

# **The Transformation of Labor Geographies in the Crab Processing Industry of Eastern North Carolina**

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Transitions in regional economies and social structures arise out of the complex interaction of global processes and local events. The manifestations of these regional transformations include the restructuring of local industries and their labor forces, as well as the reworking of social ideologies. This paper investigates one such transformation, focusing upon labor restructuring in the crab processing industry of eastern North Carolina. In the early 1990s the crab processing industry faced a labor crisis based on the inability of the industry to continue to recruit workers from local labor sources. An alternative labor force was found in Mexican migrant women who were brought into the industry under the H-2-B temporary worker program. This change in the labor pool of a once quite localized industry is shown in this study to be a reflection of broader transformations in the regional economic base, social ideologies, and the internationalization of the industry itself.

## **Introduction**

The crab processing industry and the region of eastern North Carolina have a long history together, beginning in the early 1900s in the wake of the declining fin fishery. Before that time, both shrimp and crabs were considered by-catch and were thrown away or used as fertilizer (Stick, 1958). Crab processing did not always take place in buildings designed for that purpose. Most of the crab processing began as a cottage industry performed in private homes, usually by members of fishermen's families. Crab processing was later performed in plants that process other seafood as well, as most seafood is processed similarly and it requires little restructuring to shift from one type to another. The Chesapeake Bay crab operation began earlier and remained larger, but by 1995 the North Carolina fishery ranked third in Blue Crab production. In 1994, the state's crab catch exceeded its fish catch for the second year of the previous five (Griffith 1994).

In the early 1990s, however, a crisis began to emerge in the crab-processing industry. The major problem that faced the processing plants was not acquiring seafood or the set up of the processing houses, but as stated by one crab house manager, it is "...labor...finding it and keeping it" (Griffith,

1993). Despite recruiting attempts, local workers could no longer be found to perform the processing jobs, and as the older women aged and retired, younger members of the community would not step in to fill the gaps created. The processing jobs are typically tedious and smelly, requiring long hours at low wages. Local white women who had family ties to fishermen or black women from nearby minority neighborhoods have historically held the processing jobs. There were several impetuses for this change, one being that the increase in the prominence of tourism as a local industry provided the local women with more desirable employment alternatives. Another was that the younger women were being encouraged to get more education, thereby increasing job prospects. The establishment of Carteret Community College in Morehead City in 1963 and its subsequent development of a well respected nursing program in the 1980s contributed to this process. (Lewis, 1996; Chadwick, 1996).

In order for the industry to survive, an alternative labor force had to be found. Crab house managers began to bring in Mexican women, under the H-2B temporary worker program, as a means of filling in these gaps. This seemingly simple change in the labor pool has brought together two distinct groups

of workers with very different cultural experiences, and is indicative of the increasing internationalization of the industry itself: local linkages between people and the workplace, community and industry, are being dissolved, and at the same time international linkages are becoming more firmly established.

### **Methodology**

In order to assess this transformation, I examined the mechanisms by which local linkages have been undermined, and replaced with what may be called "global" connections, using two lines of inquiry. The first is extensive, and involves a broad-scale examination of the development and current status of the crab-processing industry and its workers in eastern North Carolina. Griffith's (1993) study of low wage labor in the US, a section of which focuses upon seafood processing workers in NC, and Mosher's (1993) thesis study on the crab pickers of eastern NC, provided empirical data on the women who work in this industry. I also used survey methods, calling managers across the region, in order to ascertain the state of the industry. The second line of inquiry is an intensive one, and involved an in-depth examination of the attitudes and beliefs of the workers themselves. Interviews allow for a greater understanding of the motivating factors behind an individual's participation in the industry. Further, it provides a means by which individual and social ideologies are internalized, and acted upon, by people.

