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Culture for Sale: An Ethnographic Study of Commodification at the Westwego Shrimp Lot of Louisiana

Rachael Wissing
University of New Orleans

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Culture for Sale: An Ethnographic Study of Commodification at the Westwego Shrimp Lot of
Louisiana

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

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In
Urban Studies

by

Rachael Claire Wissing

B.A. University of New Orleans, 2004
M.S. University of New Orleans,

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the marketing strategies employed by vendors at the Westwego shrimp lot in Westwego, Louisiana. Given the fluctuating market conditions and rising costs of seafood production, seafood vendors in the Gulf Coast region must look continuously for new ways to market their product as a cultural commodity. This thesis argues that shrimp becomes a cultural commodity at the Westwego shrimp lot, and that through marketing strategies, vendors at the Westwego shrimp lot both resist and accept certain aspects of globalization. The presence of imports, a presence that emerges in the context of globalization, poses a large threat to the industry's survival. Vendors both consciously and unconsciously market shrimp as food and symbol. An analysis of their efforts may contribute to understanding the process of cultural commodification.

Keywords

Cultural commodity, Westwego shrimp lot, globalization, Self-commodification, Westwego, Louisiana,

INTRODUCTION

The shrimp industry in Louisiana often restructures the way it functions to satisfy the needs of both shrimpers and consumers. The ways that shrimp are caught, sold, marketed, and processed are consistent with changes in technology and consumer choices. For instance changes in the way shrimp nets are made have allowed shrimpers to catch more seafood at one time. The strategies employed by members of the shrimp industry are essential to keep the business lucrative and productive in the Gulf South. The site of this fieldwork takes place at the Westwego shrimp lot in Westwego, Louisiana, which is an outdoor seafood market. The Westwego shrimp lot (henceforth WSL) specializes in selling and shipping seafood from the Gulf Coast region. The WSL utilizes similar strategies for marketing and similar technological changes which are consistent with the larger shrimp industry. I have analyzed these strategies carried out at the WSL as a smaller slice of the larger shrimp industry in Louisiana. This thesis argues that shrimp becomes a cultural commodity at the WSL and that through marketing strategies vendors at the WSL both resist and accept certain elements of globalization. The presence of imports, a presence that emerges in the context of globalization, poses a large threat to the industry's survival. Vendors both consciously and unconsciously market shrimp as food and symbol.

Shrimp is a cultural commodity at the WSL in the sense that there is a process behind the selling and buying that is more involved than the way other products, specifically food, are bought and sold. Shrimp are part of an exchange between vendor and consumer and it is in the process of exchange that the cultural value of shrimp arises. The WSL simultaneously sells shrimp and culture. Shrimp, in Louisiana, can be viewed as a representation of culture because

the image of shrimp or the eating of shrimp can evoke attachments to heritage, history, tradition, and authenticity. Vendors accentuate certain aspects of these larger phenomena when selling seafood at the WSL. For example, many vendors wear the white rubber boots known as “shrimp boots” for function (to keep one’s feet dry) and because the boots are tied to an image of the authentic shrimper. The commodity itself, shrimp, thus takes on its own set of symbolic meanings and connotations that are linked more to the context of purchase and elements of the exchange process rather than the food itself.

The marketing strategies which I examine are ones that have been presented as themes in the data and have been expressed to me through interviews and conversations with informants, and through observations I have made at the WSL. What I have deemed as “marketing strategies”, some informants call “survival techniques.” These strategies or techniques are responsible for contributing to the cultural commodification of shrimp at the WSL. Strategies employed at the WSL include, but are not limited to: marketing seafood as a non-luxury good, the reliance on family and social networks, and vendors accentuating parts of their persona to appeal to local and tourist customers. Marketing, at the WSL, pertains to the individual development of new techniques of selling shrimp that sustains the overall industry because each vendor uses his or her own techniques to increase the amount of seafood sold.

Shrimping in Louisiana is a trade that is often passed down through family members. Most often fathers teach their sons the trade of shrimping and mothers and daughters are relied on to do the selling, marketing, cleaning and other support-oriented tasks. While this is not always the case, these gender roles are evident at the WSL, and informants have told me that this is often the way that the work is broken up. Discussions with informants make it clear that having the family element is essential to the industry’s survival.

Kenny, a retired shrimper, explains that, “Nobody ups and decides to be a shrimper; it’s in your blood.” Kenny acknowledges the importance and necessity of having a family connection to the trade. The shrimp boats and equipment are expensive and the trade is not an easy one to learn without the guidance of an expert, and usually this guidance is found in one’s grandfather, father or uncle. Furthermore, when boats break or problems come up, families often rely on each other to help remedy the problem or borrow a boat or piece of equipment. Family connections are significant at the WSL on the vending side of the business. Many of the vendors have family ties to the shrimp industry and commonly husband and wives and siblings work together. Those hired at the lot are often family members or have an inside connection to vendors at the WSL.

Marketing shrimp and seafood at the WSL as a local or “place-specific” good is one way vendors are able to keep the product affordable and competitive with the price of imports. The WSL accepts credit cards, cash and food stamp cards as forms of payment allowing consumers of all economic backgrounds a way to purchase seafood. Seafood at the WSL appeals to tourists and locals in similar ways. The tourists are looking for something that is unlike what they can get at home, and the locals are purchasing something that is a regular food in Southeast Louisiana. In my observations the locals are not only purchasing a regular grocery item, but also by making this purchase at a place like the WSL, they are creating a connection to something that has value in heritage, tradition and history. In this sense the expectations for the local and the tourist are similar since both groups are seeking a connection to a specific place. The expectations of the purchased product differ in the way that the local may be consuming seafood as a way to situate themselves as “super-local.” By the “super-local” I mean that the purchaser is transcending the local and claiming a deeper connection to the seafood as a way of proving their investment to the region.

Another marketing strategy used at the WSL is self-commodification. The vendors sometimes accentuate parts of their personality to appeal to consumers. White rubber boots are often worn to indicate authenticity. The white boots subtly imply that the products are fresh and authentic by suggesting that the men and women wearing them have just come from the water and have just caught the seafood, which is sometimes, but by no means always the case. This thesis examines several types of marketing strategies and survival techniques that have been expressed by informants and have been observed at the WSL and are consistent with those that occur in the larger shrimp industry in Louisiana.



Figure 1.1 White rubber boots.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SHRIMPING IN LOUISIANA

In South East Louisiana fishing and shrimping communities line the coast. Shrimping is an occupation which is a traditional one and is often passed from one generation to the next.

Herbert Padgett asserts that some of these small fishing communities in coastal Louisiana have been in existence for more than two hundred and forty years (1969:486). Before the arrival of the French, according to Thomas Becnel, natives to the area were trapping seafood (1963:1).

In, *A History of The Louisiana Shrimp Industry 1867-1961*, Becnel outlines the shifts that have transformed the shrimp industry over time, along with the relationship that the Louisiana shrimp industry had and continues to have with its surrounding areas. He traces the development of shrimping from a means of sustenance to a commercial industry. Becnel explains that a few technological shifts in the way nets were used to catch shrimp and the way shrimp were processed and canned were responsible for propelling shrimping into a fully-fledged industry in the most recognizable sense. He attributes the rise of the industry, beginning in the early 1860's, to the transition from a haul seine net to a trawl net. The haul seine is a type of net that is designed to be dragged along the bottom of a body of water. The haul seine is operated from shore and the net is buoyed at the top and weighted at the bottom. One end of the haul seine net remains on land and the other end of the net is used to encircle and catch shrimp. The trawl is a net that is used from boats. It is a conical shaped net that is also dragged along the sea bottom. It has obvious advantages over the haul seine because it is not limited to being used from shore. Becnel explains that:

Because of the tremendous advantages over the haul seine, the trawl revolutionized the shrimp industry.

First the trawl allowed fishermen a wider range of fishing grounds since deeper water did not prevent its effective use. Second, the trawling operation cut manpower to two or three men. Third the trawl yielded

greater production per man. Fourth, the trawl led to the opening of new grounds. And finally, it halted the seasonal dependence on shrimp in shallow water (1963:20).

