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“You have no boss here to work for”: Women and Labor in Chesapeake Bay Fishing Communities

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Fishing in the United States has long been perceived as a primarily male occupation. Despite this assumption, women have served vital roles within the fishing industry as cannery workers, female fishermen, and the wives and mothers of fishermen. Through an analysis of oral histories, newspaper articles, and sociological and environmental studies, this paper explores the experiences of women in Chesapeake Bay fishing communities from the late nineteenth century through the twentieth century and their adaption to change over time. These women—Caucasian, African American, and immigrant—operate under many different types of family strategy and balance their roles as mothers, wives, laborers, and producers. They labor in these water-based industries out of necessity, obligation, and because of the rewarding sense of freedom they gain from their work. This thesis seeks to challenge the assumption that women play a secondary role in fishing, and understand the ways in which they have responded and adapted to environmental change, the government's limitations on the Chesapeake Bay's fisheries harvest, and attacks on their femininity in this male-dominated field.
Introduction

'I don’t come out here to sunbathe, she says,’ re-baiting and re-salting 3000 feet of line... ‘My hands are like lunchmeat, and forget about the nails. But when I’m back in Centerville my customers will say “Oh, aren’t her nails pretty.” Not here, though.’¹

—Dianne Peddicord

Dianne Peddicord is a waterwoman. She harvests crabs on the Wye River, a tributary in Eastern Maryland that runs to the Chesapeake Bay. She started crabbing as a little girl, and later as a grown woman—when she was not waitressing, bartending, or taking care of her two sons—worked the water with her now ex-husband, a waterman.² Today she has her own boat, a smelly, unkempt craft called the Bad Girl, its very name a tribute to her renegade spirit as one of the few women to harvest fish from the Chesapeake Bay independently. Though the watermen teased her at first, they have accepted her as “one of the good old boys.”³ The quotation that opens this paper illustrates Peddicord’s efforts to remain feminine despite participating in an industry that has always been male-dominated. Her customers at the restaurant might never even know that she’s a waterwoman—the hard, dirty work hidden under a new manicure. For her whole life, Peddicord has played multiple roles, balancing her waitressing and bartending jobs along with childrearing and fishing.

Dianne Peddicord is just one example of the women who have been instrumental to fishing communities on the Chesapeake Bay. According to the Magnuson-Stevens Fisheries Management Act, a “fishing community” at its most basic level is defined as one that “is

¹ Jack Sherwood, “‘Bad Girl’ of the Wye River,” Chesapeake Bay Magazine (December 1995), 64.
² Ibid., 41.
³ Ibid., 42.
substantially dependent on or substantially engaged in the harvest or processing of fishery resources to meet social and economic needs, and includes fishing vessel owners, operators, and crew and United States fish processors that are based in such community.” This definition encompasses not only watermen and waterwomen, but also seafood cannery workers, a workforce that throughout the twentieth century was comprised primarily of women. All of these women, on the water and off, share similar experiences of balancing the demands of family with the dirty, dangerous, and sometimes degrading work, and discovering freedom in their water-based labor.

These women also take part in an industry that is dying. Fisheries around the world are in crisis. The Earth’s waters, once thought by many to be a limitless resource for food, become more and more depleted every year. A 1998 U.N. study found that most global fish stocks had reached their peak production and were in decline, with the most commercially valuable species having dropped by 25 percent. The fish stocks have been continually pushed by fishermen and consumer demand, taxed almost entirely past the point of a return to healthy fish populations. The Chesapeake Bay is no exception to the global fisheries crisis. In many ways, the Chesapeake has become a “canary in a coal mine.” It is now a body of water that has suffered from extreme pollution and overharvesting of fish stocks. The stringent measures passed in the 1970s and ’80s to clean up the Bay and reduce

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6 Poisoned Waters, a Frontline documentary, aired April 21, 2009.
pollution were ultimately ignored, falling by the wayside of the political and public consciousness over the last few decades. Those who depend on the Bay for a living have suffered along with it. The watermen, a cultural icon of the Mid-Atlantic, have reacted with anger towards the government and environmental agencies that regulate their daily catches. They are also saddened that they can no longer do the work they love, and neither can their children. The watermen have been the most vocal on the subject of the fisheries crisis, while the women have remained largely silent. How have the women of these Chesapeake Bay fishing communities adapted to the mercurial demands of the fishing industry?

In this thesis, I explore the roles that women play in Chesapeake Bay fishing communities—specifically on Maryland’s Eastern Shore and the Northeastern region of Virginia—during periods of fishery boom and bust, from its peak in the late nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century; then into the 1960s and 1970s when regional fish stocks began their decline. These women—single and married, whether from fishing families or not—in their responsibilities as mothers, wives, producers, laborers, and business partners, have played a vital part in sustaining the Bay’s fishing industry. Yet, their experiences have been largely unexamined by historians. As Joan Scott writes in her essay “History in Crisis?: The Others’ Side of the Story,” “written history both reflects and creates relations of power.”7 By ignoring these women, we ignore the work that they have done over the last 150 years, granting privilege to men’s work. Women’s work in fishing

communities around the world—both paid and unpaid— is a contribution to the fishing family and needs to be recognized as such.

In his essay on women in fishing communities in the United Kingdom, Paul Thompson writes broadly:

Fishing is dependent on the work of women in three principle ways. There is, first of all, the direct productive contribution of women’s labour on which the industry has always relied. Second, there is the role which has been primarily women’s in all human societies, of creating the next generation both in a physical and moral sense—the bearing and raising of children. Third, there are the special responsibilities which women carry because of the absence of men at sea.

Thompson also emphasizes that the labor of fishing is strongly gendered, with the labor at sea falling primarily to men, and the shore-side preparing and disposing for the fishery falling primarily to women. Thompson’s assertions are very true—but oversimplified. On the Chesapeake Bay, as in many fishing communities around the world, the gendered division of labor is complex, with much overlap between the spheres of home and work, male and female. Where one waterwoman may see herself as a trailblazer, another may feel that her work on the water simply fulfills her obligations as a good wife and mother. Women perform vital work in the seafood canneries, on boats, or in their homes in the many permutations of family life that dot the Eastern Shore. Despite the lack of attention that has been paid to them during the years of the Chesapeake’s peak production, the women have labored in fish plants, on boats, and in their homes. They have borne witness to the fisheries crises of the twentieth century, and adapted to the Bay’s unique

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environmental changes in their own ways. In this thesis I elucidate women’s experience on the Chesapeake Bay.

**Watermen and the Changing Chesapeake Bay**

Watermen, the Chesapeake Bay’s name for fishermen, are, to say the least, cultural icons. Like most fishermen, they are highly romanticized figures—cowboys at sea, solitary men who work the water in all kinds of inclement weather. They are known for being quiet and wary of outsiders, as well as extremely opinionated about government and environmental agencies and their attempts to regulate Bay fisheries. As historian George G. Carey has observed:

> if nothing else, Maryland watermen are controversial. East of Annapolis, I would say they probably evoke more interest, concern, frustration, and anxiety than almost any other occupational group. I am familiar with at least one marine biologist who would be delighted if all watermen would simply disappear.10

For many fishing families today, the fishing is not and cannot be their sole source of income. Thus, fishing families in the Chesapeake Bay region must rely on varied economic strategies and the labor of men, women, and children to keep afloat financially. During the latter part of the twentieth century, fishery stocks on the Chesapeake Bay have declined to such an extent that watermen, waterwomen, and watermen’s wives, who before may not

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9 Among many fishing peoples, “fisherwoman” is not an accepted term. In this paper, I refer to women who fish on the Chesapeake as waterwomen, a decision that was influenced by Lila Line’s 1982 book of the same name. I use the terms watermen and waterwomen to refer to those people who rely on fishing as a whole or portion of their livelihood.

have held a wage-earning position, have had to bring in additional income through farming, construction, boat building, teaching, waitressing, and work in other occupations outside of the water-based economy. Other watermen harvest multiple fisheries throughout the year, changing their catch with the season—crabs in the summer, oysters in the fall. A Worldwatch Institute report on the health of world fisheries relates that “accelerating economic and social desperation continues to drive fishers down the path of self-destruction threatening to decimate world fishery resources.”\textsuperscript{11} In many respects, the battle for fisheries conservation is a conflict between the economic necessities for fishermen and their families and the survival of overharvested marine species.