This research is structured around the following questions: Given the historical background of labor in the industry, and looking beyond simply other job alternatives, what precipitated the industry's labor crisis in eastern North Carolina? Why did it become necessary to bring in migrant labor? What happened in terms of changes in attitudes and/or opportunities that made it more beneficial for younger locals to work outside of this industry and not take these jobs? Why were Mexican women a viable alternative labor source for this type of work?

In order to understand the transformation

of the crab processing industry, then, there is a need to examine specific events and people in light of their embeddedness within local social relations. In doing so, I focus on two groups. The first is the local women who previously dominated this labor pool. The interview questions presented to them sought to establish how they view this job and why locals are no longer willing to be employed within this industry. What other options have opened up at the local level for this group? The second group consists of Mexican migrant women, who form the new labor pool.<sup>1</sup> Why is it that Mexican migrants were willing to move into this labor niche? In other words, what specific socio-economic factors made this opportunity viable and desirable for the migrant workers?

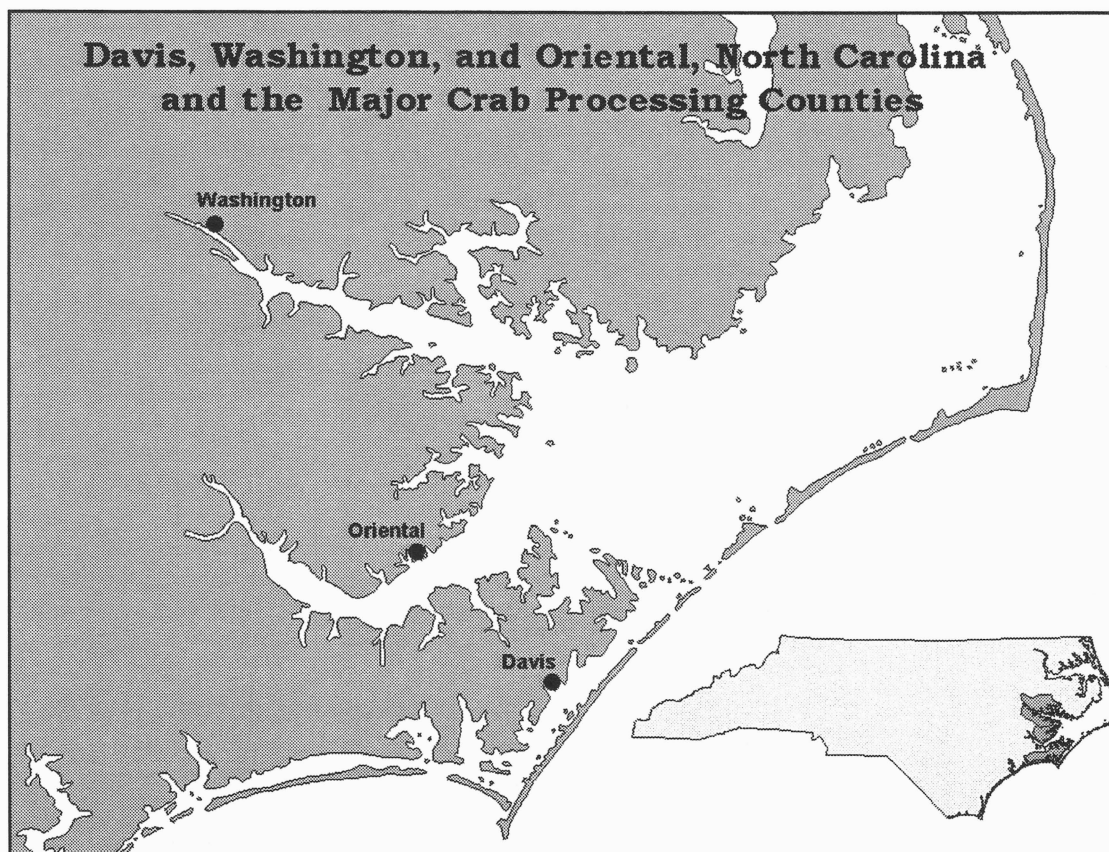
### **Theoretical Background**

The answers to such questions are found in the transformation of local social relations that were traditionally structured around ideologies, which included capitalism and patriarchy. I take capitalism to be a structure that encompasses economic activity engaged in for profit, one in which the owners of the means of production exploit workers for their labor power, and which often incorporates the particularities of place and space in its temporal manifestations. Patriarchy is the dominance of men in social structures generally, and particularly, the systematic subjugation of women by men.

