adviser that I'm working with and she works with me in exchange for, I do the transcripts for her podcast. I do a lot of bartering to get a lot of the stuff that I need without having money.

More recently, Erin told me, she has decided to stop housesitting because she wanted to stabilize her living situation. She still wants to find a job and it is much more difficult to do so when one does not have a permanent address. Now, she offers child care services in the afternoons, and spends her days doing the mix of transcription service, fact-checking service, and copyediting that has helped to sustain her for the previous seven years.

Erin might be considered a poster child for the Gibson-Graham (2006) diverse economy, composed as it is of so much more than just capitalist economic relations. She has been outstandingly resilient in her working life, determined not to return to her family home even as she is determined to make her employment decisions based on her values. She substitutes service trades and barters when she needs things and is without money to buy them outright, such as the physical therapy she got by painting a room in the therapist's house, as mentioned above. When I asked her if she would take a traditional job if she found one, she replied:

> Yeah, I would... but, you know, selectively. Like, I'm not... there's a lot of stuff I'm not qualified for, there's some other stuff I could do that I wouldn't want to do. I mean, I could go to the mall and apply to work at retail in a store or something and that would be hourly, and I would hate it and I would probably quit and go babysit again. Where I'm at right now with my thinking about work is that there's jobs that I would hate that I'm

> not willing to do and there's a whole middle ground that I feel kind of neutral about. Like right now, nannying... I don't feel like it's doing any evil in the world, I don't feel like I'm miserable every day and I want to leave, but I also don't feel like I have a meaningful career with a future. It's kind of neutral. It's an okay job. I don't feel bad. I don't feel especially accomplished or good. Neutral is better than going to the mall.

Erin lives the predicament of wanting to lead a principled economic life in the context of a society whose values are essentially material and financial. She appears to be a somewhat devout member of her faith (she is Quaker) and states above that she does not want to do evil in the world. She also does not want to work for a company she feels is doing evil in the world – whether that "evil" consists of overseas investments that harm indigenous populations or policies that treat its U.S. workforce poorly. She is still inclined to work in the nonprofit sector, where she could work for a cause in addition to working for a paycheck. In that sense, she was very much like the nonemployer business owners I had been talking to all along, who cared not only about the work they did but about how they did that work and with whom. At the same time, from a more worldly perspective, the jobs that often appeal to her are positions that do not pay well. "I looked at the local library," she told me. "I think it would be fun to work in a library, I think I'd be great at it. And the jobs at the library for library assistants? Nine dollars an hour. Nine dollars. So... yeah." She laughed ruefully. "It's hard."

What makes it even harder for Erin is that she has lacked stability and security for almost the entirety of her adult life so far. That includes the lack of an occupational identity and that, in turn, impedes her ability to construct social and economic identities (Freeman 2014; Lane 2011; Muehlebach 2011; Weeks 2011). She does what she is able to do and what she needs to do to be economically self-sufficient but her world is, as Allison and Piot phrase it, "embedded in rhythms of truncated work [and] interrupted life cycles" (2014: 4). To put it into childhood terms, she still does not know what she wants to be when she grows up.

"One of the difficulties with your story is that I'm having a hard time getting a handle on who you are professionally," I told her and she instantly agreed. "Do *you* have a handle on who you are professionally?"

"No," she said. "What I do have a handle on, I have a sense of some of my skills, a lot of which are soft skills. I have a sense of things I enjoy, things I don't enjoy, what motivates me and what doesn't, what makes me feel fulfilled in a job and what doesn't, I have a sense of those kinds of vague things. But that's not a field, that's not an industry, that's not a career track. So, I do feel a bit floundery in terms of not having a sense of a professional self."

Where Carson's dissatisfaction stems from a mismatch between self-employment and culturally dominant models of success, Erin's emerges from the absence of any settled occupational identity at all. This lack of occupational identity is central to Erin's difficulty in making a commitment to self-employment. She likes the lifestyle – the freedom, the

flexibility. But if she has no sense of what she can or wants to do for which people can be persuaded to pay her, then she will do what she has been doing and just take what she can find. At the same time, Erin is not isolated by her inclination to work from home. After all, she could work anywhere with wi-fi; even if poverty leaves out the local Starbucks, even if she has no free coworking spaces available, the library is always an option. In other words, the issues she is currently encountering by being self-employed – the painful loneliness, the instability, the low income – are all problems that stem from her lack of an economic identity that would allow her to consistently present herself to a target market or a prospective employer, to network effectively, or to develop rewarding professional relationships. Trying to work independently from where she is now has been a lot like trying to introduce herself to someone when she does not know her own name.