\textbf{The Chesapeake Environment}

The Chesapeake Bay is a shallow, partially mixed estuary, or a semi-enclosed body of water where salt and freshwater mix to form a very productive ecosystem for marine creatures to grow and thrive. From north to south, the Bay varies in levels of the saltiness of the water, with some species preferring the tidal freshwater of the northern zones to the more saline waters in the south.\textsuperscript{12} As Catharine Hall points out, the Bay must be viewed as both a natural entity and a cultural entity that reflects human behavior.\textsuperscript{13} The prolonged human activity along its shores has taken its toll on the Chesapeake, advancing naturally occurring processes. An influx of the nutrients nitrogen and phosphorous from farm runoff and air pollution create dense algal blooms that block sunlight and rob marine creatures of

\textsuperscript{11} McGinn, \textit{Rocking the Boat: Conserving Fisheries and Protecting Jobs}, 9.
\textsuperscript{12} Catherine K. Hall, “Defining Boundaries and Breaking Barriers: Access and Adaption of Chesapeake Bay Watermen” (PhD diss., Brown University, 2008), 59.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 61.
oxygen.\textsuperscript{14} Erosion is a natural process, but excess sediment from agricultural production and land development by the 16.5 million people who live in the Bay’s watershed causes further problems with the Bay’s species, even smothering oysters on the Chesapeake’s bed.\textsuperscript{15}

The Chesapeake Bay is home to a number of marine species, including various fish and shellfish. The most prominent and most harvested of the Bay’s creatures include the striped

bass, American shad, the blue crab,\footnote{The blue crab \textit{(Callinectes sapidus)} is, without a doubt, the most iconic of the Chesapeake's marine species, serving an important economic and ecological role in the Bay. The blue crab has the highest commercial value of all Bay catches. As both predator and prey in the water, it helps to maintain balance in the Bay's food chain. The crab lives in deep waters during the winter and shallow waters during the warm weather, when they are harvested as hard shell, peeler (harvested right before molting), or soft shell crabs.} and the Eastern oyster,\footnote{The Eastern oyster \textit{(Crassostrea virginica)} is a bivalve native to the East Coast that serves a vital function as a filter feeder. The oyster feeds by pumping water through its gills and consuming the particles and plankton, also removing the nutrients and sediments from the water, which can be harmful to the Bay's health. They live in brackish to very salty waters, attaching to each other on firm mud bottoms. Oysters in the Bay have been prone to the diseases MSX and Dermo, which seriously harmed their populations.} harvested widely by commercial and recreational fishermen alike. According to 1965 statistics, 18,996 people were employed as watermen on the Chesapeake, an increase of 30 percent from 1940. During this time in the rest of the U.S., the number of watermen grew by only 3 percent.\footnote{Richard E. Suttor et. al, \textit{The Commercial Fishing and Seafood Processing Industries of the Chesapeake Bay Area}, (College Park, MD: University of Maryland, 1968), 2.} Chesapeake fisheries reached their peak in the first half of the twentieth century, fueled by the public demand for oysters and blue crab, yet seafood processors' output in the mid-1960s was six times greater than pre-WWII levels.\footnote{Ibid., 12} Not surprisingly, this time of tremendous output did not come without consequences, and the Chesapeake fisheries began to decline in the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1960–61 oyster season, for example, the oyster harvest in Maryland was only 1.6 million bushels—in the 1880s, the same harvest hit 12 million bushels a year.\footnote{Christine Keiner, "Scientists, Oystermen, and Maryland Oyster Conservation Politics, 1880-1969: A Study of Two Cultures," (PhD diss., The Johns Hopkins University, 2001), 276.} Today's oyster harvest equals only about two percent of its historic harvest on the Bay.\footnote{Chesapeake Bay Foundation, "Bay Facts—Animals," http://www.cbf.org/Page.aspx?pid=613.} Despite some much-touted growth by the blue crab populations and vital underwater grasses during the 2008 season, stocks of the Bay's most
iconic species—especially the Eastern oyster—remain well below ideal levels as defined by the National Oceanographic Atmospheric Association (NOAA).  

The Chesapeake’s decline reflected worldwide fisheries decay: a United Nations study in the late 1990s found that 11 of the world’s 15 largest fishing areas were in decline—or 60% percent of all major species. Despite this decline, fishing catches increased from 21 million tons in 1950 to 120 million tons in 1996. During the twentieth century, more and more people joined the water-based workforce, using their more effective harvesting technology to compete for fewer and fewer resources.

Fisheries Regulations

In a 2002 Washington Post editorial entitled “My Freedom Is in Danger Again,” Maryland crabber Kirk Bloodsworth writes that the state’s new crab regulations would likely cripple his crabbing business. Bloodsworth explains that he spent nine years on death row for a crime that he did not commit and that buying his boat was his first action after getting out of prison. He feels joy, peace, and freedom on the water. Bloodsworth’s comparison of being an innocent man on death row to Maryland’s denial of watermen’s rights is a powerful contrast and highly indicative of the way that many watermen see the government’s fisheries regulations. Yet fisheries regulation on the Chesapeake is far from a recent occurrence.

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In the early decades of the nineteenth century, New Englanders depleted their own oyster beds and went looking for other sources of that precious commodity. Oyster buyers headed south and started to take their catch in the Chesapeake Bay. Maryland legislators grew concerned that their populations would be depleted as well, and in 1820 passed a measure that forbade oyster dredging by out-of-staters. In 1854, watermen were required to purchase a dredging license for the first time; in 1890, the state government instituted an oyster size requirement that dictated how large an oyster must be before it can be harvested.

Today, each of the Bay’s species and corresponding harvesting seasons are closely regulated by the state Department of Natural Resources (DNR). Each fish, crab, or oyster must be a certain size before it can be gathered. When certain fisheries are in peril, the DNR may close down the season completely to allow the species to rejuvenate itself. The tools fishing families use are monitored, too. The dredge, a clawed basket that scrapes the bottom of the Bay and efficiently gathers oysters, is allowed only in certain areas because of the damage they cause to the oyster beds. While the first fisheries regulations were the earliest landmarks in an effort to help preserve the Bay, they are also the first moves toward impinging on the waterman’s right to harvest fisheries openly and the beginning of a long battle between watermen, fisheries scientists, and the state and federal governments. Many watermen and waterwomen feel like scapegoats for the Bay’s problems, which are much bigger than overfishing: "'Harvesting the crabs is not the problem,' said Larry Simns,

27 Ibid.
president of the Maryland Watermen’s Association. ‘It’s what we’re putting in the bay that’s the problem.’”²⁸ When the Bay’s fisheries experience small successes, scientists chalk it up to the regulations. The watermen give credit to the environment. Noted Larry Simns after a blue crab bounce-back: “Mother Nature does a lot of things that man don’t know nothing about.”²⁹