Both of these structures are manifest at the empirical level, in the realm of practices, ideas and beliefs, and work together at local levels of action and interaction. Patriarchal ideologies often shape women's work experiences, and influence the manifestations of capitalism in that construction of some jobs as "women's work" serves capital

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1. In order to interview the Mexican workers, I enlisted the help of the translator that the crab house itself uses (Rachael Raymond). This translator's assistance was invaluable because she knew the crab house's staff and the migrants, and both trusted her.



**Map 1.**

concerns. Female labor can be labeled as “unskilled”, and therefore compensated by lower pay, effectively re-establishing the woman’s inferior status. In addition, any labor that can be associated with home and family, such as working with food, is deemed “natural” for women and therefore compensation. In this way, does not require special skills or high monetary any job that can use women’s labor can be minimally compensated, thereby increasing profits (Foord and Gregson, 1986; Massey and McDowell, 1984).

Griffith (1987) argues that low wage labor, even in advanced capitalism, is governed by non-market labor forces, placing it further outside regulatory controls. Non-market labor processes, which include coercion by the

deployment of established ideologies and myths about gender and racial divisions of labor, rely on kinship and informal social relations. For example, the industry may accentuate sexual or racial distinctions among workers in order to reinforce myths that certain groups of people are predisposed or better suited to assume certain positions in the international division of labor. Griffith notes that in the seafood processing industry, employers must utilize such myths concerning sexuality, ethnicity, and nationality, to assure supply of, and exert control over, labor. These myths consist of socially and culturally dictated norms concerning gender roles, the accepted definition of “women’s work”, and racial biases concerning status in the work force.

### Study Area

The crab houses focused upon in this investigation are located in Carteret, Pamlico, and Beaufort counties (see Map 1). These counties were chosen because they have the highest concentration of crab processing plants in North Carolina. One crab house was chosen from each county, Luther Lewis and Son in Davis, Carteret County; Washington Crab Co. in Washington, Beaufort County; and Garland Fulcher seafood in Oriental, Pamlico County. I selected Luther Lewis and Son (Figure 1) for in-depth investigation because of its close proximity to my own home in Morehead City.

The village of Davis is located about forty miles east of Beaufort, NC, which is the nearest commercial center. Primary economic activities have been the traditional means of subsistence. The older women pickers were all born and raised in the local area, and there are no ethnic black neighborhoods nearby from which to

draw workers. One of the local pickers is the owner's mother, Lue Lewis. Besides Lue there are only two local pickers left at this crab house, Leontine and Rosie, both in their 70s. About six years ago, the Lewis crab house started bringing in Mexican Migrant workers to meet their labor needs, and these workers now comprise the majority of the workforce.

### Crab House Setup

All seafood processing plants are set up in similar ways, regardless of the type of seafood they process. Most are family owned and operated, with family members occupying virtually every rung of the occupational ladder. The work force tends to be divided into management, office personnel, pickers (who number from 15 to 20 generally), and 'floor help' (men doing miscellaneous jobs around the plant). There are large vats and cookers in one part of the plant for cooking the



**Figure 1.** Frontage of Luther Lewis and Son Crab House.



**Figure 2.** Mexican and Local Pickers at Luther Lewis and Son, Davis, NC.

seafood, and long tables of various heights, for sitting and standing, where the meat is removed from the shells by the pickers, clad in hairnets and aprons. Mounds of raw shrimp, scallops or oysters, or cooked crabs, recently cooled, are placed in the center of the table, and as the meat is removed it is placed in plastic tubs for weighing (Figure 2).

