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Buoyancy on the Bayou: Shrimpers Face the Rising Tide of Globalization

Abstract

[Excerpt] This book is about shrimp fishers from one coastal community in southeastern Louisiana. But more generally, it is about how individuals respond to large-scale economic change and industrial restructuring, largely a consequence of the forces of globalization. Throughout the book, I draw from the rich ethnographic data I collected to show how local actors respond to economic challenges. And while focusing on the responses of the shrimpers to the collapse of their industry is culturally worthy in itself, there is value that goes well beyond it. While most studies of industrial decline focus on communities where few jobs are available after an industry leaves, my case study shows that even though alternative employment opportunities exist, some forgo those opportunities to try to fulfill what they perceive as their cultural calling. Others reluctantly leave this identity behind. From the shrimp fishers' experiences with industrial decline, we stand to gain a greater understanding of the importance of the work that we do in shaping our social lives and our understanding of the world around us.

Keywords

shrimping, globalization, Louisiana, industrial decline

Comments

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BUOYANCY ON THE BAYOU

BUOYANCY ON THE BAYOU

*Shrimpers Face the Rising Tide
of Globalization*

JILL ANN HARRISON

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To Ryan and Henry

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One of the first words I learned during my initial few days of living on the bayou was *lagniappe* (pronounced *lan-yap*). Lagniappe is commonly used to describe that little something extra given out of kindness. Metaphorically, it is the thirteenth roll in a baker's dozen. It is also a word that keeps crossing my mind as I think about the research and writing processes that have resulted in this book. There are numerous individuals who generously provided me with lagniappe, which facilitated this project's completion. I am especially grateful to those current and former shrimp fishers and their families who generously shared with me their thoughts about their livelihoods and provided me with many delicious meals. I am particularly thankful to those whom I call "June and Herbert Batiste" and their family, who provided me with a place to stay and an immeasurable amount of assistance with this project. This book could not have been completed without them. I also thank Reuben Teague for his generous hospitality whenever I'd visit the great city of New Orleans during my research.

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BUOYANCY ON THE BAYOU

PROLOGUE

In April on the bayou, shrimp fishers arrive at the docks early to prepare their boats for the upcoming May season, the busiest time of the year. But April 2010 would be different. On April 20 the Deepwater Horizon oil rig burst into flames and added yet another tragedy to an area already beset with them. Just as coastal communities of southeastern Louisiana had made it firmly on the road to recovery from the devastation wrought by hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Ike, the BP oil spill cast a harsh spotlight on the region once again. For nearly three months, oil flowed freely from the damaged rig at an estimated rate of fifty thousand barrels a day until it was finally capped in mid-July. In the end almost five million barrels of oil flowed into the Gulf, making it the largest accidental marine oil spill in the history of the petroleum industry. Many shrimp fishers surely found themselves on the water that spring, but it wasn't to haul in their nets, heavy with shrimp. They sailed their boats into the black, oily water to lay oil-containment boom and to control the fires on the water that had been purposefully set to burn away the black slick. That spring, there was little else they could control.

In the weeks and months that followed the spill, journalists and scholars have raised important questions about the oil spill's impacts on those who depend upon coastal resources to earn a living: oyster harvesters, crabbers, and deep sea fishers. Shrimp fishers capture a great deal of this attention, perhaps because their large, majestic vessels are emblematic of southern Louisiana. Although it is too soon to know the full impact of the spill on the domestic industry, many of the reports on shrimp fishers end with a similar question: Will they be able to overcome the environmental challenges doled out by the spill? Although the spill has certainly made life more difficult for the shrimpers, most people do not realize that they have been struggling to stay afloat for almost a decade now, before both Hurricane Katrina and the Deepwater Horizon oil spill were part of the region's history.

