

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

BRENDA GRZETIC, *Women Fishes These Days*. Halifax: Fenwood Publishing, 2004, 102 p.

Brenda Grzetic's book *Women Fishes These Days* is a portrayal of women's contested entrance as members of the paid labour force in the recently restructured east-coast fisheries. The main theme of the book is the gendered organization of work within a resource industry made increasingly schizophrenic by the economic pressures to conform to prevailing neo-liberalism on the one hand, and the need for well-conceived, publicly regulated conservation measures on the other.

Grzetic reflects an emerging breed of feminist scholars, confident in the now well-established critique of male-dominated theories and phallogocentric ordering of the world, yet not succumbing to essentialist tendencies of valorizing feminine qualities. In the book, we meet sixteen fisherwomen from Newfoundland's south and west coasts. Along with scores of others, since the early '80s these women have joined their husbands on the boats to fish for lobster, lump, cod, and crab. As a skilled in-depth interviewer with no shortage of respect for, and rapport with, her subjects, Grzetic does full justice to the diversity of women's lived experience. Moreover, the author handily sets the ambitions, perceptions, values, and feelings of the interviewed fisherwomen against the backdrop of the massive social and economic changes in the province, changes that were precipitated by the 'rationalization' of the fisheries industry and the moratoria of the early '90s, which, in addition to many other devastating effects, displaced women from the few 'good' jobs they held in the processing plants.

Despite the fact that women have gone aboard to fish, their concern for the sustainability of marine life is a secondary theme emerging from Grzetic's work. As one interviewee says "It's destruction. And what about the shrimp? What's going to happen to that? The same thing. They go from one species to another: to take the pressure off the cod they go to the crab, to take the pressure off the crab they go after the shrimp. Then they do the same thing with lobster."

Although women now comprise one-fifth of all certified fish harvesters in Newfoundland, by their own accounts, they have not been given an enthusiastic reception and are often assumed to be dilettantes taking up fishing for the sole purpose of qualifying for EI benefits. As members of any 'good' reserve army, they are expected to return to the home once the

industry approximates an equilibrium, and take up their former unpaid posts as the 'skippers of the ground crew'. In this context, Grzetic analyzes the formative relationship between identity and language and weighs the normalizing "fisherman" against the awkwardness of the gender neutral, "fisherperson" or "fisher".

Grzetic's findings suggest that the feminization of fishing has not resulted in genuine integration, in which both men and women perform the same tasks; neither is it re-segregation in which women replace men in the occupation. Rather, the outcome appears to be ghettoization: while men control the flow of work, navigate the boats, and maintain the engines, women describe themselves as "helpers" and "assistants" who sort, cut, and ice the fish, bait the lines, and set the traps and nets.

Grzetic sheds light on the inherent contradictions of the recent 'professionalization' of fishers. She writes "in an industry that is increasingly characterized by too many fishermen chasing too few fish," fishers are now anointed 'entrepreneurs' each vying for market control. Although Grzetic did not take this up, one might wonder if the 'professionalization' imperative is a response to allowing women into the occupation - feminization has a tarnishing effect on any occupation and sends the message that it is on 'on the skids' with declining prestige, security, and compensation.

Health and safety issues scream from the pages of *Women Fishes These Days*. Most fisherwomen suffer from urinary tract infections and kidney infections, despite women's efforts to adjust their eating and drinking schedules to compensate for the lack of toilet facilities on the boats. Arthritic pain in knees, hands, shoulders, lower back, and hips are prevalent, a consequence of damp cold conditions. Women's injuries from falling in the boats go unreported, at least in part, because they feel that drawing attention to their injuries will be treated as evidence of their inferiority as fishers. High-risk fishing practices are the cause of most disputes between women and their husbands as men remain on the waters longer in worse weather, and go further from shore than what is comfortable for women. Grzetic explores the processes by which these high-risk practices are contested within the context of characteristically patriarchal marriages.

Cooperative relationships between those aboard are sometimes a matter of life and death, and the fisherwomen do report that "since going aboard, their relationships with their husbands have become closer". Grzetic exposes the limits of this new-found egalitarianism. Not surprisingly, the domestic abuse women experience within the home can spill over to the boat. But, the fisherwomen admit that they remain silent even amongst themselves on the thorny issue of gender-based violence - their unspoken words might be the loudest of all those in the book.

One could argue that Grzetic's discussion of women's compliance with, and resistance to, their own oppression is limited. Further, she relies on,

but leaves unexamined, the concept of the 'nervous system' in her analysis of the gendered political economy of the fisheries (from Taussig's *The Nervous System*). However, these are small concerns in light of what Grzetic has accomplished. That the book is based on her master's thesis makes the accomplishment all the more remarkable and is cause for eager anticipation of more work from this fine researcher!

Women Fishes These Days is an important book and I recommend it highly. The book will inspire graduate students who are in the early stages of their own thesis work. It will also serve very well on a list of required readings for a sociology, anthropology, or women's studies course on "Women and Work" at the undergraduate or even graduate level. It is likely to generate lively classroom discussion on feminist research methodologies, women's participation in relations of dominance, and the dynamic connection between structural labour market changes and women's work.

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