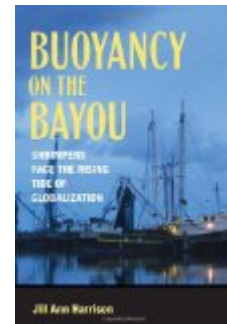


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jill Ann Harrison. *Buoyancy on the Bayou: Shrimpers Face the Rising Tide of Globalization*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013. Illustrations. 208 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-5074-7; \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8014-7833-8.

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Commissioned by David T. Benac



Although not explicitly driven by historical analysis, Jill Ann Harrison's anthropological study of shrimpers in the Louisiana Gulf of Mexico is a welcome contribution to the field of marine environmental history. Drawing on ethnographic research in one coastal Louisiana community, Bayou Crevette, Harrison addresses the interaction between work, culture, and the nonhuman environment in a way that should interest self-described marine environmental historians, the large majority of whom write about fisheries.[1] However, she is less concerned with drawing policy lessons for marine management, as many of these historians are, and more interested in understanding how Louisiana shrimpers have dealt with forces that threaten their occupational livelihood.

In the past decade, several forces converged to undermine the Louisiana offshore shrimp industry. Rising fuel costs bankrupted many shrimpers. Mandatory turtle-excluder devices, or TEDs, further handicapped those who survived. By far the biggest threat, though, has been competition from imports of farm-raised foreign shrimp, which now account for 90 percent of the U.S. market. *Buoyancy on the Bayou* recounts with compassion and sympathy the stories of many shrimpers who have suffered from this trend.

Modifying Albert O. Hirschman's model for predicting social responses to organizational decline ("exit, voice, and loyalty") (*Exit, Voice and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States* [1970]), Harrison develops three similar concepts, each in separate chapters, to explain Louisiana shrimpers' reactions to the hazards of "globalization." In the first, "Identity," she discusses the shrimpers who have chosen to keep shrimping

in the face of occupational decline, even when there are other more economically attractive opportunities available, such as working in the nearby offshore oil industry. These "globalization martyrs" find that their identities—community, family, and cultural—are too closely bound to shrimping to seek other careers (p. 88). The "non-material costs of exit" also weigh on those who have chosen to give up shrimping, often to take higher paying oil industry jobs (p. 110). In the next chapter, "Loss," Harrison observes that the family shrimping roots of those who exit do not run as deep as those who persevere. But those who leave still find the decision agonizing and regrettable. The third main chapter, "Innovation," shows how some shrimpers survived by changing their business practices. They incorporated on-board freezer technology, adopted new marketing strategies, or forged new kinds of commercial partnerships. According to Harrison, the determination to preserve their occupational identity, more so than the profit motive, drove this group to innovate.

This is a reasonable argument, but a limited one. The book offers few comparisons with other shrimping communities and ethnic groups (e.g., Vietnamese shrimpers) along the Gulf Coast. Harrison describes the different sectors that comprise the larger shrimp industry, but she narrows her occupational focus to boat captains and deckhands. The book could have been strengthened with a discussion of how the shrimpers' "identity"—white, male, and paternal—has been constructed over time. Women appear in the book only as wives or daughters of boat captains. We get little sense of how they perform reproductive labor, supplement the family income, or handle the business transactions of the family

shrimp operation. There is also no mention of African Americans, who have long participated in the Louisiana shrimp industry, albeit in subordinate positions. Under racial segregation, they were never given the chance to establish a long “family tradition” of working their own shrimp boats. In many Gulf Coast shrimping communities, African American men typically had to find jobs as “strikers,” emptying the nets and sorting the catch on the docks, while African American women often worked in the fish houses, cleaning, deheading, and boxing the catch. One wishes that this slim book could have been filled out with more inquisitive analysis of how the entire range of people employed in the Louisiana shrimp industry experienced the challenges of globalization.

Although restricted in scope, *Buoyancy on the Bayou* provides valuable ethnographic information and insight into the recent travails of the iconic Cajun shrimper. Along with renewed scholarly interest in the Gulf of Mexico following the 2010 *Deepwater Horizon* drilling disaster, Harrison’s study may even help place this region, the most productive commercial and recreational fishery in the United States, higher on the agenda for marine environmental historians.

Note

[1]. See, for example, the collection of essays in the special “Marine Forum” issue of *Environmental History* 18, no. 1 (January 2013).

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