What ultimately plunged the shrimp fishing industry into a state of crisis was not a storm or an accident, or was even related to the delicate ecosystem that provides such a bounty of resources. Rather, it was the result of industrial restructuring that opened the market to a flood of farm-raised foreign shrimp. If we are to truly understand how shrimp fishers will deal with the aftermath of the oil spill, we need to be familiar with the struggles that they were going through *before* the spill happened. This book is about a livelihood imperiled by waves of a different sort, the waves of globalization. It is the story of economic change and shrimpers' resistance to it. While the future remains uncertain, the shrimp fishers' tenacity in the decade-long struggle to remain afloat is not. From their determination and in some cases their loss, we can learn much about the importance of work in providing us with much more than our daily bread.

The story of how I came to be so interested in the working lives of shrimp fishers traces the collapse of the Louisiana shrimp fishing industry and provides a useful context for introducing this case study. As a lifelong, landlocked midwesterner who gets too seasick to go out on boats, my deep passion for understanding the working lives of shrimp fishers may seem a little curious. But there is a fairly strong thread that connects their experience to mine.

It begins with college graduation. Like many recent graduates, I had no idea what I wanted to do next. In the confusion and anxiety that often accompany the uncertainty of possibilities, there was a nagging feeling of

wanderlust that I just could not ignore. Up until that point I'd lived in the town where I was raised, and I wanted to go somewhere unfamiliar and do something that pushed me out of my comfort zone, something that would enable me to get a bit dirty before I began a future career. Little did I know just how muddy I would get when I made the decision to join AmeriCorps, the federal program that provides community service opportunities in exchange for a monetary award to defray educational expenses. AmeriCorps offers thousands of opportunities in locations all across the country, and I was pretty open regarding what to do and where to go.

As I pored over the possibilities described on the program's website, I was drawn to one in particular, located in a small town in southeastern Louisiana. The job description outlined two primary duties. The first involved educating local students and other community members about the severe coastal erosion problems that Louisiana currently faces. I knew nothing about wetland ecology or the coastal erosion problem, but fortunately for me a familiarity with the region was not a requirement. The job's other duty involved trudging around in the marshes and swamps to plant different varieties of marsh grasses. Marsh grass, as I later found out, helps to hold soil in place and is therefore a valuable defense against the wind and waves that accelerate coastal erosion. The job sounded perfect: it would both take me to an exotic location and allow me to get my hands dirty and my feet wet, quite literally. I applied for the job, and as good fortune would have it, a few months later—in January of 2001—I found myself leaving town and heading toward Louisiana, to a town I refer to in this book as Bayou Crevette.

On the day I pulled into town for what was to be a year-long experience, I was immediately struck by the presence of the shrimping industry, a presence signaled throughout the town. Most visible were the shrimp boats, impressive vessels sitting docked along the bayou that flowed the entire length of the community. Even though it was a chilly winter day, people were out on their boats, working hard to get them in order for the upcoming spring season. Boatbuilding businesses were in evidence, too, permitting passersby a glimpse of boats in progress. I would be tracking this progress later on my daily commute through town. The streets were lined with other sea-related businesses—net shops, hardware stores, and seafood docks—and all of these hummed with activity. In addition to the

sights was the smell, that of the muddy bayou commingling with the distinctive, pungent odor of seafood that is natural to fishing communities.

I had been instructed by the AmeriCorp program's director to go first to the home of her parents, June and Herbert Batiste, for a welcoming dinner (I use pseudonyms to refer to participants throughout the book). Their cozy little house, partially hidden by the gigantic live oak tree that took up much of their front yard, sat less than a hundred yards from the bayou. Over a delicious gumbo dinner, June described how she and Herbert—who were at that time in their early seventies—had worked a significant portion of their lives as shrimpers. They retired from shrimping in the 1980s, after the last of their five children left the area to attend college. But because they had a half-dozen grandchildren, they wanted to build a new boat so they could give them the experience of trawling, in the process teaching them the importance of hard work and passing along a love and appreciation for the craft that was so intimately connected to their family history.