The differing conditions under which the local and migrants workers were hired manifests itself in differing processing set ups for the two groups inside the crab house. The contrasting set ups can be related to contrasting conditions under which the women work. The Mexican workers are constrained by the provisions of their visas and often work under strict supervision, as well as submit to controlled living conditions enforced by their employers. In Mexico it is customary to stand and work diligently, and the migrants practice the same work techniques in the US. In contrast,

the local workers have a history with the crab house and the community, and often enjoy kinship ties to owners and managers. As a result, local women work under much more liberal and relaxed circumstances. They are seated at tables while cleaning crab, chatting and giving the observer the impression of friends seated around a kitchen table. In contrast, the migrant workers are standing and working in silence, giving the impression of a robotic assembly line. One crab house manager divulged that longer legs had to be welded to their crab picking tables in order to accommodate the different technique of the migrant workers.

The pickers are all paid at a "piece rate", meaning by the pound of crabmeat produced. The piece rate varies between crab houses, but at Luther Lewis and Son the workers are paid \$2.00 per pound. Approximately 10 to 15 pounds of whole crabs must be picked

to obtain one pound of picked meat. Minimum wage is currently \$5.35 an hour or about \$43 for an eight hour day. Using these figures, the picker must produce at least 21 pounds of finished crab meat to make minimum wage. That means between 210 and 315 crabs a day, or between 25 and 40 crabs an hour, or a crab every two minutes! If the worker does not pick enough crabs to make minimum wage, the crab house by law must make up the difference. It can be determined then, that an increase in minimum wage under the piece rate system does not benefit workers, but forces them to work harder. The crab house may be forced to use fewer workers or fire some because the crab plant can not make up worker wages and maintain profitability.

### **Traditional Labor Force**

The community of Davis is rural in nature and employment was previously dominated by agricultural or fishery pursuits. Kinship ties and social networks were prominent in determining employment options. The local job market is gendered, as there were few job opportunities available to women outside of caring for children or the elderly, housework, agricultural labor, or working in the seafood houses. Men were expected to support the family so they were privileged in terms of education and job opportunities. None of the local pickers interviewed had finished high school, completing formal education only through the 7th or 8th grade (Chadwick, 1997; Lewis, 1996).

Lue Lewis refers to the relationship between pickers and management at the crab house as "...one big family". The other two pickers, Leontine and Rosie, are old friends of the Lewis family. The women concur in their assessment of the "down East" area where they grew up. Lue says "...it wasn't good but we didn't know it" (Lewis, 1997). Leontine says "...we were poor but we didn't know it...everybody was that way...all alike...we had all we could eat." (Chadwick, 1996). Both women describe their processing jobs in similar terms. Lue states "...its the greatest...like a

quilting party...like a spelling bee...not like an average job...we're able to talk and carry on, stop and take a break when we want...". Leontine agrees "...its the best job I ever had...".

This association of the job with the ideologies of family and housework tends to place the work outside the realm of strictly economic pursuits and into that of housework and a "woman's place". The relaxed atmosphere further equates the workplace with the home, kitchen, and private "female" spaces. This has traditionally justified minimal compensation because capital identifies the work as "natural" and supplemental to the woman's primary role as housewife and/or mother. The relational ties between worker and owner/manager also blur the lines between employer and employee, wage labor and family labor. These ties were previously considered a benefit, since the close ties allowed the workers flexibility in work schedules and a certain bargaining posture to use in negotiations of wages and conditions. These ties kept abuse at a minimum, because social repercussions would surely ensue. There are no such ties for the migrants in the US, but they work together to ensure fair treatment in the workplace and optimum utilization of social services. Now legal action serves the purpose once provided by social and community ties.