Fishing is an occupation that is, for the most part, passed down through the family from father to son. In many ways, fishing is an artisanal profession in the tradition of many early American craftsmen, a set of skills and a lifestyle inherited through the bloodline and requiring the support and participation of all—frequently unrecognized—family members working towards economic stability. In the early rural American home, both men and women worked in what Jeanne Boydston calls “comparable and interdependent systems of production,” turning raw materials into products for the family’s economic gain.³⁰ With the beginning of industrialization in the early nineteenth century, American life segmented into two separate spheres: one, “(the workplace) economic in nature and focused on production,” and “the other (the home) noneconomic in nature and focused on reproduction.”³¹ As the industrial period of the early and mid-nineteenth century broke men’s artisanal labor down into smaller pieces appropriate for a factory rather than a

³¹ Ibid.,XV.
workshop, women’s non-wage earning domestic contributions to the well-being of their families became less visible and less valued as a vital part of the household economy. Boydston writes, “In the demise of the self-sufficient household lay the decline of women’s status.”32

Rather than an industrial revolution dismantling the artisanal system of production as it did in the nineteenth century, today, it is the state of the Bay—essentially, nature—which stands in the way. Both the tradition of passing on artisanal skills and the familial enterprise that fishing communities have long fostered may be coming to an end. Many water-working parents hope that their children will choose different, non-water based careers for themselves. Waterwoman and waterman’s wife Sheila Strong Pierce says of her own children’s futures, “I hope they are rocket scientists.”33 A crabber, David Kirwan, expresses a similar sentiment about the collapse of the Bay fishing economy: “I think it’s a tragedy. I’m a little upset my children can’t enjoy it.”34 Over the last few decades, Chesapeake fishing communities have had to adapt in many ways, which is nothing new for those who earn a living through fishing. Now, however, there seem to be fewer options, fewer water-based alternatives, more seafood flooding in from international markets, and more tourists who care more about the way the water looks rather than what comes from it. Men and women in these fishing communities are still active, though, and embody a rich

32 Ibid., 2
34 Poisoned Waters, documentary film, directed by Rick Young (Boston, MA: Frontline co-production with Hendrick Smith Productions, 2009).
legacy of perseverance, pride, community formation, and fierce independence that is part of
the fabric of fisheries labor. Cannery women are no exception.

**Cannery Women**

Crab pickers never retire. They pick 'til they die or they come home and die. But you don’t retire.

—Laurena Collemer, crab picker

During the 45 years Laurena Collemer picked crabs, she has seen the transition from
wooden work tables to stainless steel; the workforce change from local women to Mexican
seasonal laborers; and, doubtless, fewer and fewer crabs coming into J.M. Clayton
Company where she works. Still, she continues to pick crab because she enjoys it, and
because “it’s better than sitting here at home all the time.”

At the height of cannery output in 1965, there were 257 seafood processing plants on the Chesapeake—152 in Virginia and
105 in Maryland. According to 2008 statistics, there are 109 facilities in Virginia and 68 in
Maryland, together employing just over 3,000 people. Women like Collemer have played
vital roles in the prosperity of Chesapeake Bay fishing industry and have witnessed its
decline firsthand. While they are not out in boats themselves, harvesting oysters or crabs,
the women who have labored in the fish and seafood processing plants of the late

35 Kelly Feltault, *It’s How You Pick the Crab: An Oral Portrait of Eastern Shore Crab Picking*, (St. Michaels,
MD: Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum, 2001), 37.
36 Ibid.
38 Elizabeth Pritchard, ed., *Fisheries of the United States 2008* (Silver Spring, Maryland: National Marine
Fisheries Service, 2009), 82.
nineteenth and through the twentieth century have helped to form fertile ground for the production of a strong women's culture and facilitated the transmission of skills from one generation to the next. Though their work packing oyster and crab meat was and is laborious and dirty, cannery work endowed women—black, white, and immigrant—with a sense of autonomy, and for most, pride.

**Early Canneries**

In early canneries, the canning of fruit was a subsidiary to oysters, so the same women worked with both fruits and oysters during their respective seasons. Baltimore was one of the earliest sites of cannery production, beginning there in the 1830s following the collapse of northern oyster packers in Connecticut and Long Island.

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40 Though Baltimore is not explicitly a part of the Eastern Shore, I have chosen to include it in this study because of its proximity to the Chesapeake Bay and its integral nature to the history of the canning industry.
Women in a Baltimore Oyster House, 1905\textsuperscript{42}

The female workers in Baltimore canneries at the turn of the century were largely immigrant women. Some canners preferred to hire immigrants because they were "different from the others. They can work 15 or 20 hours and it won't hurt them....They'd be opposed to any restrictions in lowering hours, for they are greedy and want to make all they can."\textsuperscript{43} This cannery manager mistook the necessity to work for greed, thinking it advantageous for him to hire immigrant women because he believed their avarice drove them to earn. Additionally, some outside the industry called cannery women's respectability into question. A 1892 observer of the Baltimore cannery workforce wrote:

These girls are almost without exception of foreign birth or parentage, the largest proportion being of Bohemian origin, with Irish probably coming next. Few American

\textsuperscript{43} Linda Shopes, "Women Cannery Workers in Baltimore, 1880–1945," 5.
girls, however poor, will consent to engage in this occupation, as in it both sexes must mingle indiscriminately, without regard to color, class, or condition.44

This comment falls within the general attitudes of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century middle-class—especially non-wage earning middle-class women—who viewed factory work as rough, unfeminine, and injurious to family life. White middle-class women’s activist groups worked to protect working-class women from the coarsening effects of their labor and their manipulative employers.45 Opinions like those of the 1892 observer above would indicate that this philosophy on the harmful effects of wage work on women and their families did not extend to immigrant or black women.

In her work on Baltimore canneries, Linda Shopes writes that immigrant women came into the industry as it became more technologically advanced. Oyster shuckers occupied the lowest rung on the oyster packing hierarchy since shucking was seen as dirty and menial, typically relegated to the poorest people.46 The conditions in shucking houses were often less than ideal—because oysters are harvested during the winter, the workers dealt with freezing conditions in the shucking house, which was sometimes flooded with water. Initially, a workforce of mainly free African American men canned the raw oysters, but once the process of steaming became a prevalent step in canning, canners employed immigrant women for the work of removing cooked oyster meat from the shell. Linda Shopes notes that in much of the Western world, food preparation was designated to the

44 Quoted in Paula Johnson, "‘Sloppy Work for Women’: Shucking Oysters on the Patuxent,” 40.
46 Paula Johnson, "‘Sloppy Work for Women’: Shucking Oysters on the Patuxent,” 38.
lower classes. Thus, African Americans, immigrants, and women who worked in canneries became associated with nature as opposed to the higher ideals of culture.47

Most cannery managers did not see cannery work as skilled labor. Canneries found women especially suitable for employment. While cannery owners employed men to operate the mechanized equipment, much of the work involved in food preparation was intricate, fitting for female workers. Canneries made their own assumptions about gender in choosing to employ women, saying that they were "more adapted to it [cannery work]," that they were "neater, quicker, and more cleanly than men," and more understanding of "the handling of fruits and vegetables."48

The food preparation portion of cannery work thus became feminized, not only in practice, but in philosophy, as well. Shopes writes that men found working with fruits and vegetables to be "unmanly," and that the only men who performed female cannery roles were those men who were alcoholics and "not able-bodied men."49 Men in twentieth-century cannery stayed away from "women’s work," too, as picking crab was somehow "sissified," and men who performed this work were sometimes perceived to be gay. In crab houses, it is usually the men who are responsible for the gathering and steaming of the crabs, and the women who remove the meat from the shell. Some believe that the proliferation of women in crab picking occurred and persisted simply because women tend

48 Ibid., 11.
49 Ibid.
50 Transcript, Betty Lou Middleton Oral History Interview, December 2, 1999, conducted by Kelly Feltault, Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum.
to have smaller hands, more suited to the intricate work of removing the crab than men are. Despite the fact that in truth, crab picking and oyster shucking involve a great deal of skill and endurance, this subdivision of labor by sex was rationalized by pointing to physical differences, like the size of a woman’s hands. The manual dexterity necessary for this intricate piecework became associated with women as unskilled laborers. One rarely sees this rationalization of sex segregation in reference to male-dominated jobs that require manual dexterity, like surgery. This reasoning, based on presumptions about male and female anatomy demeaned women’s labor and kept them in low-paying, repetitive piecework and men out of it, clearly segmenting the sexes and creating a job hierarchy within the cannery. The fact that men who did women’s work in the factories were considered “sissified” fits with a major theory about industry and technological change—that technology deskilled and therefore feminized certain jobs.  