Like others I met during that year, the Batistes were intensely proud of what the shrimp fishing industry had provided their town and their family. Many of our conversations focused on the many adventures they'd had aboard their beloved wood-hulled boat, aptly named *La Belle Vie* (meaning "the good life"). Their boat was not only the means by which they had earned a living it was also their vehicle for exploring the world. During their younger days, June, Herbert, and their five children had sailed the shrimp boat to many locations in Central and South America, as well as the Caribbean. June took great delight in telling me the story of how they sailed *La Belle Vie* up the East Coast to Boston for their daughter's graduation from college. As part of the festivities, they hosted the university's president for a celebratory meal on board. They prepared the meal in the *La Belle Vie's* small galley, using shrimp and crabs that they themselves had harvested from the inland waters of the Gulf of Mexico near their home. This story—told and retold to me on multiple occasions—certainly illustrated and reinforced the pride they took in their livelihood and their Cajun roots.

It became obvious to me early on in my experience that people in the town took great pride and enjoyment in preparing meals for others—especially outsiders. And being an outsider myself, I enjoyed countless

meals cooked by people who were eager to feed the "AmeriCorps kids," as we were known throughout the community (although I was in my early twenties at the time). These delicious meals almost always showcased food that came directly from the rich, natural areas that surrounded the bayou community. The indigenous ingredients included a variety of meats—crab, shrimp, alligator, crawfish, many types of gulf fish—as well as local produce—okra, cushaw, and mirliton. Meals were usually accompanied by the story of how the ingredients were obtained. If whoever prepared the meal had not caught or harvested them themselves, then they had usually been given them by somebody who had—a friend, relative, or neighbor. Some of my hosts loved to boast about how—unlike those of us up North—they never had to buy seafood, adding—rather sanctimoniously—that they would not want to eat that frozen stuff anyway.

Fresh shrimp was almost always incorporated into these home-cooked meals, and as a result I heard a great deal about the shrimping industry. Older folks told me stories about shrimping before they had motorized boats, and about how they had quit school—sometimes at age eleven or twelve—to learn the craft from their parents or grandparents. Younger people filled me in on current practices as they described the trip that harvested the shrimp for our current meal. A few of my AmeriCorps co-workers got to enjoy the experience of shrimp fishing firsthand; regrettably, my strong susceptibility to seasickness prevented me from enjoying it myself. But in any event, local pride in the shrimp industry was highly apparent, and multiple times throughout the year shrimp was celebrated in the form of shrimp and seafood festivals, shrimp boils, and seafood cook-offs. Every day it seemed that people wanted to talk about their families, their work, and their community. Little did I know then that this generosity was my first lesson in ethnography and that these stories would eventually occupy over ten years of my life.

After I planted thousands of marsh grass plugs, and talked to hundreds of school kids about environmental issues, the year-long program came to a successful end. AmeriCorps on the bayou was a perfect antidote to my post-college case of wanderlust. Renewed from months of crawling around in the thick, odiferous mud of the wetlands, I decided to begin my "real life" in graduate school back in the Midwest. But surrounded by books and articles in my small, shared windowless office, I could not forget

about the bayou. I often found myself yearning to go back, to breathe in the moist air of the wetlands, to soak up the sounds of the fiddle and accordion, and to eat the delicious Cajun food that, like so much of regional cuisine, can only truly be found in its place of origin. As a result, through the years I made several trips back to the bayou.

The first trip I made back to Bayou Crevette was in 2003 to visit some friends. During that trip, I certainly got my fill of the thick and hearty food and swamp air, but I could not help but notice the palpable feeling of uneasiness and concern that lingered when I asked how folks had fared with the latest shrimping season. This anxiety and pessimism had simply not existed during my AmeriCorps year, when fisher folk and deckhands alike had gloated about the shrimp (and cash) they were hauling in. But this time people described how dockside prices had abruptly fallen and told of the rumors swirling around that the depressed prices would be permanent. Prices had plummeted in the past, they told me, but this time was different—this time they feared they would not rebound. Surely, I thought, they must be exaggerating, as just two short years ago the industry had been vibrant and very much alive. I was hesitant to believe what I heard, although I was saddened just the same.