In addition to these advances in net technology, Becnel credits the opening of a shrimp canning factory in Barataria Bay, Louisiana in 1867 for the transformation, “from a local business venture to a small-scale localized industry” (1963:1). Becnel uses the opening of the factory as an official indication of an emerged industry. The same year the processing plant opened, a Mardi Gras parade entitled the, “Feast of Epicurus,” paraded down Canal Street featuring floats that honored shrimp, oysters and other foods (1963:4). These types of public celebrations in Louisiana are indicative of the ongoing importance that seafood has in everyday life and serves as an example of part of the process of cultural commodification.

Becnel also documents marketing strategies that have helped the shrimping industry flourish. For instance, Becnel claims that:

Shortly after the trawl replaced the seine and led to larger catches, the marketing of shrimp in headless form created new outlets. When offshore discoveries of shrimp expanded production, frozen shrimp became an important marketing form to supply the growing demand throughout the United States (1963: iv).

The types of changes recorded by Becnel are relevant not only in the larger industry but the ways in which the WSL operates to catch, sell, and market shrimp and other seafood products. The WSL has implemented marketing strategies where gaps in consumption exist much in the same way as described by Becnel concerning the opening of canning and processing plants. Those involved in the industry in the 1860s saw a way to expand the use of shrimp and the amount of shrimp to create more lucrative profits. The vendors at the WSL rely on various techniques to broaden their consumer base, such as: offering deals to regular customers, handing out key chains and trinkets featuring the stall’s logo as a way of advertising, making business deals with local restaurants, wearing white rubber boots while vending and handing out business

cards with personal phone numbers. The WSL has been through many changes over its history, as will be discussed in greater detail later, to ensure that customer demands are met. In 1963 Becnel voiced some of the same concerns which are present in today's discussion of the shrimp industry. Becnel projected that, "The key to the industry's future seems to be the expansion into new fishing grounds, revitalization of the grounds which have produced sparingly in recent years, and curbing growing imports." Becnel's comment implies that there is a necessity to continuously find new ways to catch and market shrimp.

GULF COAST SUPPORT AND COMPETITION

In order to understand how the WSL and the shrimp industry in Louisiana function today it is useful to address the concept of globalization as a way to connect both the market and the industry to regional, national, and international markets. Globalization, in this context, refers to the exchange of commodities across boundaries and interconnections that the WSL has to a larger flow of goods. In the interest of applying and understanding globalization to the larger research it is relevant to connect Louisiana's shrimp industry and the WSL to other markets and other industries. It is not my intention to try and include the complexities of the entire industry or to trace all of the global connections of the shrimp industry, but to establish that there are links between markets and industries and that these markets and industries do not stand alone. Theodore Lewellen explains that, "Contemporary globalization is the increasing flow of trade, finance, culture, ideas, and people brought about by the sophisticated technology of communications and travel and by the worldwide spread of neoliberal capitalism, and it is the local and regional adaptations to and resistances against these flows" (2002:7).

The Gulf Coast states, including Texas, Mississippi, Alabama and to some extent Florida, have maintained a competitive relationship with each other concerning their respective

seafood industries. Geography plays a crucial role in connecting these states considering that the Mississippi River connects to the Mississippi Sound in Biloxi and to Mobile Bay in Alabama. The Gulf of Mexico connects all the previously mentioned states. Paul Durrenberger pays special attention to these connections in his book, *Gulf Coast Soundings: Policy and People in the Mississippi Shrimp Industry*. Durrenberger situates Biloxi, Mississippi as place where wealthy New Orleanians went to escape the threat of yellow fever during the early nineteenth century (1996:26). As New Orleanians ventured east, connections were made between Mississippi and Louisiana. Eric Wolf asserts that when looking at places, such as cultures, markets, states and nations, we should not view them as isolated, but rather try to understand that they may be connected to other places through economic, ecological, political, and demographic systems (1983:3). Both Durrenberger and Wolf make it clear that there are interconnections that exist between markets and that these connections are essential to the movement and flow of commodities.

The shrimp industry in Louisiana also deals with these connections in trying to combat imports and set comparable and competitive prices. The WSL is largely connected to other parts of the state of Louisiana and has a strong connection to New Orleans. In addition to locals shopping at the market, buyers from inland Louisiana procure seafood to be sold for profit in places where seafood is not as readily available. One informant, Terry explains that, “It’s [the WSL] well known, it’s known throughout the country. You’d be surprised people that know the shrimp lot in Westwego. I mean all over the country.”

Restaurants in New Orleans, and especially in the French Quarter, use fresh seafood as a means of building a reputation as an authentic eatery that relies on local foods. For instance, the Redfish Grill restaurant has a billboard that advises, “Friends don’t let friends eat frozen fish.”

I am sure that not all New Orleans seafood restaurants purchase their seafood from the WSL, nor do all serve fresh, local seafood. However, I have witnessed restaurateurs buying fresh seafood at the WSL with the intention of featuring these local products on the restaurant's menu. Many of these representatives have relationships with specific vendors. One informant explained that if the vendors have a good enough relationship with the buyer then seafood will be set aside or deals will be made to ensure a long-term business relationship.

ECONOMIC FLUCTUATIONS

The shrimp industry certainly has experienced its share of adversity concerning its position as a commercial industry. Most of my informants express concern for the viability of the trade. The two factors that are mentioned and seen to be the most threatening are imports and the price of fuel. Despite several obstacles my informants seem to express a sense of optimism concerning the future of shrimping in Louisiana. This optimism stems from the large cultural and economic contributions of the industry coupled with the ongoing support for fishers and shrimpers. United States Senator Mary Landrieu of Louisiana highlights the contribution of fishers to the state claiming:

Our state is the nation's top producer of shrimp. Shrimping is a very important activity in coastal Louisiana and is, in fact, intricately bound into the very culture of coastal communities. This industry provides hundreds of jobs, and its economic impact of hundreds of millions of dollars throughout the state. And thousands of recreational shrimpers participate in shrimping for their own personal use as food or bait (Gallagher 2003).

When I asked Kenny, an informant, how he views the current state of the industry he explained that, "[I]t's [the industry] been dwindling for years. Since the storm [Hurricane Katrina] and imports got a lot to do with it. Right now I say you get less money than what you

got than say the late seventies early eighties you look at fuel, insurance, repairs, how you going to make it?” Since the shrimping industry has long been in trouble financially fishers have become accustomed to relying on social networks to sustain their livelihoods. Those social networks include farmers markets to vend shrimp, seafood alliances and seafood organizations. Shrimp prices are declining as fuel prices are increasing leaving some, like Roger Schumpelt, to claim that, “We are pretty much trading shrimp for fuel” (Haig-Brown 2006: 27). The price of fuel causes great concern for shrimpers because they are unable to get around the problem. Other threats to the viability of the industry may be remedied in a way that fuel costs may not. The price of fuel is not negotiable. However, strategies for marketing and selling shrimp may be altered or imposed.

Seafood alliances are instrumental in promoting the benefits of buying local, Louisiana shrimp. Having a national government that does little to regulate imported shrimp requires shrimpers to become involved in lobbying to impose stricter regulations on the imported shrimp. The formal social networks that have been used for the purpose of saving their industry legislatively resonates with Marvin Harris’ assertion that members of a culture need to have their own voice: “In a democracy, only those who speak up are heard; and friendly outsiders alone never provide a secure power base. This means that for empowerment each group needs to learn to speak loudly in its own voice and to rely primarily on its own material and ideological resources” (1999:115). In 2002 the Louisiana Seafood Promotion and Marketing Board, in an effort to combat imports, began a persistent marketing program to emphasize the quality of shrimp caught in the wild (Gallagher 2003). Many other seafood alliances and nonprofit agencies have followed this type of campaigning by urging consumers to purchase Louisiana seafood. The prevalent theme consistent in these types of campaigns is the superiority of

Louisiana wild-caught shrimp over imports in quality and taste. Even national grocery chains, such as Whole Foods Market, have begun promoting Louisiana shrimp with signs suggesting that shoppers, “Buy local.” It seems that these types of campaigns will become increasingly important for those invested in the industry. When I asked Kenny what he thinks the future of shrimping will likely be he explained that, “Both my Grandpas told me don’t be a fisherman because when you graduate high school fishing won’t be around. But I think there’s always gonna be fishing in some kind of way. Look at a kindergarten class and someone’s gonna be the next president. Look at your younger generation and that’s your next generation of shrimpers.” With that said, Kenny recognizes that strategies will have to be applied for the industry to survive.