### **Mexican Migrant Workers**

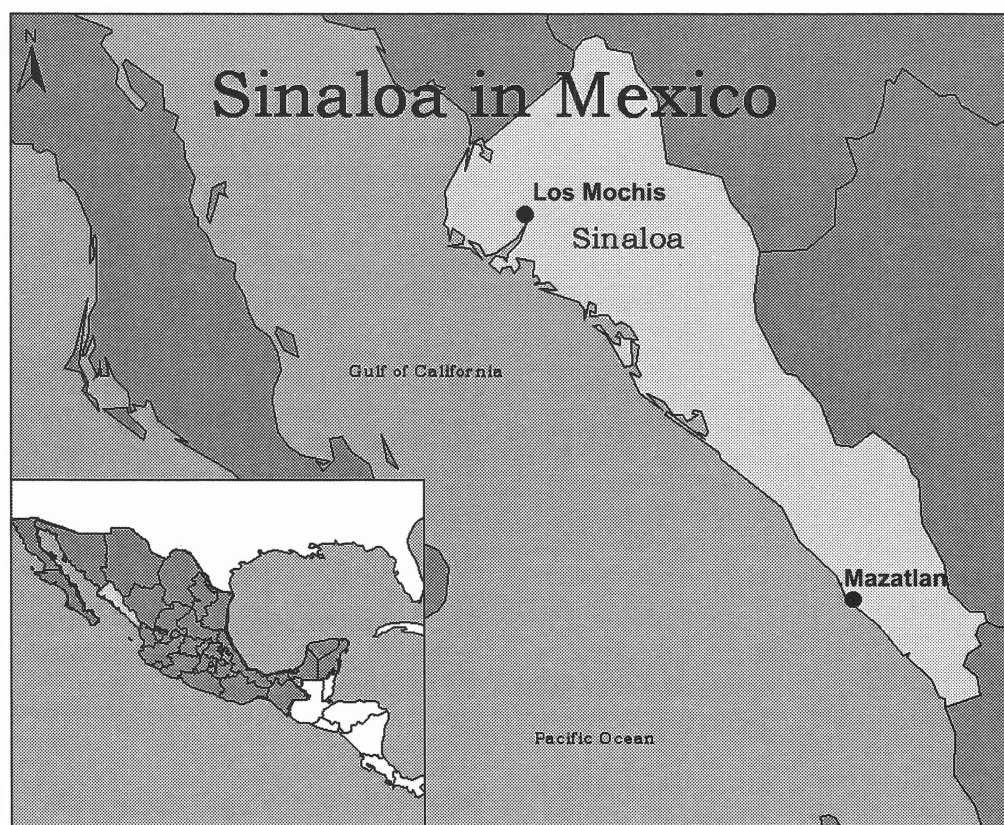
Many parallels can be drawn between the older local workers and the Mexican migrants that now make up most of the work force. One is the similarities between the two geographical areas from which the workers came; the "down East" region and its companion region of Mexico. Except for one, all the Mexican pickers at L.L. and Son came from the same small village in the state of Sinaloa, called Gabriella Leva Solarno, near Los Mochis (Map 2). The Migrant pickers were recruited in Sinaloa by the staff of the crab house there in which they work after the season in North Carolina is over. It is called the "Fish Export of the Pacific", and acts as an informal labor contractor for the US crab houses. Seafood

processors found out about the possibility of using migrant workers by word of mouth from employers in other local industries, such as poultry processing. The process of securing these workers required paperwork on both sides of the border and compliance with state and federal stipulations, such as sponsor requirements (Johnson, 1997; Griffith, 1993).

The migrant workers relate that the procedure for processing seafood and the type of crab used (the blue crab) are the same. The only difference is the unit of measure, as Mexico uses the Metric system, and the pay rate, because the workers get paid more in the US for crab picking due to our minimum wage legislation. The Mexican pickers also concur that the two villages, Davis and Gabriella, are "... the same ... small, little town[s] ...".