JESSE: DYNAMICALLY DISABLED

As can be seen from the examples above, when friends and family are aware of and interested in one's research, they often suggest acquaintances of their own as appropriate informants. There are many robust communities for disabled individuals that can be found via social media applications such as Discord and TikTok, and my disabled, transgender offspring met Jesse through one of those communities. I was eager to interview them because I was interested in understanding whether and how their disability impacted their capacity to practice nonemployer business ownership.

Jesse is an artist. They have been accepting commissions and producing artwork according to specific requests off and on for approximately seven years, but have only been attempting to make a business of it for the past two years. They make jewelry, paintings, metalwork – basically, any artwork or accessories one might want to either wear or hang on one's wall. Their customers come from a combination of friends and family, referrals from friends and family, and people who browse websites like Etsy and Redbubble because they know to look there for interesting, custom-made items. Jesse's retail business is their sole source of independent income.

Jesse has multiple neurological and psychological issues. In addition, they are a genderfluid person of color. Given these varied disabilities and other non-conformities, waged or salaried work seems out of the question. "I am what a lot of people call dynamically disabled," they told me, "in that I have certain disabilities that are very bad on some days and very good on others. I find it extremely hard to hold a constant job where I'm expected to perform at the same level every single day. So, I had to quit my last job because, at my worst, I just couldn't do the work. I decided to quit while I was ahead, before they fired me and that gets on my record."

It would not be accurate to say that nonemployer business ownership is not working for Jesse. It is working for them as well as anything can and they are quite clear about their

own limitations. Like Carson and Erin, Jesse is not self-employed by choice. They told me that, because of their many mental health challenges, they cannot maintain a traditional job and do not expect to ever live independently.

"As much as I do enjoy my business, it's not really a choice on my end, I suppose is the best way of saying it," they said.

"Meaning you feel like you can't do anything else?" I asked.

"Yeah," they replied, sounding just a little frustrated. "I mean I can't hold a job. I can't really do anything but commissioned work. My – I call it 'brain rot' – my brain rot doesn't let me read things sometimes, I can't do paperwork for people, I can't be a secretary, I might not even be able to work a cash register some days. So, this is kind of all that I can do."

As an individual with dynamic disabilities (that is, disabilities whose presentation is not consistent and who is therefore difficult to accommodate in a traditional workplace), the flexibility and control inherent in operating a single-person business is a more than ideal means of earning income. For Jesse, it is the only way they can feel like an economically productive member of an ableist society that tends to devalue individuals who do not meet the "socially constructed ideas of normalcy, intelligence, excellence, and productivity" with which they are and have always been surrounded (Durban 2021). At 25 years of age, Jesse was the youngest of my informants. They confided that they had been considered an "eccentric manic pixie dream person," and thus entertaining to the neuro-typical, for much of their life. "Then," they said, "when they realize that it's not just a show, I'm not like a normal person, I do have things that are wrong with me, they lose interest, they don't hang out with me. That's just kind of how it's been my whole life. People keep me around because they like my art but they don't really care about me as a person."

Jesse's parents were dissatisfied with their decision to leave their job and embark on self-employment. "They would keep hounding me with 'get a real job,' 'get a real job,' 'get a real job'," Jesse said.

"What do you understand they mean by a 'real' job?" I asked.

In answer, Jesse said:

> I think they think that what I do isn't a job. I'm going to be blunt about it, I think that they don't think that I work. I think they don't understand that it's like… I do enjoy my work at times but it is work. I have to do things. I have to get up, I have to check all my receipts. I have to buy materials. I have to check my stock. I have to actually physically create the items. I have to take photographs. I have to type up listings. I have to pay taxes. I have to be my own social media presence and advertiser. I have to do all of that, and I guess a lot of people don't necessarily see that just by looking at me.

Here Jesse describes work – the activity their family does not seem to believe they do – as a series of tasks, handling of materials, and of earnings. This litany of activities is interesting in that it indicates that the expectations held by Jesse's family – and even by Jesse

themself – are a gross underestimation of what they can do. The tasks that Jesse regularly accomplishes to operate their business demonstrate considerably more competence than their previous list of all the jobs they *cannot* do would suggest. It is notable that the range of activities required by the operation of Jesse's nonemployer business, while they consider it to be "all" they can do, shows that what they can do is quite considerable.