The severity of the decline crystallized when I visited June and Herbert. After only one full season of fishing on their brand-new boat, they were already expressing great regret over having built it. They were struggling to keep up with all of their expenses, even though the bulk of the labor was done by one of their sons and their grandchildren, who worked only for the bounty of their catch and the richness of experience as payment. I left the bayou feeling troubled and concerned, and when I went back to Ohio and the grind of graduate school, I continued to keep tabs on the state of the industry.

Two years later, in 2005, Hurricane Katrina ravaged the Gulf Coast. Within a month of its devastation, I went back to the bayou, this time to offer my services to those who needed help with recovery. Fortunately, Bayou Crevette had been spared the level of flooding and destruction experienced by New Orleans and other coastal communities. It had lost one of its prominent seafood docks (later rebuilt), and the storm debris in the Gulf caused damage to nets and made fishing difficult, but by and large the community's industry dodged the lion's share of Katrina's wrath. But

hurricanes aside, the industry was still caught firmly in the grip of a downward spiral. People continued to worry about the plummeting dockside shrimp prices, but this time their worries were compounded by the sharp increases in overhead costs, especially fuel costs, which had spiked sharply in the middle of the decade. High fuel costs subsequently pushed up the prices of other necessities, like ice, groceries, and supplies. It was plainly evident from the widespread worry and dismay expressed by shrimpers and nonshrimpers alike that the industry's future was even grimmer than a couple of years before.

In addition, there were other, more visible changes in the shrimping situation that went beyond verbal worry and dismay. Most noticeable was the substantial number of boats that lay docked along the bayou adorned with "for sale" signs. The increase in the number of these signs became the topic of a joke that I heard (time and again) from shrimpers: "It's gotten so bad that everyone has decided to change the name of their boat to the same thing, *The For Sale*." Unfortunately, among the renamed boats was June and Herbert's almost-new, blue-hulled vessel, used for only two shrimp seasons. Other discernible changes included the closing of businesses—net shops, ice sheds, and seafood docks. The boatbuilding business was also reeling, as people were no longer willing to bet on the industry's future with brand-new boats.

To put it simply, the shrimping industry did not have the same presence in the community as it had only four years earlier, when I pulled into town for the first time.

I went back to Ohio feeling worried for June and Herbert's family and the others whose livelihoods were threatened. I was dismayed and confused over what had happened. Why had the industry tanked so sharply in such a short amount of time? This was especially perplexing given the growing popularity of shrimp over the past several decades. Shrimp has become less of a luxury food and more of a staple in the American diet. It was once something people splurged on for celebration, but now it is now possible to feast on "endless" piles of shrimp at all-you-can-eat buffets or even at fast food restaurants. The demand for shrimp among American consumers has been relatively strong and so, I thought, shrimp fishers should be doing better—not worse—than they had in the past. What was the problem?

After doing a little preliminary research, the predicament became abundantly clear. Shrimp fishers were now facing the same problem that those working in the steel mills during the 1970s: cheap imports. The waves of globalization had finally crashed into the shores of the U.S. commercial shrimp fishing industry.

As I dug around for more information, I found out that around the late 1990s, the technology for growing shrimp in hatcheries had been greatly improved. As a result, countries that exported shrimp—China, Thailand, Vietnam, and Ecuador to name the largest—were able to ramp up production. Although the technology for cultivating shrimp in ponds began to expand as far back as 1980, these endeavors had been plagued for years by crop failures and disease outbreaks (Belton and Little 2008). However, by the end of the century most of these problems had been remedied. As a result, the United States experienced a dramatic increase in the importation rate of foreign, farm-raised shrimp.