Despite how difficult cannery work could be, the women who worked in canneries enjoyed several advantages that came with this type of labor. Not only did the women’s paltry wages serve as an important contribution to the family economy, but cannery work’s irregular hours allowed for women to occasionally go home to tend to their children, make meals, and nurse babies. Some children reported to their mothers during the day or brought them food—some even worked beside their mothers in the shucking room.

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53 Ibid., 20.
The canning community also served as a place in which the extended family worked together. Shopes mentions in her piece that many of the descendants of cannery workers said their mothers and grandmothers remained at the canneries because they did not know English.\(^5^4\) Besides the language gap, the women’s willingness to stay in one place also hints at a sense of familiarity, closeness, and safety that they gained by working with other women from the same country who spoke the same language. Thus, early Baltimore canneries became thickly entwined with the family and community lives of the women who worked in them.

**Canneries into the Twentieth Century**

The African American female population performed most of the oyster shucking in early twentieth-century Southern Maryland, sometimes with black laborers from the Eastern Shore coming in to work, as well.\(^5^5\) Many African American women believed that cannery work was a better option than domestic service. Especially in the years prior to World War II, however, many black cannery workers were ashamed of their work, and outsiders also degraded this labor. Irma Gross, a former shucker commented that “‘Kids ain’t interested in it [shucking oysters]. They want somethin’ better. That’s [shucking] not good. That’s not educated. Anybody would do that, they wouldn’t have no education. Anybody educated wouldn’t want a job like that.’”\(^5^6\) Eva Butler from St. Mary’s, Maryland, comments that most shuckers were black “because black people didn’t have no jobs, I

\(^5^4\) Ibid., 21.
\(^5^5\) Paula Johnson, “‘Sloppy Work for Women’: Shucking Oysters on the Patuxent,” 40.
\(^5^6\) Ibid., 41.
guess.”57 Though Eastern Shore crab houses were mostly integrated by the 1930s and ‘40s, black and white women kept themselves segregated within the picking room.58 Betty Lou Middleton from Woolford, Maryland, comments that despite this table-by-table segregation, the women all talked and mingled, saying, “That’s why I guess I never knew racism.”59 The labor that these women shared, as well as the societal degradation of that labor, built ties between cannery workers.

In her study of cannery workers in California during the early decades of the twentieth century, Vicki Ruiz also found that women created very tight bonds with one another. Ruiz writes, “Nurtured by gender-based job segregation, extended family ties, and common neighborhoods, intra-ethnic and interethnic support groups helped women cope and at times resist the prevailing conditions of work.”60 She continues that these networks bridged ethnicity and gender and “formed a distinct ‘cannery culture.’” Despite the cannery managers’ attempts to segregate their workforce by gender and ethnicity in order to maintain control over the workers, “gender-determined job segmentation did facilitate the development of a collective identity among women.”61 It was this collective identity among the female cannery workers that encouraged women to network and organize.

58 Kelly Feltault, It’s How You Pick the Crab, 15.
61 Ibid., 32.
themselves as a group and later led to widespread involvement in labor unions on the local and national levels.

Cannery work served as a valuable means for many women to make a beneficial economic contribution to their families and cultivate a sense of responsibility. Ruiz writes that the Mexican women who found work in canneries were often young and single, contributing all or part of their incomes to their families. This gesture enabled families to move away from relying solely on a man’s income.62 It also allowed women to purchase luxury goods for their homes: Ruiz writes, “Indeed, many Mexicans believed that consumer goods signaled the realization of the American dream.”63 For these young Mexican cannery workers, their income was a way of becoming part of the American consumer culture, gaining American respectability through commercial means. Cannery workers on the Chesapeake utilized a portion of their wages in a similar way. Laurena Collemer tells how she and her older sisters worked in crab houses as teenagers, and that the wages her sisters earned from picking crabs helped to buy their house. “‘But we worked,’” she recalls, “‘and my two sisters bought a living room suit, paid so much on it a week. And then I bought an Oriental rug….And we had that on the floor, and we were growing up, learning responsibility.’”64 Joyce Fitchett expresses a similar sentiment, saying that working in the cannery from a young age made her “‘realize that you got to work for what you want and I

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62 Ibid., 14.
63 Ibid., 18.
64 Quoted in Feltault, It’s How You Pick the Crab, 12.
do that. I do what I have to do. And I have at times worked three jobs just to survive.”  

U.S. National Oyster Shucking champion Deborah Pratt tried her best to escape the life of a cannery worker, an occupation both of her parents held. But when she was 25 years old and pregnant, married to a man who was doing time in prison, her sister taught her how to shuck oysters so she could get by.  

The comments from these women indicate how important a job at the cannery was to themselves, their families, and to becoming mature young adults. Collemer mentions her sisters and her mother, but no father; Pratt had to support herself and her baby. Fitchett points out that she frequently had to work three jobs just to keep going. For many of these women, cannery work provided valuable financial and emotional independence. Ruiz argues, “While one woman might rationalize her wage-earning roles as an extension of her family responsibilities, her U.S.-born daughter might visualize her own income as an avenue to independence. Thus, working for wages could either tighten bonds of kinship or provide the means for material advancement and assimilation. In many instances, cannery labor served both functions simultaneously.”  

For cannery women, their labor opened avenues to independence and a cross-cultural community of workers.  

Children’s presence in the canneries only added to the familial feeling in the workplace. Many children accompanied their mothers to the Eastern Shore crab packing facilities because there simply was no other way to take care of them. Crabhouses  

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65 Ibid.  
67 Ruiz, Cannery Women, 19.
contributed a fairly flexible space for working women to monitor their babies and toddlers.

According to Laurena Collemer:

We didn’t have babysitters back then on Hooper’s Island, so mama would take us to the crab house—some people even brought their playpens in there. There wasn’t any law then that you couldn’t keep the children out of the crab house—and even after there was, I still brought my own kids down. We thought we were having a good time because we didn’t know any different, you know. It was just the way that everybody lived.\(^\text{68}\)

Though these children were obviously too young to pick crabs, they literally grew up on the floor of the cannery.

This prominent presence of children in canneries allowed for the transmission of specialized skill down through generations, just as watermen pass their knowledge of fishing to their children. One cannery owner reflects on the way that crab picking skills were passed down from mother to child, ""'of course they learn to pick crabs from their mother, they picked right alongside their mother or in a table so the mother could watch 'em. And that’s how our future crab pickers would develop. The mother would teach 'em.'"\(^\text{69}\) Another owner mentions how one woman’s style of picking was distinguishable from the next, and these same traits were passed down to their daughters, much in the way that watermen pass down their knowledge of fishing to their own sons and daughters.

This transmission of skills and transfer of knowledge from mother to child in the seafood packing house is the women’s acknowledgement of their own skills. For women in Chesapeake canneries who have become extremely proud of their work, it is a point of dignity to be able to pass their skill and knowledge to the younger generation, allowing the

\(^{68}\) Quoted in Feltault, *It’s How You Pick the Crab*, 9.

