

**Marian Binkley**, *Voices from Off Shore: Narratives of Risk and Danger in the Nova Scotian, Deep-Sea Fishery*, St. John's, NF: ISER, 1994, 238 pages; *Risks, Dangers, and Rewards in the Nova Scotia Offshore Fishery*, Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995, 192 pages.

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Fishermen are often regarded as the epitome of Western Individualism. Popular culture is replete with references to the romantic and rugged imagery of the fisher poised, bearded and weather-worn, battling the winds and storms of the open seas. Were it only so. As Binkley effectively points out in her pair of monographs, *Voices from Off Shore* and *Risks, Dangers, and Rewards*, the world of the commercial fisher is neither romantic nor necessarily desirable. It is, in fact, one of the most dangerous, uncomfortable and difficult vocations one can take up.

These books are the product of a research program, initiated in 1989, which examined the working conditions of deep-sea fishers in Nova Scotia. The books cover the same material but in importantly different ways. *Voices* is a carefully selected sample of stories about fishing told by fisherfolk themselves. The storytellers include the Old Salt, the deckhand, the wife, the landsman, the casualty and the Skipper. In an analytic sense, *Risks* is by far the more detailed text. Here, Binkley methodically takes us through her theoretical concerns, the details of the fishing process, the bureaucratic counting of injury, fishers' job satisfaction and the possibility of improving working conditions. Read as a set, the two works complement each other in the respective prioritizing of emic and etic viewpoints.

The personal stories in *Voices* helps us in understanding the ways in which fishers perceive danger. For example, early on in her research, Binkley found that when asked if they had ever had a serious accident at sea, the fishers invariably answered, "no." For the outside observer, their visible physical dismemberment and injuries rendered their response incomprehensible. But, when we listen to their own stories of fishing and making a living we realize why: "It's only serious if it makes you stop fishing" (Binkley, 1994: 107, 221).

Numbers and categories of accidents take on a living tone in the voices of men like "Ned Adams," an icer on a deep-sea dragger. Mr. Adams lives the experience which we see "objectively" laid out in tables and graphs: "When you're down in the hold, you gotta shovel all the fish up into the pen. If the boat rolls, all that comes down on you. You shovel up the ice and the fish slides down on you. Eighteen hours in the hold shovelling ice is bad enough without that" (ibid.: 108). The meticulous listing and discussion of causalities and types of injuries (see esp. Binkley, 1995: 106-127) is shocking in and of itself. Listening to "Ned Adams" and the other fishers tell their own stories should make even the most unconcerned reader squirm.

In a field in which women have traditionally received short shrift (for an important exception see Davis and Nadel-

Klien, 1988, *To Work and to Weep*, St. John's, NF: ISER). Binkley's discussion of women's experiences (1994: 70-95, 215- 218; 1995: 49-65) is refreshing. In "The Wife's Tale," themes of loneliness and worry underwrite "Joan Elliot's concerns for her husband's health and her family. As Binkley comments, "her story illustrates just how difficult and distressing (fishermen's wives) lives can be" (Binkley, 1994: 71).

I am somewhat concerned, however, about the manner in which the fisherfolk stories are recounted. In the introduction of *Voices*, the author suggests: "The unembellished facts speak for themselves, and the dramatic events are presented as unremarkable, commonplace occurrences" (ibid.: 5). Yet, I would suggest, the facts rarely "speak for themselves." This is a crucial point. Part of what Binkley so poignantly describes in "objective" terms in *Risks* and through the stones of fisherfolk in *Voices*, is the abject violence of capital's appropriation of surplus labour and the extent to which workers simultaneously forge accommodations with capital and struggle to open up fields of resistance.

While Binkley (1994) notes that transforming these stories into "readable text has inherent difficulties" and "present(s) a methodological problem" (p. 8), I would suggest that the difficulty is more fundamental than how one structures the narratives for publication. What is at stake is a strategically important opportunity to draw connections between workers' lived-experiences and a particularly brutalizing mode of work.

In terms of the changing working conditions at sea, Binkley doesn't shy away from drawing out critical political economic factors. What may be best for the companies' profit margins and the consumers' palate is not necessarily in the best interest of fishers. For example, one innovation in improving the quality of fish involves sorting fish into 70-110 pound boxes at sea and then stacking them one on top of each other in the fish hold. The box system reduces the weight pressing down on the fish and thus improves the quality. For the fishers, however, this system reduces the capacity of the fish hold (hence lower earnings for the fishermen) and increases the risk of injury while stacking heavy boxes of fish under conditions in which "the work floor heaves and rolls" (Binkley, 1995: 93).

On a final note, it is a tragedy, that in throwing thousands of fishers out of work, the cod moratorium and the overall decline in fish stocks has done more to improve the fishers' health and safety than a plethora of government inquiries and regulatory changes. For those left fishing, however, the underlying logic of the market economy propels them to fish harder while catching fewer fish. Ultimately, this increases their risk of injury at sea.

Taken together, these two books provide an intriguing look at the real dangers fishers face and the possibility of improvement. For the specialist, *Risks, Dangers, and Rewards* is an important addition to one's library. The generalist reader will be content with *Voices from Off Shore*.