While this may be good news for the shrimp-loving American consumer, who is now able to indulge in low-priced all-you-can-eat shrimp feasts at the local Red Lobster, the news has not been so favorable for domestic shrimp producers. As more imports poured in, dockside prices for U.S. shrimpers plummeted sharply and quickly. Similar to what had happened to the U.S. steel industry, shrimp fishers now had to struggle to effectively compete against low-wage producers overseas. The sharp rise in overhead costs—especially fuel—had made it even more difficult for shrimp fishers to turn a profit. I was both fascinated and saddened by what was happening on the bayou, particularly by how the shrimpers were dealing with the prospect—and the actual incidence—of leaving their industry behind.

My interest in the collapse of the shrimping industry is in no way haphazard but is easily traced back to my own experience with occupational decline. I was born and raised in Youngstown, Ohio, a rust belt town that experienced great hardship when the steel industry completely collapsed in the early 1980s. My father was one of the tens of thousands of steelworkers there who lost a livelihood with the industry's ruin, and although I was just a little girl, I experienced firsthand many of the negative effects of deindustrialization. In addition to the financial problems created by unemployment, my father's anxiety and tension regarding the

inability to find reliable work took a toll on his self-worth. As a young child I watched as the once-quiet neighborhood I grew up in quickly transformed into the crime-ridden and poverty-stricken area that it remains today. And I watched as my parents became more and more worried about how we were going to make ends meet. As I became a little older and more aware of things like class differences, I realized that my family's struggles were hardly an isolated event. I learned from friends and relatives that our struggles were being experienced in other houses in our neighborhood and those in other parts of the city.

Given this deeply personal experience, I wondered if occupational decline would have the same effects on the bayou as it did in Youngstown. Many questions began to emerge: What, exactly, was happening to the once-vibrant Louisiana shrimping industry? How were shrimp fishers responding to the collapse of an industry that is not only important to their economic survival but is also linked tightly to their heritage and cultural identities? And how might the community be changed by occupational decline? These questions continued to nag at me, despite being nearly a thousand miles away, and eventually my desire for answers led me back down to the swamps and marshes of the bayou. And with June and Herbert graciously allowing me to stay with them while I conducted my field research, I spent the summers of 2006 and 2007 traipsing around the community, trying to locate and talk to as many current and former shrimp fishers as possible. Fortunately, most of the shrimp fishers I encountered generously permitted me access to their working lives, often inviting me into their homes or onboard their boats (that sat docked as we chatted). Their stories are presented here.

This book is about shrimp fishers from one coastal community in southeastern Louisiana. But more generally, it is about how individuals respond to large-scale economic change and industrial restructuring, largely a consequence of the forces of globalization. Throughout the book, I draw from the rich ethnographic data I collected to show how local actors respond to economic challenges. And while focusing on the responses of the shrimpers to the collapse of their industry is culturally worthy in itself, there is value that goes well beyond it. While most studies of industrial decline focus on communities where few jobs are available after an industry leaves, my case study shows that even though alternative

employment opportunities exist, some forgo those opportunities to try to fulfill what they perceive as their cultural calling. Others reluctantly leave this identity behind. From the shrimp fishers' experiences with industrial decline, we stand to gain a greater understanding of the importance of the work that we do in shaping our social lives and our understanding of the world around us.

SETTING SAIL

What We Can Learn from Louisiana Shrimp Fishers

If you have ever purchased wild-caught American shrimp, there's a good chance that it was caught by a Louisiana shrimp fisher. Louisiana is a major player in the U.S. seafood industry. Nearly one-third of the nation's seafood comes directly from Louisiana's estuaries, wetlands, and coastal areas.¹ But if the seafood industry is a crowning feature for Louisiana, shrimp is its largest jewel. Of the entire Gulf of Mexico region (Alabama, Western Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas) that supplies the overwhelming majority of domestic shrimp—nearly 85 percent in 2006—Louisiana was the leading producer, contributing almost half of the region's shrimp landings.²