SETTING: THE WESTWEGO SHRIMP LOT

During the late 1960s Andrew Adams (known locally as Papa Rock) set up his pickup truck filled with ice chests of fresh seafood (mostly blue crabs) on the side of the expressway in Westwego. Papa Rock set up daily and the word of his success spread motivating other fishers to sell seafood in the same area. Eventually the section of the side of the road became overcrowded and the person who owns the land, Ronnie, where the fishers were setting up seized a business opportunity and started charging rent to the vendors. The operation slowly evolved in scale and size. Currently the Westwego shrimp lot is housed in a gravel parking lot that is equipped with seventeen covered stalls, running water, a store and restrooms. The name, “Westwego shrimp lot” is an unofficial one since there are no signs claiming this title. However, this is the name that the locals, vendors and customers have used since its inception. Papa Rock’s son Terry now owns and cares for his family’s business which includes seven of the seventeen stalls on the property. The other ten stalls and the store are rented or owned privately by other independent

vendors. Each stall, regardless of the owner, is represented as an independent operation. All the stalls have different names and signs. The differences create a more competitive environment, allowing shoppers to walk around the entire lot to find the best deal. In reality, most of the vendors have the exact same prices for shrimp and seafood. Even when prices vary they are competitive.

The Westwego shrimp lot is located off highway U.S. 90 in Westwego, Louisiana. It is approximately fourteen miles from downtown New Orleans and is easy to get to by car. Cars enter the lot via the highway and choose any open spot in the gravel lot to park. Usually the customers will park and immediately begin searching for the best deal on whatever seafood they have come to purchase. The vendors (mostly women) call out to those that park directly in front of their stalls. People from all age groups and economic backgrounds visit the market to shop for inexpensive, fresh seafood. Currently shrimp are sold for between \$3.50 and \$5.75 per pound at the WSL. This is far cheaper than the prices at retail stores, such as, Whole Foods Market, where the same shrimp are sold for between \$9.00 and \$18.00 per pound. The Crescent City Farmer's market is fairly inexpensive, offering shrimp at \$7.00 per pound. Whole Foods Market offers the seafood as a high-end product, whereas, the other markets sell inexpensive "everyday" food.



Figure 2.1 Ice chest with shrimp.

The vendors at the WSL take payment in the forms of cash, credit cards, food stamps and local checks. Although the market is known throughout the country, local residents are responsible for the majority of the business at the WSL. The market is representative of a place where locals go to pick up something for dinner, where tourists go to marvel at fresh seafood and sign up for swamp tours (at the back of the lot there is a place for this), and where business people from inland Louisiana go to buy seafood to resell it at a profit. The market serves what local residents consider ordinary cuisine. This is in contrast to other places in the country where seafood, even on a local level, is marketed as a high-end or luxury good.

The vendors sell products in covered stalls that are placed side by side with ten stalls on one side and the other seven directly across the parking lot. On one side of the parking lot the ten stalls are: Rock's Seafood, Ruth's, Sue's, Ruth Ann and Rob's, A&B Seafood, Debbie's Seafood, Amy's Seafood Market, The Crab Shack, Naturally N'awlins, and Seafood Connection. The other side of the parking lot includes: Captain Jonathan's, Mary Ann's, Anna Lee's and four unmarked stalls. There is a restroom on each side of the lot. There is also a store, Market Wego, on one side. The typical setup of a stall includes a long table with ice-chests full of shrimp marked with handwritten price tags. Each vendor may have frozen or refrigerated specialty product, such as frog legs, which is kept in a refrigerator near the back of the stall. In Louisiana shrimp and certain types of fish can be caught fresh most of the year. Seasonal items such as, crawfish and crabs, may be displayed at the front of the stalls in crates or hampers. These products tend to sell quickly and often the stalls with crabs and crawfish create long lines of customers.

The hot summer months in Louisiana do not create any special problems or burdens according to the vendors I have spoken with during my fieldwork. In contrast the winter months when the temperatures drop and the vendors are digging around in ice all day create greater discomfort. Ivis, a vendor, explains, "I like to work outdoors for the most part, but being wet and cold in the winter is no picnic." Other than minor complaints, that happen at all places of employment, the vendors seems to be fairly content doing their jobs and the market functions smoothly most of the time.

The sentiment at the WSL is similar to the one in the restaurant where I work and may have been my initial attraction to the research. In both situations there is a diverse clientele, employees work long days on their feet, the management is involved with individual sales on a

minimal level and coworkers pass the time by teasing one another. Overall, the atmosphere of the seafood market is alluring and attractive. The WSL is appealing because there is a visual connection to where one's food comes from. Visiting the market allows the shopper to catch a glimpse of an industry and a market that is unique and not ordinarily seen by outsiders to the industry. The WSL is a rich and important enclave which is representative of Louisiana heritage and culture.



Figure 3.1 One side of the WSL.

SURVIVAL STRATEGIES OF WESTWEGO SHRIMP LOT VENDORS

Those involved with shrimping in Louisiana have implemented new and innovative practices to ensure the trade's survival. I argue that the use of history and heritage to increase sales may be

considered a survival strategy. Other strategies may include self-commodification and maintaining a family connection. Things like shrimp, white rubber boots and crawfish are commodities that exist in a cultural context and have become synonymous with Louisiana. Alison Leitch (2003) explores the phenomena of regular commodities or food commodities becoming responsible for defining a region, as she shows in her discussion of the ways in which pork fat in Carrara, Italy has become a symbolic of the town it is made in. The pork fat was relatively insignificant to outsiders until its existence was threatened by the European Union's guidelines of food preparation. In resistance to these guidelines the Slow Food movement was born and emerged in the interest of protecting "endangered foods." Leitch explains that the movement has gained notoriety by being politically affiliated (2003:437).

Leitch traces the pork fat (*lardo*), "as it has moved from a commodity with a relatively contained set of meanings for local people to its current role as a widely circulating symbol of an endangered food for the Slow Food movement" (2003:456). In post-Katrina New Orleans and the surrounding areas, this same type of commodification occurs for the city itself. Outsiders, along with locals, are more invested than ever in the future of New Orleans and historic preservation and food preservation efforts make this clear. Food in New Orleans, such as gumbo, red beans and rice, jambalaya, seafood, and king cake give the city its own unique identity. The WSL exists because seafood is important and symbolic. Leitch explains that, "As a direct result of this campaign [Slow Food], *lardo* has also acquired a new meaning as an exotic item of consumption for middle-class and local consumers alike" (2003:456). Through the process of turning something into a cultural commodity, meanings and agendas change. Often the commodity itself can give a place a specific identity. The more endangered a food or practice, the more important and symbolic it potentially becomes.

Processes of globalization are often responsible for enhancing a commodity's importance or meaning. Recently, scholars have viewed globalization as a process of both resistance and acceptance. Previously globalization was viewed as a force responsible for stamping out cultural traditions, values and norms. According to Ulf Hannerz globalization may be viewed as a progression that allows for new creative mixtures of local cultures. Richard Wilk says that people may move through a global marketplace while still retaining their identities (Wilk 2006:7). In his discussion of food in Belize Wilk importantly notes that, "If globalization indeed crushes local culture, there should be nothing of the kind left in the region" (2006:10). Clearly this is not the case in Belize or any other place affected by processes of globalization. Instead, cultures manage to exist separate from the connections implied in globalization and remain distinct, viable and changing. Undoubtedly, the processes of globalization that have brought imported seafood to American markets have shifted the way business is conducted at the WSL. These processes have created a need for combating and competing with imports. The presence of imports creates an opportunity to market Louisiana shrimp to other parts of the country. Since there is a necessity to combat imports shrimpers are looking for new ways to market Louisiana shrimp nationally. Wilk explains that, "Tradition is as much an active creation as any innovation or borrowing. Keeping things the same sometimes requires just as much effort and work as changing them" (2006:122). Vendors at the WSL protect tradition and heritage while embracing modern selling practices.