\(^{69}\) Ibid. 10.
women to assert themselves and lay claim to work at which they are talented. They also offer a counterpoint to the any suggestions that their work is unskilled. When reading Betty Lou Middleton’s description of her crab picking, she does not just describe a skill, but calls it an “art”: “The art of picking it is being concerned about it, wanting to do the best, and trying to strive to really do it right... And I think that it’s best for business when you know you’ve picked that can of crabmeat yourself, that there aren’t little slivers of bone in it. And that I pride myself on.”\(^70\) Middleton feels connected to her work, immensely satisfied when she sees can of beautiful crab meat sitting before her.

Canneries were sometimes sites for not just the familial transmission of knowledge, but also spaces of resistance. In his discussion of African American female cannery workers on the North Carolina coast, David Griffith writes that cannery owners have long employed members of the same family to work in their factories, tapping into the authority of older mothers, aunts, and grandmothers to discipline and recruit younger employees. In the 1980s and ’90s, the cannery women began to subtly resist the local authority of the plant owners, encouraging young women to find other careers or get an education. Employers “lost control over the reproduction of the labor force” and “lost their ability to infiltrate households effectively” as a result.\(^71\)

Today, a majority of the women who work in Chesapeake Bay canneries are Mexican migrant workers who leave their families to work for part of the year in the United

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\(^70\) Transcript, Betty Lou Middleton Oral History Interview, December 2, 1999, by Kelly Feltault, CBMM.  
States. Laura Vidal shows that these women face a great deal of criticism from other Mexicans who refuse to work for American companies, and are often called "'stinky'" because of the labor they perform and are frequently accused of prostitution. Like the immigrant women who performed similar work in the mid-nineteenth century Baltimore canneries, these Mexican women are ridiculed by people from their homeland and have their respectability called into question because of their association with such a "dirty" occupation.

These immigrant women take the work despite its requirement that they often leave children in their homelands. Some encounter problems with their husbands who remain in Mexico: incidences of infidelity, alcoholism, and the men's anger that their wives are abandoning their children pervade the women's narratives. One woman comments, "My husband wouldn't take me into consideration. Now, I told him that if he doesn't shape up he can leave, but I'm staying in the U.S. I achieved my goal in spite of what my husband says." Vidal illustrates that despite the hardships and criticism many women face when choosing to travel to the U.S., some relish the independence, income, and closeness they develop with their coworkers. These women express feelings of loneliness and isolation being so far away from home, but they believe strongly that they are making a difference for their families back in Mexico: "We have a responsibility towards our parents, towards

73 Ibid., 96.
74 Ibid., 97.
our children, so we constantly send them money."\textsuperscript{75} For other women, the hard work of crab picking means a little more money for niceties and material possessions that embodied American respectability and pride in their work.

The women in both crab picking and oyster shucking houses express a common sentiment about their work: it gives them freedom. One Calvert County, Maryland, shucker, Audrey Bishop, said that in cannery work, "‘you’re your own boss, you can work when you feel like it....But if you’re in somebody else’s house [as a cleaning woman], if you want to sit down, you can’t do that, you got to be constantly goin’, that’s what I mean about being your own boss.'"\textsuperscript{76} From the immigrant women who labored in the earliest Baltimore canneries to the women who work in today’s few remaining canneries, the freedom that the work provides opens up new opportunities to provide for their families, create networks with other women in a strong cannery culture, and avenues to a greater sense of independence. As Smith Island Crab Meat Cooperative founder and waterman’s wife Janice Marshall says, when picking crabs, "‘you have no boss here to work for.'"\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{75} Quoted in Kelly Feltault, \textit{It's How You Pick the Crab}, 27.
\textsuperscript{76} Quoted in Paula Johnson, "‘Sloppy Work for Women': Shucking Oysters on the Patuxent," 43.
\textsuperscript{77} Quoted in Kelly Feltault, \textit{It's How You Pick the Crab}, 32.
Waterwomen and Watermen’s Wives

I didn’t want Grandma upset because I was reading a book about the water. The women of my island were not supposed to love the water. Water was the wild, untamed kingdom of our men. And though water was the element in which our tiny island lived and moved and had its being, the women resisted its power over their lives as a wife might pretend to ignore the existence of her husband’s mistress. For the men of the island, except for the preacher and the occasional male teacher, the Bay was an all-consuming passion. It ruled their waking hours, sapped their bodily strength, and from time to tragic time claimed their mortal flesh.

—Jacob Have I Loved78

Katherine Paterson’s young adult novel, Jacob Have I Loved, is narrated by fourteen-year old Sara Louise, a resident of the fictional Rass Island in the Chesapeake Bay. Sara Louise finds peace out on the water, crabbing from her own skiff given to her by her waterman father. Everyday she saves up money so that she can get off the tiny island and send herself to boarding school on the mainland in Crisfield. “It seemed to me,” she says “that if I could get off the island I would be free from hate and guilt and damnation, even, perhaps, from God himself.”79

Though fictional, Paterson’s novel and the voice of her protagonist echo some of the life experiences of women in fishing-dependent communities. Sara Louise explains that it is not a woman’s place to care about the water, but the men are bewitched by it; it is a “passion,” akin to a “mistress.” In fishing communities around the United States, women are raised to not be fishermen. For many, a general disdain or disinterest in the water is a naturalized behavior, fostered within them from an early age. As a result, women in many

79 Paterson, Jacob Have I Loved, 77.
fishing communities take care of operations at home, rarely impeding on men's domain of the fishing boat.

Yet women continue to do the reproductive and productive work necessary to sustain fishing families and the watermen do the most visible and valorized work. Many watermen's wives attend to bookkeeping and net mending, as well as other non-wage earning tasks, like cooking, childrearing, cleaning, and even hog slaughtering—tasks that make the fishery possible. Some wives are fishmongers or restaurateurs; some maintain jobs in land-based economies, apart from the fishery. Other women, like fictional Sara Louise, go to sea in boats, either as crew members on other fishermen's boats—often their husband's—or, on rare occasion, in their own fishing boats. These women cannot be easily divided into the two categories of those who fish and those who do not. Their lives are dictated by multiple and ever-changing permutations of occupational and family strategies that are influenced by familial, political, and environmental factors.

It is not a generalization to say that fishing in the United States is a male profession. One exception is Alaska, which has a sense of "urgency that supercedes gender": there, the frontier spirit is still very much intact into the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and where both enterprising men and women can make their own opportunities. While doing research on Smith Island, Maryland, one of the two inhabited islands in the Chesapeake, I emailed the museum there to see if they might have an archive with
materials I could use for research. After explaining the topic of my paper and posing my question, this response came back: “there are no women who fish/crab here.”

Despite the gendered assumptions and ideology that make waterwomen invisible to the author above, some women nonetheless did fish. As Paul Thompson suggests analyzing female fishermen causes us to question the “naturalness” of a male stereotype in an occupation like fishing. In her case study of an anonymous East coast fishing community (that she has dubbed Rocky Haven), Carrie Yodanis believes that equating fishermen to men is not simply a stereotype. “Women are women because they do not fish,” she writes; because men do the fishing, the occupation itself draws the boundaries between men and women. There is fishing, and then there is the lack of fishing, both actions that hold their own, gender-specific place in Rocky Haven, the site of Yodanis’s study. She writes, “Not being a fisherman is at the core of what it is to be a woman in a fishing community.” Especially in very rural communities where fishing is one of the only—if not the only—occupation available for men, to be a man is to be a fisherman.