Fortunately for Louisiana shrimp fishers, Americans love shrimp, making it the most-consumed seafood product in the United States today.³ Served at the most elite restaurants, it can also be purchased at many fast food restaurants. But shrimp hasn't always enjoyed this kind of mass appeal. When the Louisiana shrimp fishing industry began in the late nineteenth century, shrimp was far from the popular staple that it is today. In fact, in

large part because of its insect-like quality, shrimp was largely shunned by elite populations and was a food that mostly poor people ate. Marketed mainly to Chinese immigrants, it was also a common staple for the recently arrived Acadian exiles who settled the inhospitable coastal wetlands area of southern Louisiana. Americans, especially wealthy Americans, did not eat shrimp, even though it was available in the marketplace.⁴

The shrimp that was sold back then was not the fresh (or freshly frozen) product that we find in the seafood section of grocery stores today. Instead it came sun dried and salted or water packed in a can like today's sardines (a fish that is still sometimes associated with poor people and roustabouts in the same way shrimp used to be). Most shrimp was shipped to either China or to the American West, where a growing Chinese immigrant population created great demand for it.

As the final product differed from what we know today, so did the process through which it was harvested and sold. Shrimp was not caught by independent shrimp fishers who owned their own vessels, nor did the industry resemble anything close to what was depicted in the popular film *Forrest Gump* (a film that continues to shape the public's perception of shrimp fishers), with fleets of majestic shrimp boats bobbing gently along as clouds of sea gulls hover close above. Back in the early days, there were no motorized boats that dragged trawl nets across the ocean floor or pulled skimmer nets atop the shallow surface of the Gulf waters. Rather, shrimp was manually harvested by haul seines—large, weighted nets that encircled the shrimp—that were pulled by hand or by sailboat. Those who worked the nets, called *seiners*, were not owner-operators of their own nets or sailboats; instead they were low-wage workers who labored for companies, usually owned by the processors who packed and shipped the shrimp, who cared little about providing them with decent wages or working conditions.⁵

The Louisiana shrimp industry as we know it today was born out of conditions consistent with the processes of industrialization, whereby waged laborers supplied a specific commodity to distant and international markets. A series of technological advances that began at the start of the twentieth century profoundly transformed the industrial structure of shrimp fishing. The development of motorized boats and nets made it easier for fishers to trawl a larger area for a longer period of time, and refrigeration and shipping technologies permitted the shrimp to be shipped in a

fresh state that many found more appealing than canned or dried. These important industrial changes had repercussions not only for those directly involved in shrimp production but for the nation as a whole. The meanings attached to the consumption of shrimp suddenly underwent a significant transformation. Initially a food for the poor and oppressed, it became a luxury product that only the wealthy could afford to consume on a regular basis. For the nonwealthy who could not afford shrimp's high cost, it came to symbolize a celebration, a special occasion worthy of splurge. And shrimp held its reputation as a delicacy for most of the twentieth century.

Up until around the year 2001, business hummed along as usual for shrimp fishers. There were good years and bad years—years when haul totals or prices would fall or rise—but generally catching shrimp provided what fishers described to me time and again as "an honest living." Hard work translated into economic success, and shrimp fishers prided themselves on their relatively light debt loads and ability to make it without relying on government subsidies. Fishing provided shrimpers with enough money to pay cash for necessities and luxury items as well—new trucks, fishing gear, and vacations (usually hunting trips). Debts were kept to a minimum, and on the rare occasions when fishers needed to buy things on credit, they were quick to pay them off. But shortly after the turn of the new century, Louisiana shrimp fishers were unexpectedly confronted with one of the most devastating floods they had ever been up against. This flood, however, was not the kind that results from broken levees or unseasonably high amounts of rainfall. Instead, it was the result of what some have called the "pink tsunami": the extraordinary increase in the amount of farm-raised foreign imports into the U.S. seafood market. Ever since then, shrimpers have struggled to get by.