In an attempt to understand globalization through food, James Watson (1997) explores how the introduction of McDonald's restaurants affected those living in Hong Kong. He explains that "The people of Hong Kong have embraced American-style fast foods, and appear to be in the vanguard of a worldwide culinary revolution. But they have not been stripped of

their cultural traditions, nor have they become ‘Americanized’ in any but the most superficial of ways” (1997:79-80). Watson points out that McDonald’s does not change culture. He defines culture as a, “set of ideas, reactions and expectations that is constantly changing as people and groups themselves change” (1997:8). In most instances people are not changing for McDonald’s, but the reverse is true. Although the marketing techniques at the WSL are slightly different from those identified by Watson, the adaptation strategies are similar. The vendors at the WSL are consistently tweaking the way seafood is sold to appeal to a larger consumer base. Accepting payment with food stamp cards and credit cards certainly appeals to more consumers.

In, *Consuming Geographies: We Are Where We Eat* (1997), David Bell and Gill Valentine examine the social, cultural and symbolic meanings that food has taken on in Western society. They argue that food is so significant that specific cuisines can be attached to places. In addition they point out that regional foods like escargot may be eaten as sustenance, but may also be consumed to establish national identity (1997:204). This is also the case with shrimp in Louisiana. Locals with whom I have spoken say they eat shrimp that was caught in Louisiana as a way to connect personal identity with a local one.

Through ethnographic interviews and research Ivonne Vizcarra Bordi constructs a model of how something becomes a cultural commodity by looking at the “Marias” in Mexico City (2006). The Marias come from rural areas into the city to sell handmade tortillas, tacos and tlacoyos. Much of their success comes from the indigenous package they sell. These women are seen as folkloric figures in traditional dress. Bordi argues that the increased presence of the Marias in Mexico City is in direct resistance to the process of globalization. The Marias are resisting those elements of globalization which make it difficult for traditional aspects of culture to exist. In discussing the process of making something a cultural commodity Bordi points to

nostalgia as an important component and the desire for a connection to food and tradition. The seafood industry in Louisiana thrives on this type of desire to keep tradition alive. Locals say they are connected to a past by eating what those who came before them ate.

Bordi insists that globalization does not, in fact, obliterate culture. On the contrary, Bordi maintains that often this type of resistance shapes and strengthens a national identity (2006:97). The existence of Marias in traditional clothing in Mexico City is parallel to men at the WSL wearing the white rubber boots that are known as shrimp boots. The white boots have come to symbolize an entire industry. The White Boot Brigade is a nonprofit organization that uses the symbol of the white rubber boot to market Louisiana shrimp nationally. Mardi Gras beads and parade throws also feature the white boots along with plastic shrimp, alligators, crabs, crawfish, and other such symbols of Louisiana. The visual of the white boots is representative of a historical context for Louisiana that is comparable to the sentiment evoked by the Marias' traditional dress in Mexico City.

The shrimpers and vendors at the WSL often play up certain aspects of the trade to appeal to a large audience. For instance, men will wear their white boots while vending, even if they have not just come from shrimping. Local accents may become thicker in the presence of tourists. Men who do the shrimping often accompany their wives and partners to the lot to show patrons that the shrimp is fresh and possibly just pulled out of the water and placed in the ice-chest. These behaviors are neither forced nor are they inauthentic. Rather they are conscious strategies that are used to help vendors sell more seafood. Alexis Celeste Bunten considers the process of emphasizing certain parts of one's persona as "self-commodification" (2008:381). She claims that this process is "an economic response to the global expansion of the service sector and a politically motivated expression of identity" (2008:381). The appeal is obvious for

the tourists who want something different from what they get back home. The appeal to the locals is that this type of self-commodification allows for the consumption of something “super-local.” The effect then becomes similar for both locals and tourists to enhance the localized character of the purchased product. The locals who shop at the WSL are not shrimpers, so in this way they are similar to the tourists in their expectations. Bunten argues that developing a commodified persona is a type of strategy to sell oneself as a product. (2008:390).



Figure 4.1 Single stall at the WSL.

ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH METHODS

A qualitative approach to research was used in this study to understand the makeup of the shrimp industry in Louisiana. The goal of using qualitative methods is to understand the problems associated with the industry through the words and perspectives of the participants involved. The Louisiana shrimping industry is vast and complex, so rather than focus on such a large group of stakeholders, I narrowed the lens by utilizing ethnographic methods to examine a smaller sliver of the entire shrimping industry. The WSL, as a field site, is conducive to this goal because it is arguably representative of vendors, fishers, patrons, and small business owners. When carrying out ethnographic research the investigator may seek to, “provide a full picture of a closely observed way of life” (Marcus and Fischer 1999:22). Doing ethnographic research allows the observer a firsthand look at the activities or phenomena being “studied.” There are several fundamental benefits to doing ethnography as opposed to the classic “armchair” research that was popular in the start of the discipline of anthropology. Franz Boas criticized this method and urged students to get out into the field to understand the particular culture with their own observations (Kutsche 1998:1). Participating in ethnography allowed a more collaborative process between me and my informants. I aim to represent those involved as accurately as possible. It is not my goal to distort the “truth,” nor is it my inclination to represent those involved in a damaging light. I take the responsibility seriously considering that my words or judgments could potentially affect informants’ jobs or relationships with coworkers. According to the American Anthropological Association’s Code of Ethics, “Anthropological researchers have primary ethical obligations to the people, species, and materials they study and to the people with whom they work. These obligations can supersede the goal of seeking new knowledge, and can lead to decisions not to undertake or to discontinue a research project when

the primary obligation conflicts with other responsibilities, such as those owed to sponsors or clients.” I approached the research presented here with the tenets of this ethical perspective always in mind. For this study the following methods were used: participant observation; and structured, and formal recorded interviews.

Participant Observation

Participant observation proved to be the most valuable method employed during this research. Hanging out at the WSL allowed me to get a sense of details that may well have been missed during an interview. Dewalt and Dewalt contend that, “For anthropologists and social scientists, participant observation is a method in which a researcher takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture” (2002:1). Dewalt and Dewalt use the term *explicit culture* to indicate, “what people are able to articulate about themselves” (2002:1). Participant observation has allowed me to get an inside view of the particular events that take place at the WSL.

In the spring of 2008 I began visiting the WSL. I collected data and continued through the spring of 2010. I usually went twice a week for an hour or so at a time. I walked around the lot observing the interactions between vendors and sellers, taking in the sights, sounds, and smells of the environment. The majority of my time was spent at a stall with Ivis, a Cuban vendor, who became my most important and regular informant. On many days I hung out with Ivis and watched her work. She offered a steady flow of facts about the shrimp business. She showed me how to tell if the shrimp are from the wild as opposed to farm raised and how to determine if the shrimp are individually quick frozen (IQF’s) or fresh. When soft shell crabs

came into season, she taught me how to prepare them. She always had recipes for me as well as for her customers. Over time Ivis and I got to know each other in ways that would have been difficult to do in the limited setting of a formal interview. I was able to directly observe the interaction between her and her son, Kelsey, and the response that other vendors had to me “studying” her. According to Steven Rubenstein, “This approach to ethnography pioneered by Malinowski, less a method than a way of living, demands involvement and detachment simultaneously. Such a life inevitably affects our relationships with the people with whom we live. As we study their culture, they become both our teachers and our friends” (2002: 218). Engaging in participant observation allowed me to see Ivis in action as the only Spanish-speaking vendor at the shrimp lot. She uses her bilingual ability to entice Spanish-speakers as a way to sell more seafood. Furthermore, the customers are satisfied that they can communicate in their native language with someone as friendly and helpful as Ivis. Above the stall where Ivis works is a sign that reads, “Se Habla Espanol.” The Spanish-speaking customers can take a quick glance around and easily find the sign. I have observed Spanish-speakers arrive at the lot, see the sign and head straight for Ivis’ stall.