As Yodanis argues, “a woman who takes on the role and identity of a fisherman is in danger of losing her identity as a woman.” If a woman who is defined by not fishing decides to take up fishing as an occupation, her very femininity is called into question by

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80 Unknown correspondent from the Smith Island Center, e-mail message to author, July 15, 2009.
83 Ibid., 69.
84 Ibid., 75.
the gender-specific nature of the work. In the interviews conducted by Yodanis, her female respondents echo the sentiments of Paterson’s Rass Island residents—that women are not supposed to love the water. After asking the women of Rocky Haven why they do not fish, Yodanis characterized their responses into four categories: biology, gender role socialization, cultural traditions, and discrimination.

**Look Like a Lady, But Act Like a Man**

In Yodanis’s first category, biology, which is closely tied with the second, gender role socialization, women expressed repugnance to fishing because it is perceived as stinky, messy work. Yodanis’s interviewees used these biological variants as excuses for why they could not fish like a man: “Women, as well as men, grow to believe and act according to the belief that women cannot and so do not fish.”85 Other women complain of seasickness on the water, bodily weakness, and the occupation’s early hours that keep them from going out with their husbands or on their own to make a living from fishing.86 This is not to say that the women of Rocky Haven do not hold wage-earning positions—many work at land-based jobs that take them away from the water. In Rocky Haven, girls’ activities aboard their fathers’ boats are not taken seriously, and “viewed as a game rather than a training period. Going out on the boat is seen as fun rather than an educational experience.”87 While boys may be encouraged from a young age to go out as apprentices to their fathers so that they might run their own boats someday, most people assume what young girls learn about

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85 Ibid., 78.
86 Ibid., 64.
87 Ibid., 65
fishing will not lead to a life in which they are on the water for anything more than pleasure. Other women who fish or work aboard their watermen husbands’ boats cite experiences with their fathers as an important moment in their development as waterwomen.

In biographical portraits of waterwomen, both the women and the writers who portray them try to strike a balance between the presumed masculine occupation of fishing and traditionally recognized female qualities. Patsy Higgs from Rock Hall on the Eastern Shore says of her experience with her waterman father, “I worked with him just like a man.”88 Higgs’s use of the phrase “just like a man” suggests that fishing is a man’s work—that it requires a certain strength, stamina, and fortitude that women just do not have. At the same time, Higgs’s interviewer, Lila Line, makes sure to comment on the waterwoman’s womanly nature, writing, “Patsy Higgs balances feminine sensitivity with mental and physical toughness.”89 It is at first difficult to see how “feminine sensitivity” could be important in an occupation like fishing, but Line points to Higgs’s feminine side as if to make a statement—that it is possible to fish like a man and not be completely robbed of one’s femininity. In a 1965 Sunday Sun Magazine article about waterwoman and Chesapeake waterman’s wife Norma Simmons (or “housewife-waterwoman,” as the author of the article calls her), the male journalist pays special attention to Simmons’s feminine characteristics: “Mrs. Simmons is 5 feet 4 inches tall and weighs 120 pounds,” and later,

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88 Lila Line, Waterwomen (Queenstown, MD: The Queen Anne Press, 1982), 2.
89 Ibid., 13.
“Her shoes are a flat-heeled feminine sports type, attractive as well as practical.” The journalist nonetheless recognizes that Simmons is a skilled and valued worker on the boat.

Between meals during the workday Mrs. Simmons culls oysters brought up from the bottom in the tongs. Entering and leaving port, she may run the engine, handle lines or steer, and she is considered by her husband to be an excellent navigator. He relates with pride that she once took the boat through a dense fog from the Western Shore [of Maryland] to their destination near Madison on the Eastern Shore by chart and compass, and made it ‘right on the nose.’...She can also make many kinds of repairs.

This testimony not only addresses the kinds of work that women who go out on the Bay do aboard fishing boats, it also illustrates a kind of fascination with Simmons’s work and the sense that she, as a woman, is a novelty on a fishing boat.

Waterwomen often speak of their work as challenging gender norms, but in nuanced ways. Yodanis cites the example of one woman, Mary, who goes fishing with her husband:

‘‘I don’t mind working like a man. I don’t mind looking like a man, but I want to be treated like a lady.’’ Mary goes on to explain how she needs to remind her husband that she is a woman and not a man since he thinks of her as ‘‘one of the guys’’ and expects her to do physically demanding work. She maintains a night business decorating cakes, explaining that ‘‘Maybe this is just what I keep as a woman.’’ The epigraph from Dianne Peddicord in which she talks about maintaining her nails also illustrates a waterwoman’s desire to maintain ties to womanhood—Peddicord manicures her nails nicely before going into her waitressing job so that they do not reveal the hard, manual labor that she does all day long.

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90 Ibid.
92 Yodanis, “Constructing Gender and Occupational Segregation,” 75.
93 Ibid.
Whether or not they fear, as Yodanis suggests, losing their identity as women, Mary, Norma Simmons, and Dianne Peddicord hold on to notions of traditionally feminine virtue (style, lovely nails) or activity (baking) to maintain and define themselves as women despite inhabiting a man’s world.

The waterwomen’s “feminine preservation” reflects in many ways what Nan Enstad found when studying turn-of-the-century female factory workers. These women used fashion and clothing choice to distinguish themselves as ladies in spite of their work and strike activities, and as Enstad writes, “The practice of working ladyhood created a site of multiplicity, a shifting identity which played off a range of cultural contradictions and instabilities of turn-of-the-century society.”94 The women resented that outsiders saw them as unfeminine because of their work; they dressed stylishly was a way of countering those opinions.95 In modern-day coalmining communities, too, many female miners find themselves defending their profession to the community: in Ontario’s Inco Mines, the female workers were accused of stealing jobs from men and having sexual affairs with their male coworkers.96 At the same time, other female miners were advised that they would have to prove that they were men in order to keep their jobs.97 The waterwomen take part in a long tradition of working women in maintaining the paradoxical balance between

95 Ibid., 61.
97 Ibid., 287.
gaining respect in a masculine working world and maintaining their “feminine” qualities in spite of their “male” labor they perform. They must look like ladies, yet act like men.

Yodanis’s third explanation for why women do not fish, discrimination by men, is what she describes as subtle, rather than blatant.\(^{98}\) As in many occupations that are dominated by men, the entrance of women into that occupation causes some tension. Rather than committing outright harassment, fishermen will frequently make women feel unwelcome in local fishermen’s hang-outs, on the onboard radios, and even in the refusal to accept “fisherwoman” as an alternate term for a woman who fishes. This “subtle harassment” is not universal; sometimes, it is more overt. In Alaska, where fishing is a major industry and many fishing outings last for months at a time, female crewmembers are almost constantly exposed to sexual harassment and discrimination. In her book, *The Entangling Net*, Leslie Leyland Fields compiles the stories of female fishermen in Alaska, all of whom have faced some form of discrimination from men. Women discuss how they had trouble finding a job aboard a male-dominated fishing vessel simply because they were female, or were greeted with sexual comments from the men when inquiring about available positions. Other women locked themselves in their rooms at night while the men got drunk outside. One woman states, “The guys all tried to sleep with me at first. It’s like a joke you have to get through.”\(^{99}\) Comments like this one—that the men’s unwanted

\(^{98}\) Yondanis, “Constructing Gender and Occupational Segregation,” 67.

sexual advances were like a "joke" that needed to be endured—reveal a kind of hazing ritual, the men pushing the women’s limits and testing their mettle.