For shrimp-loving consumers, imports have made the product much more affordable, and as a result shrimp has undergone yet another image makeover: from luxury food to kitchen staple. Because of imports, we can now purchase shrimp at the drive-through window of some fast food restaurants for less than the cost of a cup of Starbucks coffee. Although we might assume differently, the increase in demand has not been a boon for domestic shrimp fishers. Even working at full capacity, they can only supply what they catch from the sea. As consumer demand has increased, domestic shrimp's market share has held steady, estimated at around 10 percent over the past several decades. The problem for shrimpers is

fresh state that many found more appealing than canned or dried. These important industrial changes had repercussions not only for those directly involved in shrimp production but for the nation as a whole. The meanings attached to the consumption of shrimp suddenly underwent a significant transformation. Initially a food for the poor and oppressed, it became a luxury product that only the wealthy could afford to consume on a regular basis. For the nonwealthy who could not afford shrimp's high cost, it came to symbolize a celebration, a special occasion worthy of splurge. And shrimp held its reputation as a delicacy for most of the twentieth century.

Up until around the year 2001, business hummed along as usual for shrimp fishers. There were good years and bad years—years when haul totals or prices would fall or rise—but generally catching shrimp provided what fishers described to me time and again as "an honest living." Hard work translated into economic success, and shrimp fishers prided themselves on their relatively light debt loads and ability to make it without relying on government subsidies. Fishing provided shrimpers with enough money to pay cash for necessities and luxury items as well—new trucks, fishing gear, and vacations (usually hunting trips). Debts were kept to a minimum, and on the rare occasions when fishers needed to buy things on credit, they were quick to pay them off. But shortly after the turn of the new century, Louisiana shrimp fishers were unexpectedly confronted with one of the most devastating floods they had ever been up against. This flood, however, was not the kind that results from broken levees or unseasonably high amounts of rainfall. Instead, it was the result of what some have called the "pink tsunami": the extraordinary increase in the amount of farm-raised foreign imports into the U.S. seafood market. Ever since then, shrimpers have struggled to get by.

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that the flood of imports resulted in a quick and dramatic plunge of dock-side prices. Domestic producers relying upon wild-caught methods of production currently face enormous difficulties in staying afloat. For many shrimp fishers, the difficulties have been too much to bear, and they have chosen to leave the water permanently.

The hand dealt to shrimp fishers—their struggle to survive in an industry being taken over by foreign imports—is in many ways similar to that previously dealt to millions of industrial laborers in the 1970s and 1980s. The process of decline in the manufacturing sector—particularly steel, auto, textiles, and apparel—is generally referred to as *deindustrialization*. Deindustrialization is a process that has been around for quite some time, but the factors that contribute to it have shifted over the decades. The earliest research on deindustrialization and economic dislocation—that is, unemployment that results from layoffs or plant closings—attributed them to firms' abilities to produce more with fewer workers vis-a-vis job-cutting technological advancements.⁶ But since the 1980s, most researchers have at least partly associated them with intensifying economic globalization processes that enable firms to outsource production to low-wage regions of the world.⁷ Globalization is a widely deployed concept in social scientific research, and as such it has been the subject of debate since it burst onto the academic scene. The abundance of research on the causes, character, and consequences of economic globalization reflects its complexity as a concept and the difficulties involved in encapsulating its core essence. Defining it, therefore, is always a tricky endeavor, but my understanding of economic globalization follows the lead of the political sociologists David Brady, Jason Beckfield, and Wei Zhao, who define it "as international economic exchange and the flow of goods, services, people, information, and capital across national boundaries."⁸

Economic globalization is driven by several key mechanisms, most notably improvements in transportation and communication technologies that make doing business more efficient. Some globalization scholars have shown that intensifying globalization processes—usually measured by looking at international trade and investment—facilitate the movement of production to developing countries and thus contribute at least partially to deindustrialization in the manufacturing sector.⁹ As economies become more globalized, foreign competition puts pressure on firms to remain competitive. One solution has been to relocate production to countries

where operational costs are held down by extremely low wages and lax regulations. To put it simply, it is no longer cost effective to manufacture or purchase domestically produced goods.