They agree that in their home village there are "...no jobs...only ... agriculture and seafood ... everybody does everything ...all the same ..."(Ramona and Patricia, 1997). Kinship networks are also used extensively in Mexico to recruit labor for the industry. All the migrant workers at the Lewis House, except one, were related in some way as extended family. The Mexican workers family ties between themselves and in Mexico serve as an equally important labor control mechanism. Relational networks serve to facilitate the creation of impromptu labor unions.

The Mexican women were subject to similar gender discrimination in their home job market. Mexican men are privileged in terms of education and employment opportunities. None of the Mexican pickers from Sinaloa



**Map 2.**

had finished High School, and most had only completed through the 4th or 5th grade. The one Mexican picker that had finished High School was from Mexico City, and she was only picking crabs as a temporary means of supporting herself because she left her previous job. She left the crab house the next year to work full time in a local motel.

The primary concern of the Mexican workers is their families, and all stated that they endured the long journey and the separation from loved ones so that they could provide more money to secure a better future for their children. They stated that they would work anywhere "... wherever it is better" (Ramona and Patricia, 1997), in order to do this. All the migrant workers stated that they attended Catholic Mass and that the church was an important part of their lives. The Mexican workers recruitment via kinship ties serves the same purpose as that used in the local labor force, by making the lines between paid labor and home labor less distinct. Patriarchy and gender discriminations serve again to restrict women to the lowest strata of the labor hierarchy, in which monetary compensation is the least.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

The current labor crisis in the seafood processing industry can be explained in terms of the dismantling of previously localized linkages between worker, community and industry. As internationalization of the industry increases, and diversification of other economic sectors in the region develops, the historically close connection between economic pursuit and community life has been altered. There has been a generational shift in expectations as to acceptable and appropriate employment for women which was encouraged by advances in education and opportunities for the local women. The rise of the tourist industry and the employment alternatives that accompanied it have provided local women with job alternatives that do not involve the more disagreeable factors found in seafood processing, such as the smell and monotony.

It can be seen that gender and cultural ideologies tended to shape women's expectations in both of the labor forces—the older local and the new migrant. The past local labor pool and present labor pool are both characterized by little formal education, which corresponds to the limited employment alternatives available outside of the processing plants. The deteriorated condition of Mexico's economy, and the inequality and injustice that shape its society, have influenced the migrant women's job choices and expectations. The social reality of both past and present groups is that of working class, with few expectations of upward mobility. This may partially explain the success of the relational networks in structuring job opportunities.

This is neither a unique situation nor industry action. Capital can and does maintain its global nature today because of its ability to access and utilize diverse groups and areas to meet its needs. It is unique, however, for this particular industry in this particular area to now be accessing such a distant labor source. What was once a local industry has become globalized, not just in terms of labor, but also in terms of competition from foreign sources of crabmeat.

What are implications of this transformation for the broader rural "down East" region? As a result of the importation of these new migrant workers, there is now the establishment of new international communities, or enclaves. The Mexican migrants have their own dynamic relationship with other groups in the area, but are culturally and historically distinct. There is also a changing portrayal of this local industry—it is no longer part of a community, no longer blurring family and business ties, but is now increasingly seen as a separate, distinct economic concern for profit. This change in the traditional connection between the industry owners and the labor force can be felt by merely watching the difference in how the two groups work in the crab house. The older local women sit at the table and laugh or chat together, evidently enjoying the

work they are doing. Conversely, the Mexican women stand at the picking tables and work in silence, with no indication of similar enjoyment or relaxation. To the Mexican women, it is a job and no more, there is no personal connection between themselves and the local community, no continuity between their family history and the local history. They are glad to do the work, but owe nothing to the industry beyond labor participation.

Because of these transformations, the manipulation of relational ties in the local area can no longer be relied upon to maintain the labor pool from local sources. It is true that the survival of the industry has been secured by the introduction of this new source of labor, but the industry that survives now is not the same entity as that which the local women became a part of twenty or thirty years ago. It is now more of a capital concern than a community concern, and the linkages between community and industry have been altered forevermore.

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