Interviews

I conducted four recorded interviews beginning in November of 2006 and lasting until September of 2009. After the interviews I listened to the recordings and transcribed them. The first of these recorded interviews was with Kenny, a retired shrimper who spent many years in the shrimping industry as a fisher who used his own boat and nets to catch shrimp and then sell it to processors or distributors. Kenny currently makes his living by moving equipment and working in construction since it is more profitable than shrimping. Kenny has a long history of shrimpers in his family and learned the trade from his father and grandfather. Kenny started

fishing when he was eight years old and began shrimping with his own boat right after he graduated from high school.

The next recorded interview was with Ivis in October of 2008. This interview was structured to understand Ivis' life history and the unique way in which she ended as a top seller at the WSL. Ivis is a forty year old Cuban woman with three children. She came to New Orleans from Miami in November of 2006 after her family friend Terry asked if she would come and work for him. Terry was interested in bringing Ivis on as a vendor because she is a native Spanish speaker and none of the other vendors speak Spanish. Terry recognized that the growing Latino population in New Orleans, after Hurricane Katrina, would benefit from a vendor who could speak Spanish. Ivis moved with her husband and two of her children. Ivis' entrée into the business is unique because the shrimping industry in coastal Louisiana has long been considered a family business in the sense that individuals rarely decide to go into the business without having a generational tie to shrimping. Even though Ivis did not grow up in this business she did carry out an important tradition related to this work: she got her son, Kelsey, a job at the WSL.

I recorded an interview with Terry in March of 2009 in his office at the WSL. During the course of the interview he gave me the history of the lot and informed me of the changes that had happened from 1965 to the present. Since Terry is such a large stakeholder at the WSL he is thought of as a business role model by some vendors and others are jealous of his success.

In March of 2009 Kelsey and I met for lunch and recorded an interview. We talked about his experience of working behind the scenes as a "back-up man." Kelsey explains that being a back-up man entails catering to the vendors and making sure they have what they need. In addition to serving the needs of the vendors Kelsey works unloading trucks and making occasional deliveries. Kelsey is constantly moving from one area to the next and he is exposed

to the way the lot works on a level that is different than the perspectives gained by the more stationary workers, such as the vendors.

MARKETING SHRIMP

Presented in this section is the data collected from my informants involved in this study. The data reflects the perspectives, opinions, knowledge and actual words from the research participants. I use an emic viewpoint with an etic analysis. The findings are placed into categories that are consistent with themes that have risen out of the interviews and participant observation. The themes are as follows: The structure and function of the market system, the importance of keeping the tradition of fishing and shrimping in existence by passing the trade to the younger generation, the new strategies and techniques that are utilized to sell more seafood, and the ways in which goods become culturally commodified.

The History of the Westwego Shrimp Lot

Terry has been in the business of trapping, catching and selling seafood since he was a child. Terry's father was one of the first fishers to begin setting up at the current site of the WSL when it was just a space by the side of the road. Terry has experienced the changes of the WSL and is an expert on the history of the lot. The transformations are illuminated to show how the WSL has shifted marketing practices in order to meet the needs of the consumer and to keep the products low-cost and highly-desired. The ways in which the vendors at the WSL have remained focused on keeping seafood affordable demonstrates the ordinary nature of the product rather than a luxury good.

Terry explains the beginnings of the WSL and some of the changes that have occurred over the course of its history:

We [Terry and his father] used to sell crabs long before [the family started selling shrimp] in 72, 74, 76; we'd sell crab along here [the WSL]. Then we started selling shrimp out the tailgate of the truck. We

rigged up two poles and ran a string across, let the scale hang from there and sell shrimp right out the tailgate. It got to the point where we'd start fighting for spots [along the road] because there were so many of us doing it. Everybody [thought], "We can make money we, love seafood, let's go here." It got to the point I was having to get up at three in the morning and come park my truck to reserve a spot and sleep the next three hours till daylight, till work started just to get a stinking spot. What happened was the guy who owns the property, his name is Ronnie Temento, he's a business man and he said, "You know what these guys are parking on my property for nothing." He said, "I see this as an opportunity for me to make some profit off this property I own." So he came up with the idea of, everybody that was selling, he roped off 20X20 stalls up and down each side and he put everybody's name that wanted a stall in a hat cause he didn't want to show any favoritism because, naturally, the front of the lot does better than the back. So he put everybody's name on a paper and he put it in a hat and started drawing names and I put, me and my dad, put our names in the hat five times, because I wanted five stalls. Everybody thought I was greedy. I'll never be able to get enough shrimp for five stalls. He started pulling the names and started filling the stalls coming to the back. Well since then I've increased to seven stalls. I got two more after that.

As the WSL attracted more business, Ronnie Temento started making improvements to the lot and vendors started changing the appearance of their stalls. The WSL has come to include running water, electricity, credit card machines, food stamp card machines, bathrooms, shrimp water dump sites, a gravel parking lot, a small store and covered stalls with concrete floors. Terry explains some of the changes that have occurred at the WSL:

It started with putting junk trucks in those stalls. Old broke down, didn't have to have a motor as long as it was a truck with the tailgate. My dad and I came up with the idea of [getting] rid of this piece of junk and [building] a building. On the corner up there at Rock's we were the first ones to build a roof, walls, hanging scales. Everybody went crazy over it, our competitors. So everybody started building stalls. Then we had the issue with the smell. And the smell was killing us and it worked out with the building you could put your stuff in, in the morning, you had it at your home, loaded your truck up, load your shrimp off. You would have a truck sitting there. The covered roof, for the rain for the workers. That was a great

brainstorm. Then we dealt with the smell and I'll never forget it was July 4th weekend. I was going out of town with some friends and Daddy [Papa Rock] was out here and we were talking on the cell phone and I told him, "Daddy let's concrete the thing." I said, "You know we have a guy at the church, Frank, that does concrete work, let me give Frank a call and have him pour a slab." Frank came out here and measured off the three front stalls and gave me a price. It was like \$3200 for him to set the forms and slick it down and everything and that was the best \$3200 because at that time we didn't have the wash down in the back. [Now] we pour bleach and soap and hose [the shrimp water from the ice chests] right to the back, but starting out here it was a job.

Terry and his father struggled along the way to become the successful business owners they are now. Terry explains that some of the hardships endured were from the lack of amenities:

[In the beginning] we had no running water, we had no place to dump the shrimp water, there was no electricity. It was like the pilgrim days. It was very difficult in the early days. My dad and I would literally go days without sleep. Going and running and picking up shrimp in an ice chest in Venice [Louisiana], dropping off a load having empties waiting for me, turn right back around, meeting the boat at three in the morning, meeting the truck delivery. We used to meet at China Doll restaurant right there on the corner [near the WSL]. We'd meet in that parking lot at three o'clock in the morning with a guy that would deliver us shrimp. These guys [employees at the WSL] don't see that. All they see is "Man you got it made." Yeah, I got it made now, but 25 years ago when we had no running water, no ice machines I was working my butt off.

I asked Terry how he and his father went about getting ice before there was an ice-maker on site and what kind of difference that made in being able to conduct business more efficiently. He explains that:

I would have to go across the river, go by Billy Martin and fill up [ice chests], shovel and fill them up, put them in my truck, drive across the [bridge] drop them off here and when they started getting low go back

and forth. Those guys [other vendors and backup men] don't see that. They have now \$25,000 in ice machines that's on the premises. Thousands of dollars I've spent in concrete. Ronnie Temento, the owner, personally put out \$50,000 behind the stalls where we wash down. Ronnie put that out of his personal money.