Instances of sexual harassment and discrimination by male crewmembers are not as prevalent in the stories of waterwomen on the Chesapeake Bay as they are in those of Alaskan female fishermen. Many of the women on the Chesapeake Bay during the twentieth century express that they were teased by some of the watermen when they began fishing—or that their presence was not an issue at all. After a trial period, they were accepted as “one of the guys.” Susan Smith, for example, a former nurse turned Eastern Shore oyster culler, remarked that since she was a single woman, her presence on a fishing boat was quite a novelty, which led to much joking among the men. Eventually, she noted, she began to feel like “one of the boys.”

Mary Lowery, a crabber from Tilghman Island, said that the watermen joked about bringing lawn chairs to the pier to watch Lowery and her female friend collect crabs. Waterwoman Dianne Peddicord, too, commented that after proving herself to the other fishermen in Wye Mills, they accepted her as “one of the good old boys.” Both Smith and Peddicord were single when they began working the water on their own, and they had to prove themselves to the watermen through their hard work before they were accepted into the fishing community.

In a 1993 interview, waterwoman Patsy Higgs talks about being accepted as a woman in fishing by doing all of the work on the boat that men did.

100 Lila Line, “The Oysterwomen of Tilghman Island,” publication and date unknown, 18. “Watermen” folder, Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum Library.
101 Transcript, Mary Lowery oral history interview, January 30, 1999, by Kelly Feltault, CBMM.
102 Sherwood, “‘Bad Girl’ of the Wye River,” 42.
Pete Lesher (P.L.): How did—did they treat you any differently when you went to sell [fish after catching it]?
Patsy Higgs (P.H.): No.
P.L.: You were pretty much—you got the same treatment as all the other watermen?
P.H.: Uh-huh. I didn’t want any other. You know, I mean I was out there doing a job just like the men were doing. I mean I didn’t just stand there and not do nothing. I worked just like my father and brother and any man would work. And I stood there and froze to death just like they did.
P.L.: And the others respected you for that, obviously.
P.H.: Right.

The fact that Higgs had a father who was a well-respected waterman may have aided her in acceptance on the docks, but her comments hint at a more interesting trend that appears in the stories of so many fishing women. Higgs’s statement “I worked just like my father and brother and any man would work” reinforces the idea that a man’s work is hard work; that fishing is men’s work; or even that working is part of a man’s gendered identity. She also emphasizes that a women have had to prove they were capable through grueling, masculine labor. Higgs rejects any preferential treatment that she might be given as a woman selling her catch. Other female fishermen express the sentiment that even referring to themselves as a woman weakens their reputation in the fishing community. Sarah Broadwell, a young female fisherman from Long Island, says that she does not approve of the term “fisherwoman”: “I’m a fisherman. I do exactly what you’re doing. No more, no less.” On the use of the gender neutral “fishers” or “fisherpeople,” one female fisherman says, “I am a licensed commercial fisherman. I am a wife, a mother, and a grandmother. If

103 Librarian at CBMM
104 Transcript, Patsy Higgs oral history interview, September 3, 1993, by Lila Line (Ryan) and Pete Lesher, page 5, CBMM.
105 Transcript, Sarah Broadwell oral history interview, September 23, 2007, by Janice Gaudaire Fleuriel, page 22, NOAA.
anyone out there calls me, mistakenly, a “fisher,” please refrain. I do not eat mice, porcupines, or other things that “fishers” find attractive.”  

As it is for men, fishing is a dangerous occupation, rife with hazards, and these women are not immune to accidents or health problems. And yet women sometimes risk more than men. Many women work through their pregnancies. Frances Grunden, an older woman who owns a seafood shop on the Eastern Shore, comments that she had two stillborn sons after working through each pregnancy: “I used to help pull the fish nets; pulled and yanked too heavy. They were born dead....” A marine policeman suggested lightly to Kathleen Poole that she stop crabbing so far into her pregnancy so that he would not have to deliver her baby. Patsy Higgs only did light work on her boat while pregnant, but occasionally her menstrual cramps would get bad enough to keep her from going out to fish. These women face the same occupational hardships that their male counterparts face—back problems; inclement weather; tiring, freezing, and blisteringly hot days—but they also have to face gender-specific health issues when they fish, like pregnancy and menstruation.

In order to prove themselves, women have had to excel at tasks that are somehow “unfeminine,” whether that be hauling heavy lines and nets or gracefully dealing with a

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106 Yodanis, “Constructing Gender and Occupational Segregation,” 68.
107 By “fisher,” this woman refers to the “fisher cat,” a medium-sized North American mammal.
108 Line, Waterwomen, 19.
109 Ibid., 76.
110 Transcript, Patsy Higgs oral history interview, September 3, 1993, page 12, by Lila Line (Ryan) and Pete Lesher, CBMM.
plastic bucket rather than a toilet during ten hour fishing trips. Women in fishing must both
cast aside their stereotypically feminine attributes to prove themselves to the men with
whom they work, while simultaneously maintaining some female characteristics to
distinguish themselves from those same men. Some women, like Patsy Higgs and Sarah
Broadwell, associate their femininity or status as a woman as a bar to fishing, thereby
emphasizing their occupational versus gender identity. If the fishing community logic
dictates, as Yodanis writes, that all fishermen are men and all men fishermen, those women
who do fish outside the bounds of traditional gender constructs balance on a precarious line
between male and female.

The last of Yodanis’s reasons for why women in her East Coast fishing community
do not fish—tradition—is perhaps the most potent and all-encompassing of these
explanations for the lack of women’s presence on the water. When asked why she did not
fish, one of Yodanis’s respondents replied, ""Tradition more than anything.""111 Women are
naturalized to care very little for fishing: many women who married to fishermen or raised
in fishing communities show barely any interest in the water. This does not mean that
fishermen’s wives have nothing to do with their husband’s business. Fishing on the
Chesapeake Bay, as in many communities around the U.S. and around the world, is by its
very nature a family enterprise. Besides being an occupation that is passed down from
generation to generation, it is and always has been highly dependent on the support and
hard work of the entire family. As one Canadian lobster fisher and fisherman’s wife,

111 Yodanis, “Constructing Gender and Occupational Segregation,” 65.
Mildred Skinner wrote, "We were always part of our husbands' enterprises, but we weren't seen....Without our work, our husbands' enterprises wouldn't have thrived as well as they did. All of this was unpaid labor."\textsuperscript{112} Myrtle Faunce, a watermen's wife, tended to soft crab floats near the shore.\textsuperscript{113} Many women who participated regularly in the family business believe that the non-wage work they do for their husbands precludes their own desire for wage work. They choose the welfare, and occupation, of the family over a land-based career of their own.

In his semi-outsider's view of Tangier Island, Virginia., the other inhabited island in the Bay and probably the model for Paterson's Rass, David Shores writes that family dynamics are of a "traditional" mindset and that Tangier women are, and have always been "'Stay-at-home people,' attending to house, children, school, and church, watching television, thumbing through mail-order catalogs, talking to their husbands on the Bay plying their trade, and periodically shopping at nearby mainland stores."\textsuperscript{114} These women do not fish, and only a few have part-time jobs in retail or cleaning. The men are largely disinterested in home life and their wives' work, and rarely help them with housework despite women's efforts to help their husbands in their fishing-related duties.\textsuperscript{115} Still, "Tangier women have no disdain for these roles [as wife and mother]; in fact, they cherish

\textsuperscript{112} Mildred Skinner, "We, women, are out there, fishing," September, 2000, from Yemaya dossier (Chennai, India: International Collective in Support of Fishworkers,) 47.
\textsuperscript{113} Transcript, Myrtle Faunce oral history interview, March 7, 2001, by Dorothy Garcia, page 3, Slackwater Archives.
\textsuperscript{114} David L. Shores, \textit{Tangier Island: Place, People, and Talk} (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2000), 83.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 91.
them, and besides, they are good at them.” Despite Shores’s opinion that these women have no objection to their lives as wives and mothers and no desire to join the ranks of the watermen, he writes that Tangier ladies had “a shadow cast upon some of their desires.”