What prevents Jesse from sharing all that competence with a prospective employer is, as they pointed out, the necessity for them to perform on the job competently and consistently, without regard for the dynamism of their disabilities. As a nonemployer business owner, Jesse is able to do their work when they are able to do it because they manage their own time and their own creative commitments. They are able to accommodate themself adequately and more completely than most employers would ever consider doing, particularly for employees with so-called "invisible" disabilities. Given the challenges they face, Jesse participates in the economy in the only way that is practicable for them.

Jesse's dissatisfaction with self-employment does not stem from status anxiety or identity confusion, but from the constraints imposed by ableist labor regimes that render consistency – not skill, not effort – a prerequisite for productivity.

CONCLUSION

What these three self-employed individuals have in common is not entrepreneurial aspiration or economic failure, but the ability to sustain themselves through single-person business ownership while accommodating life and work priorities that matter to them. Each case demonstrates that nonemployer business ownership can be materially viable and practically adaptive, even when it is affectively dissatisfying.

Carson's dissatisfaction stems not from income instability but from a perceived failure to achieve culturally dominant markers of masculine success and hierarchical status, despite his professional competence and economic self-sufficiency (Roberman 2013). Erin's dissatisfaction emerges from the absence of a settled occupational identity: she has not been able to translate her values, skills, or labor into a recognizable career trajectory, leaving her perpetually economically active but vocationally unmoored. Jesse's dissatisfaction is shaped by ableist labor regimes that equate consistency with productivity; while self-employment enables them to engage in some form of work, it does so within a societal context that continues to devalue variable capacity and multi-marginalized bodies.

None of these cases represent unsuccessful nonemployer businesses. Carson, Erin, and Jesse have all been able to earn enough to avoid homelessness, starvation, or reliance on public assistance. Yet all three nonetheless describe themselves as "involuntarily" self-employed. Their experiences suggest that dissatisfaction in self-employment does not necessarily arise from economic precarity alone, but from continued attachment to the

cultural meanings, moral hierarchies, and identity frameworks associated with waged and salaried work in the United States.

Self-employment may offer autonomy, flexibility, and material survival, but it does not automatically confer social legitimacy, occupational identity, or a sense of having become the kind of worker one is expected to be. In this sense, nonemployer business ownership does not resolve the contradictions of contemporary labor so much as reconfigure them, allowing individuals to remain economically active while still negotiating the enduring cultural power of the job.

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NEDOBROVOLJNO SAMOZAPOŠLJAVANJE: ODRŽIVI POTHVATI, TRAJNO NEZADOVOLJSTVO

U ovome se članku prikazuju tri studije slučaja vlasnika poduzeća s jednom osobom (bez drugih zaposlenika) čiji su poslovni pothvati održivi, ali koji su unatoč tome nezadovoljni statusom samozaposlenih osoba. Ovo istraživanje odstupa od ranijeg autoričina bavljenja vlasništvom poduzeća bez zaposlenih kao vrstom zaposlenja, a ne poduzetništva. U radu se prikazuju intervjui s 40 osoba iz dvaju mjesta (jednog ruralnog i jednog urbanog) provedeni tijekom tri godine, rezultati sudioničkog promatranja te dviju anketa. Rezultati pokazuju da većina vlasnika poduzeća bez zaposlenih teži samozapošljavanju kako bi ostvarila veću autonomiju, postigla bolju ravnotežu moći u poslovnim odnosima te poboljšala ravnotežu između poslovnog i privatnog života. Nasuprot tome, tri osobe

kojima se bavi ovaj rad pokrenule su vlastite tvrtke kao odgovor na ograničenja tržišta rada, moralne obveze i norme produktivnosti koje su ograničavale održivost ili poželjnost zaposlenja s fiksnom plaćom ili rada plaćenog po satu. U konačnici, samozapošljavanje može ponuditi autonomiju, fleksibilnost i materijalno preživljavanje, ali ono ne donosi automatski i društvenu legitimnost, profesionalni identitet ili osjećaj da je radnik ispunio društvena očekivanja. U tom smislu, vlasništvo nad poduzećima bez zaposlenih ne rješava proturječnosti suvremenog rada, nego ih tek preslaguje, omogućujući pojedincima da ostanu ekonomski aktivni dok se pokušavaju nositi s kulturnom moći koju zaposlenje trajno nosi.

Ključne riječi: samozapošljavanje, rad, identitet, status, ableizam, agentivnost