Terry recognizes that he will have to come up with new ideas in order to ensure continued financial success. Most recently he and his father became involved in shipping seafood. He summarizes the struggle of the past and the plan for the future:

For us to have the shrimp water dump site and we use it to dump out the dirty water in barrels and ice chests. It was very difficult at the beginning; we worked to what we have now I do very well out here. I work every day, I mean I don't have any time off. But I love what I do. I was born and raised fishing blue claw crab with my dad, then we sold the boats and we got out of the catching end of it and we got more into the retail/wholesale end of it. We are the only known shipper on this property. We ship all over the country and that's pretty much the history of the lot.



Figure 5.1 Shrimp purchased from the WSL.

Market Functions

Some theorists, such as, Theodore Bestor acknowledge that markets can be viewed as literal and symbolic spaces (in Bestor 2001:76). The WSL is a literal market, but also has implications of a symbolic one. The market has symbolic connotations in the sense of what it represents. For instance the market itself can be seen as a microcosm of the larger industry. In

this section I will explore how the market functions in both the literal and symbolic senses, the benefits of having local markets and how work at the WSL is structured.

For physical markets to exist and be relevant they are usually tied to a city or population center, whether the market exists inside or outside the city limits. The two tend to rely on one another for support. Markets need the population of the cities to flourish and often cities use markets as points of interest. Bestor claims that, “Throughout history, cities and markets have sustained each other, the former providing location, demand and social context for the latter; the latter providing sustenance, profit, and cultural verve to the former” (2001:76). Westwego is a short drive from New Orleans and the city is the driving force for the market’s existence. The market may exist, without the nearby, big city, but it would be on a much smaller level. For example, many local, New Orleans businesses rely on shrimp that are fresh, from Louisiana and are obtained from the WSL. New Orleans has several markets including the Crescent City Farmer’s Market and the French Market. Both of these markets rely on the city population to thrive.

Helen La Trobe argues that there is great value in marketing products directly from the producers to the consumers. La Trobe explains that, “direct marketing, as is the case with farmers markets, provides consumers with locally grown, fresh, sometimes organic and usually affordable food. Furthermore, buying local supports the local economy and may help to revitalize rural economies” (2001:181). La Trobe explains the environmental benefits that are achieved when this local approach is taken. For instance, “Creating markets where people can buy local produce from local farmers and growers reduces the distance that food travels between producers and consumers, which in turn decreases global environmental pollution” (2001:181).

Sharon Zukin claims that, “Places where we shop are landscapes of power” (2004:28). Zukin views the marketplace as a community. She points out that, “even if you’re by yourself at the farmers’ market, you’re never shopping alone. Unlike in stores, strangers often talk to each other” (2004:274). The customers and vendors at the WSL are often seen engaging in these types of interactions.

The WSL does not advertise on a large scale. The only advertising that I have noticed is business cards and key chains featuring the stall’s logo being handed out, and word of mouth. The market is well established and well known. In his exploration of Japanese tuna markets Theodore Bestor explains that, “Tuna doesn’t require much promotion among Japanese consumers, since it is consistently the most popular seafood and demand is high throughout the year” (2001:89). The consumption of seafood at the WSL is similar to the consumption of tuna by the Japanese described by Bestor. Seafood in Louisiana, like tuna in Japan is part of everyday cuisine.

Back-up Men

Previously there were several men who made up the assembly of backup-men at the WSL. Currently Kelsey and Orlando are the two that perform these duties as part of Terry’s employees providing service to his vendors. The back-up men perform a vast array of duties and work long hours. Kelsey explains that, “Before it used to be 4 or 5 of them working part time. It was like a part time gig for them. Then Orlando came [November 2006] and made it a full time thing.” Kelsey describes his duties at the lot explaining that, “I bring them [vendors] ice, shrimp, I’m basically their personal slave. Whenever they call I have to pick up the phone. Sometimes they [the vendors] call repeatedly, repeatedly, repeatedly.” Though most of Kelsey’s

relationships with the vendors are respectful he does remember times when he felt that the vendors were taking advantage of him. He explains that:

Sometimes the fish will come frozen. When they come frozen and they're not completely thawed out they want it now. One time, I remember, Orlando grabbed a fish and stuck it in the ice still frozen and took it to them just like that. I mean everybody in the lot was looking at a big piece of fish floating in the bucket in the ice chest.

When I asked Kelsey about the hours he works and his weekly schedule he explained:

Saturdays I get there at 5 in the morning don't leave till about 8 [pm]. Long hours. So like today [one of his days off] I didn't get up till about 11. You really don't want to do nothing when you only got two days off out the whole week. I was trying to pay my phone bill, then I was trying to hurry up and speed down this way when Orlando called for something for the business. So then I had to hurry up and do that and then I was trying to speed back to this side of the river and I got a Westwego speeding ticket. I guess I'm gonna do what Orlando does on his day's off, he takes his phone, takes the battery out and then just leaves it off. We have work phones. We usually just try to keep it at the place and pick it up and take it with you. But I can't have two phones, so I have the calls forwarded to my cell phone and then I forget to un-forward the calls and it will be my day off and it will be 8 in the morning. On Monday's and Tuesdays, he [Orlando] works by himself on Wednesdays and Thursdays I work by myself and we'll both work Friday, Saturday and Sunday together. Those 4 days are really slow.

Kelsey describes an ordinary day at the WSL:

I unload trucks, boats, fishermen. Some days you'll have trucks coming in with about 6,000 pounds of shrimp. Then you'll have fresh fishermen come in with whatever they caught. Summertime comes that's when it gets busy. You'll have about six fishermen lined up on the back street and then it takes about three hours to unload, unload, unload, and then the girls are trying to call you because they are all trying to get in at the same time.

Kelsey and Orlando are also family friends with Terry, so they occasionally go above and beyond their responsibilities as back-up men and do favors for him. For instance, when I was interviewing Terry, Kelsey was picking up medication for Terry's father. Also, as Kelsey

expressed previously, on his days off he is often called or asked to come in. Kelsey worked selling crabs in the front for a short while before transitioning into the back-up position. Kelsey prefers being in the back-up man position over vending, “because the back-up guy pays more. It can be stressful selling in the front. I’ve seen girls go off on [get angry with] customers.” Kelsey prefers the work load of back-up man to being a vendor and working with customers. When I first started visiting the WSL, Kelsey had additional responsibilities which included getting the vendors lunch. However, Kelsey has since stopped going to get lunch. He explains that, “They cut that out. We got in a big argument about it.” The longer Kelsey works at the WSL the more autonomy he is able to exercise. He is able to decide more firmly the limit of his job description and how flexible the parameters are.

The Vendors

The vendors at the WSL are mostly women. There are a few husband and wife partnerships and a couple of lone men as vendors. Most of the stalls are similar in appearance containing ice chests of seafood set on tables. The ice chests with shrimp usually have handwritten price tags. Most stalls have shrimp, and some have specialty or seasonal products. For instance, Rock’s seafood has a large refrigerator near the back of the stall which sometimes keeps frog legs, shucked oysters, and boxes of frozen catfish. Since most of my research is focused on those who work for Terry, I will explain what I have observed them doing and what they have told me about work.

Each day the vendors that work for Terry are loaded up with several hundred pounds of shrimp and are expected to sell whatever has been laid out for the particular day and time of year. For instance, Fridays are the busiest days at the lot and the time between Thanksgiving and

Christmas is the busiest time of year. It is also especially busy during lent and the weekend of Easter. I went to the lot on Good Friday this past year (2009), and it was the busiest I have seen the lot yet. There were three police officers directing traffic and giving out parking tickets. The lot was full, and there was almost no legal parking. This is the only time I have witnessed officers writing tickets. Usually when police officers are present it is to protect the money coming through the lot.

The vendors earn a standard rate per day with an incentive to earn more. After they reach the goal, they earn more if they sell more. Most vendors work five days a week, however they are often called in on their days off. During busy times the vendors may be paired up at stalls. When customers purchase shrimp, the vendors scoop the shrimp out of the ice and weigh it in a hanging scale. Usually the vendor will drain the ice and water out of the scale before settling on a weight. Next the shrimp are wrapped in newspaper and then double wrapped in plastic bags and payment is collected.