The shift toward a global economy has fundamentally changed the livelihoods of many American workers in the manufacturing sector, but it has also affected extractive industries such as farming, mining, and logging.¹⁰ Plant closings, permanent layoffs, and the selling off of the family farm have all been unfortunate outcomes for workers affected by this process. Globalization and deindustrialization have left in their wake a host of personal and social problems for individuals, families, and communities. When companies pack up and leave town, they not only leave behind crumbling infrastructure, they also abandon entire communities. Displaced workers are of course the most immediately affected, as they suffer the direct loss of income and the stress and anxiety that come along with the uncertainty of what is next for them. But the process does not end with the shutting of factory doors or the receiving of layoff notices. It is a protracted process that causes suffering indirectly for others as well: the small business owners dependent upon customers who have extra money to spend; home owners whose houses plummet in value as people move away and their houses fall into disrepair; and children who attend deteriorating schools that are deprived of income provided by a shrinking base of taxpayers. The importance of work and industry goes well beyond the bank accounts and 401(k)s of those who take home paychecks. Work provides the backdrop against which entire communities and the people within them thrive. The sociologists Roger Friedland and A. F. Robertson eloquently captured the multidimensionality of the concept of work when they stated:

Work provides identities as much as it provides bread for the table; participation in commodity and labor markets is as much an expression of who you are as what you want. Although economists typically assume that work is a disutility to be traded off against leisure or income, it actually contains other kinds of utility, ranging from the expression of an identity (I am a metal worker), to relative performance (I am a good metal worker), social value (it is good to be a metal worker—or—it is good to work), gender (it is good for a man to be a metal worker), or prestige (it is better to be a metal worker than a salesperson).¹¹

This book is about the plight of a specific group of workers recently impacted by globalization processes and the ensuing collapse of a domestic

industry: Louisiana shrimp fishers in a small bayou community. But on a broader level, it is a study of how workers make sense of the uncertainties and risk that accompany our continually shifting, restructuring industrial world. By exploring on a deeper level how they respond to industrial decline, I bring to the surface a more comprehensive understanding of the consequences of the processes of globalization for those living in smaller communities with long-standing cultural distinctiveness. I bring Friedland and Robertson's conceptualization of work with me through this analysis, because it crystallizes beautifully the sentiments shared with me by shrimp fishers and other community members I encountered through my research. Because people identify themselves in large part through occupation and work, changes in work processes alter personal identity and the meanings that people bring to their lives. Throughout the book, I provide a nuanced understanding of the degree to which livelihoods defined by local cultures and traditions survive in an era in which there are clearly identifiable economic and social changes stemming from the processes of globalization.

This study is part of a rich tradition of research on the dynamic relationship between occupational decline, community, and culture. Previous work on this topic has brought to light the growing significance of cities and communities as sites of globalization processes through which a restructuring of political, economic, and cultural arrangements occurs that reflects the shift toward a global system of production.¹² Other relevant research examines how global forces have more generally impinged upon the structure of work processes and local cultures.¹³ I contribute to this important work in at least two ways. First, by treating the reformulation of occupational and cultural identities as a course of action linked to changes in traditional work practices, I stress the importance of broader historical, economic, and spatial contexts to local actors' meaning-making processes, that is, how it is that they make sense of their social worlds and their places within it. I also investigate how members of a small community confront the processes of globalization in order to preserve what they can of traditional ways of life. My analysis highlights the agency—or the capacity to act—that people have with regard to how they reorganize economic and social lives in a way that connects to a deeply ingrained cultural identity. Globalization is not merely an imposing condition for communities but is an ongoing process shaped by interaction that accounts for cultural