Most of my time at the WSL was spent with Ivis at her stall. Since this has not been a life-long venture, I asked Ivis if she thought she might stay in this line of work. She explained, "I have been working since I was fifteen years old, and I'm a hard worker. I didn't think this [vending shrimp] was gonna be for me at first, but now I like it and I'm good at it." Customers usually walk around the lot settling on what they think are the best deals. If they already have a usual vendor they usually seek that person out. I once overheard a man demand to Ivis, "I want the best deal on the lot." She responded by telling him "All deals, all the time."

The vendors, especially the women, often tease one another in a manner that Radcliffe-Brown has named the "joking relationship." This type of relationship is, "a relation between two persons in which one is by custom permitted, and in some instances required, to tease or make

fun of the other, who in turn is required to take no offence” (1965:90). Radcliffe-Brown explains that these exchanges may include horseplay, verbal insults and elements of obscenity. Furthermore, the joking relationship is often a combination of friendliness and antagonism which is not intended to be taken seriously (1965:90-91). Ivis has told other vendors on the lot, “You see that swamp back there? Yes *all* the way back there? I could go to the back of that swamp and sell more shrimp than anybody here.” Ivis is making her position known which may be especially important because she is a top seller and new to the profession. Radcliffe-Brown clarifies the structure of the exchange claiming that, “The joking relationship is in some ways the exact opposite of the contractual relation. Instead of specific duties to be fulfilled there is privileged disrespect and freedom or even license, and the only obligation is not to take offense at the disrespect so long as it is kept within certain bounds defined by custom, and not to go beyond those bounds. Any default in the relationship is like a breach of the rules of etiquette; the person concerned is regarded as not knowing how to behave himself” (1965:103).

The bantering back and forth between the vendors, in my observation, seems like a way for the vendors to pass the time, make connections to one another, and to get an idea of how much other vendors are selling in a given day. James Spradley and Brenda Mann expound on Radcliffe-Brown’s concept of the joking relationship in their ethnography, *Cocktail Waitress*. There are clear similarities between the market and restaurant/bar settings. Spradley and Mann explain that, “this joking relationship is complex, full of subtle nuances and informal rules that must be mastered if participation is to be culturally appropriate. Learning to interact in this joking manner is an intrinsic part of belonging” (1975:91). They also say that the joking relationship is an integral part of a rite of passage determining whether or not one is accepted into the group. Furthermore, “Joking behavior usually occurs in the presence of an audience

who listen, observe, and vicariously enjoy the display” (1965:97,98). I think that the vendors at the WSL partake in these interactions for public consumption and additionally to reinforce their position and status among coworkers.

A Family Affair

As expressed earlier family connections, and close, personal friendships, have an integral role in keeping the shrimping industry alive. What is meant here by “family” is not necessarily a consanguine relationship, but is used to include close, personal friends. These connections are ways for networking to occur and for marketing strategies to be shared and promoted.

The following is a section of a transcribed interview between Kenny (K) and me (R) that demonstrates the way that these connections work:

R: You were telling me about getting into the shrimping business and you started fishing when you were 12?

K: Between 8 and 12.

R: And when did you actually start shrimping?

K: Right out of high school, even then it wasn't steady, enough money.

R: Did you have your own boat?

K: Yeah, I wound up getting a job then probably did a side job for about, 6, 7 years and I went back to shrimping again. And I always had something on the side. Most people do. It's hard to make a living doing just that. They fishers, but they have the seafood stand. Or they have a bait house or a bar room.

K: Mr. Pete's using one of my boats; well he doesn't have it ready yet.

R: You just gave him one of your boats?

K: I had a boat at the shop that I was gonna sell, I told him just take it and put all his stuff on it. There's been quite a few times that I broke stuff in the middle of the night. In the morning, night rigging, and I call Mr. Pete and I say I just broke my frame, and I don't know no welders and he says bring it over hurry up come over here. So I'm sure I've made more than enough off the stuff he's fixed to give him my boat, definitely.

Most of the vendors at the WSL are related through family; whether it is a husband and wife, two sisters or close family friend. Ivis can be considered an outsider to the WSL since she is fairly new to the occupation. However, the decision to get her son, Kelsey, a job at the WSL is one that continues a tradition at the WSL of working with family members. Ivis and her son live in the same household and presumably contribute towards the same financial obligations. By working together and living together they seem to do what most families in the Louisiana shrimping industry do and more specifically at the WSL.



Figure 6.1 Ivis and her son Kelsey.

Cultural Commodity

In many parts of the country seafood is marketed as a high-end or luxury product even when the products are caught locally. The opposite is true for the WSL where the goods are affordable and part of ordinary, daily cuisine. Shrimp, as well as other types of seafood, is an important cultural commodity for people in South Louisiana. Shrimp is incorporated into many of the local dishes. I argue that the evidence for continuing to market shrimp as a non-luxury good is evident in the decision to place credit card and food stamp card machines in every stall at the WSL and the frequency in which locals eat seafood products. The option to promote low-cost seafood may keep the customers happy and returning, although it may not always ensure a

fair price for the fishers. However, keeping seafood affordable is important in combating imports. These issues will remain a constant negotiation within the industry.

Seafood is a staple in Louisiana. Terry explains that, “The thing about [people in] South Louisiana, people eat seafood three times a week. It’s boiled shrimp one night, gumbo one night, fried shrimp, soft shell crabs, fish, so the locals is what really keeps us going.” In South Louisiana seafood is not viewed as a luxury good, it is simply what people eat. Even though seafood is regular cuisine in South Louisiana it is taken seriously. Kelsey told me a story about a customer getting upset over the failed promise of crawfish:

Actually, a girl almost got me shot out there. She told a man, it was during Mardi Gras, when crawfish was hard to come by. She told this man, “Be here at 6 in the morning and I guarantee you a sack.” She didn’t work the next day. That’s when I was working selling crabs those two months and then he came at 6 in the morning, “Well I aint got nothing to give you.” He was so mad he said, “Watch when I come back.” He came back rode through and he had something in his hand and we usually have a cop patrolling at that time. I mean I shut down the doors so quickly I told that cop, “You better stand right here because if he shoots me you gonna shoot him back.

This example is indicative of the importance of seafood. Seafood is something locals eat regularly. However, their connection to seafood is not ordinary. Seafood in Louisiana is marketed as a cultural commodity. The cultural value of seafood, in my view, is the reason why consumers have an emotional response to seafood.

Imports, remarkably, can be caught and shipped half way around the world and still pose a competitive price. I asked Kenny how this could be true and he responded, “Think about it, those people [in other countries] work for 2 dollars a day. The cost of labor is nothing. These people [shrimpers] are going out of business because of the imports. I mean only the strong survive.” Another problem arises when imports are marketed as Louisiana shrimp. Kenny

claims, “Well Louisiana shrimp is probably the best shrimp you can get, but they trying to market it to make it sell as a high end product. Most of the import markets, Thailand a lot of stuff from Venezuela and Belize it looks almost identical to other shrimp and they [distributors] market it as if it’s from here.” Kenny notes that if seafood is marketed at a higher price it could harm the industry financially and even if people prefer the quality and taste of shrimp caught in Louisiana, they would be willing to buy imports based on price.

The WSL takes payment in forms of cash, credit cards and food stamp cards establishing the classlessness of the commodities sold. This is not true for many commodities which often have a reputation or status symbol associated with them. For instance, Grant McCracken places value on shoes and cars claiming that one can often be lumped into categories based on purchasing choices (McCracken 2005). In Louisiana people eat seafood, without attachments to a social hierarchy. However, people do eat at certain restaurants and possibly shop at Whole Foods to be recognized socially. Terry was the first vendor to get a credit card machine and a food stamp card machine. Terry’s competitors noticed that the machines were successful in attracting more business. Terry explains the process of getting a credit card machine and how foolish his competitors thought he was:

I was sitting up there one day and two guys walked up, they were in suits, they were from “Peachtree” out of Chicago. The credit card processors. This is when credit cards, debit cards, It was almost like if you had a debit or credit card you was somebody. Everybody dealt with cash and they [the credit card representatives] said “I’m telling you (this was back in 1988, 1989) they said this is the wave if you get a credit card you’re going to be ahead of the game.” It was a \$35 a month lease you have to sign [a contract] for 4 years. My dad [said] “35 dollars a month you looking at 1600 dollars.” ‘And your point? 1600 dollars, Daddy that’s nothing to take a chance on making your business grow.’ So I got the credit card machine we put it up at the third stand up there and my competitors were laughing at me. “You signed that stupid contract? You an idiot. You committed for four years to something that aint gonna work.” Next

thing you know two customers came, started running credit cards. Word spread, I put up a big sign, “We accept Visa, Mastercard” Next thing you know I had a line of people because I was the only one out here taking credit cards. My competitors jumped on board and now. That’s how the shrimp lot graduated and we just kept improving and improving to what we have now.

After Terry realized the benefit of accepting credit card he decided to do the same with food stamps. When he first started accepting food stamps they were in paper form. This caused problems with theft and people selling their food stamps. The introduction of the food stamp card made it much easier to keep track of transactions and prevented theft. According to Terry, in 1993, he collected \$210,000 in gross sales from food stamps alone. Terry says that his business has grown since 1993 and that being able to accept food stamps is integral to the growth of his business.

Self- Commodification

One of the strategies for increasing sales at the WSL is for vendors to play a specific role. Pointing to role playing does not imply that there is something inauthentic about this action, rather an attempt to fulfill a need. All of the stalls at the WSL have different names and signs suggesting that they are all independently owned, however, this is not the case. Different vendors play different roles or play up certain aspects of their personalities to respond to the needs of their customers. Terry has named all of his stalls differently to create a lure of competition. While products may differ slightly they are mostly the same at each stall. I asked Terry about the significance of the names he chose and he explained that:

I thought about naming them all the same name, but again with customers you have to play head games with them. If they think that you’re the same person they’re not gonna go. “Rocks” naturally named after my dad. “Who Dat,” I’m a big Saints fan and that was named after the Saints. “A&B” is for my kids and my wife. My kids Ann and Alley and I have two children Brent and Becca. “Naturally Nawlins” I just recently purchased this stand, when? Last September? From a girl that had it for years and she had health

issues and got out of it. And I came up with that name. “Seafood Connection” when we built this, this is like 2 stands together. In 1999 or 2000 and I came up with the name Seafood Connection.

Terry has another stall named “Anna Lee’s” named after the woman who has been operating it and has been working for Terry the longest. Anna Lee is an African American vendors. Terry told me that African Americans seek her out and buy from her much in the same way that Spanish speakers seek out Ivis. Terry says that customers try to relate to vendors from whom they are buying. There are, of course, exceptions to this type of purchasing. For instance, if certain stalls have crabs or crawfish, the customers interested in those items go to those vendors. Crawfish are especially sought after since they are seasonal. Another exemption to the rule is for people who aren’t regular to the lot who search for the “best” deal. Kelsey explained how this works, “This weekend past everybody was selling their crawfish at \$1.69, so Terry basically came out of nowhere and said let’s sell ours at a \$1.25. So everybody was losing their business to Terry. He’s gonna try to move as much [product] as he can.”

Speaking Spanish is not Ivis’ only selling strategy, but she does emphasize this aspect to appeal to a larger Latino population. Ivis is also friendly, honest and charismatic, and these qualities help her to draw in customer’s that are not necessarily Spanish speakers and her ability to remember names and faces ensures her ability to have repeat customers. With that said I would like to focus briefly on her role as a Spanish speaker.

Ivis is new to the business and is often competing with women who have sold shrimp for fifteen years and whose families have probably been in the business for generations. Ivis was brought into the business as a clear response to the influx of Latino immigrants that have been arriving in New Orleans and the surrounding areas after Hurricane Katrina. These immigrants came in search of work, mostly in construction to help rebuild homes. Ivis is not representative

of this group, but she does represent a response to this group. Ivis was asked to come to Louisiana to fill a very specific need. It is highly doubtful that she would have come to this industry if she would have not been called by a family friend to do so. Her son, Kelsey, notes, “I think the Latin people, all the Spanish people they usually try to get from her. It’s all based on personality out there. You treat people nice, give them a smile. They come back. If you befriend them, that’s what Terry says, try to memorize their name or the conversation you had with them last you have a customer right there for life.” Another part of Ivis’ survival at the lot is her ability to fit in so smoothly. She jokes with the women, offers them advice and works hard proving that she is serious about her job. It is not clear what larger scene Ivis represents. What is clear is that she is a response to a scene. There is a future for Ivis in the shrimping industry and she exemplifies the necessary adaptations that need to be made in order for the business to survive.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that those involved in the shrimp industry will have to continue to adapt to economic, environmental and political changes if there is to be stability in the industry. I have only mentioned the strategies that I have observed and I am sure that there are others. Seafood alliances have been instrumental in generating attention to the shrimp industry’s struggles and successes. Furthermore, these alliances lobby on behalf of the shrimpers to allow them to continue working in their trade. The shrimp industry in Louisiana is much more than a job. Culture, tradition, heritage and family business all factor in to the importance and relevance of shrimping. The informants in this study all have expressed that new techniques will have to be employed for the progression and success of the industry.

Louisiana, specifically New Orleans, is a place where commodities have taken on a unique role. Mardi Gras beads, fleur di lis, king cake, seafood, white rubber boots, and hot sauce have all been marketed or promoted in a way that suggests that the purchase of any of these commodities will instantly link the purchaser to the state, the city and the culture. Vendors at the WSL have utilized the ability to culturally commodify a good to make it more appealing or attractive. The promotion of culturally commodified goods is one way that vendors have implemented survival techniques at the WSL.

The shrimp industry in Louisiana is one that has changed very little in the sense that it has always had financial trouble, and that catching shrimp is done similarly to the way it was done in 1860. However, the industry has made great strides and changed drastically in the way that shrimp are marketed and sold. The vendors at the WSL have recognized the necessity to find new ways to market shrimp and have come up with their own, personal ideas and methods.

Globalization allows for the increasing flow of trade and ideas. Through this process imports will continuously pose a threat as long as they can be shipped and sold for less than the products caught locally. Vendors at the WSL have accepted and resisted certain aspects of globalization. Vendors accept processes of globalization in the sense that the imports create a competitive element and this competition allows vendors to market Louisiana seafood as special, local, and superior. In turn vendors resist aspects of globalization by staying determined to keep imports out of the WSL. Marketing strategies and survival techniques will remain essential to the shrimp industry's continued existence.

POSTSCRIPT

While finishing this thesis the BP Deep Horizon oil disaster happened. It is unclear how much oil is leaking into the Gulf of Mexico, but estimates claim millions of gallons of oil are released into the water daily. The media stories are not consistent and little is known about the future of shrimp, fish, and oyster industries. Large stretches of waterways have been closed in the Gulf of Mexico. The quality of water in these areas is unfit for humans to swim and seafood caught in these areas is not safe for consumption. The future looks bleak for the shrimping industry. The only bright side of the tragedy, is that shrimp can be caught in intercostals waterways and some of these waterways have not yet been affected by the oil disaster. Therefore, at least temporarily, shrimpers can catch shrimp that are unaffected. The irony of the disaster, is that workers in the shrimp, fish and oil industries have been put out of business by BP and are now working for BP as part of clean-up efforts. Since the workers have boats and equipment and time invested in being in the water, they have little choice but to work for BP. I hope my small contribution can be useful and relevant in highlighting some of the survival strategies that shrimpers have used in the past.

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VITA

Rachael Wissing was born in Illinois and moved to New Orleans in 1999 where she has made a permanent home. She received her B.A. degree in Anthropology from the University of New Orleans. She will continue her work with members of the shrimp industry in Louisiana.