When a woman marries a waterman from such a secluded area, she has to give up her own aspirations or even occupational goals that might have meant moving off the island. Similarly, when describing her mother, Smith Island native Janice Marshall comments that she could have been a movie star, but “like most women, if you marry a man that works the water, you sacrifice what you’d like to do for the most part. You know, and stay there while they work the water.” Shores also mentions that many mothers advise their daughters not to marry a Tangier waterman as few of them have any respect for women’s non-wage work. Shores does not use the women’s own words to address their feelings on the life of a waterman’s wife, but expresses the idea that Tangier women who stay on the island have to accept their situation for what it is and allow the tradition of their surroundings to determine their futures.

Why Women Fish: Obligation

Many women in East Coast fishing communities enter into fishing through their fathers or husbands rather than on their own. Yodanis does not see these wives/first-mates as renegade women, bravely thwarting the gender constraints of society to participate in a traditionally male occupation. Instead, she writes, “…rather than violating gender-

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116 Ibid., 92.
117 Ibid.
appropriate rules for conduct, the [the women] reinforce them. Women who work in the fishing industry ‘justify’ their behavior as part of their role as a good mother or wife and thus as an appropriate woman.”119 In Yodanis’s opinion, those women who follow their husbands to the water, and sometimes bring their young children aboard the fishing boat with them, perform their expected gender roles by keeping watch over their loved ones and doing their best to keep the family together. Being a “good wife” also means supporting a husband’s work as a fisherman, if not fishing alongside him. Heidi Hartmann argues that “‘Dependence’ is simultaneously a psychological and political-economic relationship,” and that men’s control over women’s labor power through exclusion and restriction is “the lever that allows men to benefit from women’s provision of personal and household services.”120 The same sense of obligation that causes women to give up their own desires ad choose instead to be a fisherman’s wife brings some women to the fishing boat. In accordance with Yondanis’s theory, Judith Gerson and Kathy Peiss write that female consciousness is the acceptance of society’s gender system. This gender system dictates the division of men’s and women’s labor and places women in the position of child bearers and caregivers.121 As a result, women participate in society’s gender commands: “…women are obligated and

119 Yodanis, “Constructing Gender and Occupational Segregation,” 73.
feel responsible for meeting survival needs of their families. Women, therefore, behave in accordance with normative expectations and act to further support those expectations.”

When the women talk about working the Chesapeake with their families, they often express a sense of obligation to family members. Many started working the water with their fathers. Waterwoman Patsy Higgs says of her start in oystering, “‘To me Daddy was everything. If Daddy said ‘Try to get to the moon,’ I’d try to get to the moon. Daddy wanted me with him, you know, out on the water, and I done it mainly to please Daddy.’” Her adoration of her father is obvious, and it was her experience with him that led to her career as a fisherman, but Higgs’s sense of obligation to her father to assist him in the family business is clear. Some women recall leaving their children with female relatives onshore while they accompany their husbands fishing. Other women, like Laura Era from Cambridge, Maryland, sacrifice land-based childcare and bring their children on board with them while they work. In Waterwomen, author Lila Line describes how Era multitasks, culling oysters but then removing her dirty gloves and apron to attend to the cries of her six month old son from his crib in the boat’s cabin. While reflecting on the long history of watermen in their family, members of the Ruark family remember how many of the female relatives stayed on their husbands’ boats for great lengths of time. One man commented, “‘Mamma stayed right much on the boats the first eight years they were married, didn’t she?’” and followed with a recollection of the delicious cakes and cornbreads his mother

122 Ibid.
123 Line, Waterwomen, 2.
124 Ibid., 53.
was able to concoct in the galley of the family’s fishing boat.125 These women reconcile their roles as wives and mothers with the family fishing enterprise, perhaps sacrificing as much as those women on Smith Island who must accept their lives as mothers and wives of watermen.

For many couples who work together on the water, there is the very real matter of the family’s financial needs. Some women work on the water simply for the financial benefit of the family business or the family itself. As Mildred Skinner also writes, “Talk to any woman who fishes inshore [lobstering] for a living, myself included, and they will tell you they are fishing out of necessity.”126 This “necessity” is the necessity of two incomes for the family just to keep going. When a waterman employs his wife, any shares that she earns go right back into their bankroll. As wife and oyster culler Sara Mills of Cambridge, Maryland, points out, a husband-wife team is a convenient arrangement because her husband has to pay someone to do the culling work (the process of sorting through the oysters and getting rid of debris and dead oysters) on board, and it might as well be her.127 Some women do not accept pay. The women in Rocky Haven, the community where Yodanis conducted her study, define the money they help earn aboard their husband’s boat as his money: “Women, as they see it, are merely helping by providing free labor to preclude this expense [of paying a male crewmember]. Moreover, since women do not

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126 Ibid.
define themselves as earners, the notion that fishing is not their job is reinforced.\textsuperscript{128} In this way, women like Sara Mills and the fisherman’s wives of Rocky Haven are fulfilling their role as the “good wife,” sacrificing and doing hard work that they may not enjoy to help out their husbands and their families.

By not accepting pay for their work, these women chalk up their on-board culling and hauling as part of their duties as wife and mother, rather than a part of their occupation. Yodanis also points out that when women in isolated fishing communities do \textit{not} fish, they are missing out on “the most available, and often the most lucrative, source of income throughout their lives.”\textsuperscript{129} From a young age, boys learn how to fish from their fathers, and eventually work on their fathers’ boats, making a good wage. Girls in Rocky Haven, however, work in the only other jobs open to them, including waitressing and babysitting, which pay a fraction of what their male counterparts earn from fishing. If we follow this line of thinking, then, it seems that these women have learned to internalize the idea that their work is just part of what they do; that it has no value since it is not men’s work. Except in a handful of anomalous cases, women on the Chesapeake Bay do not own their own fishing boats or their own fishing businesses. In oyster boats for example, it is the men who do the physical work of tonging the oysters from the Bay’s bottom using long, heavy oyster tongs, too heavy for most women to use for any great stretch of time. As Harriet Bradley reminds us, when we visualize typical “men’s work,” we see men much like these oystermen: “we tend to evoke images of the outdoors, of strength and physicality;

\textsuperscript{128} Yodanis, “Constructing Gender and Occupational Segregation,” 74.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 59.
"men’s work" may be heavy, dirty, dangerous...it requires “skill” and training..."\(^{130}\) This definition suggests that “women’s work” is quite the opposite: gentle, clean, and unskilled. While this is far from the truth for those women who take to the sea with the fathers and husbands, gender ideology shapes perceptions of that work as less valuable or physically difficult than men’s labor.

Some women report a sense of guilt that they are not participating fully in the household economy when they do bring in a wage. Crab picker, founder of the Smith Island Crab Meat Cooperative, and waterman’s wife Janice Marshall comments:

> Once you sell that first pound [of crab meat], that’s the encouragement. Even though they were always hardworking women, toughest women in the world lives here, you know, making due for a family. But still, they weren’t earning their own income. And I think it’s something about that, even though you’re doing your part in the family, if you’re not earning that extra income to help out, you don’t feel like you’re doing much even though you are.\(^{131}\)

Even though Smith Island women support their watermen husbands and take care of children, the household, and attend to other non-wage-earning tasks, they feel that their work lacks the value of paid employment.\(^{132}\)

Men also feel the pressures of strict gender constructs and division of labor prevalent in fishing communities. Barbara Garrity-Blake writes that, in Reedville, Virginia—the hub of the U.S. menhaden\(^{133}\) fishery—many fishermen worry that their continued absence from their families threatens their role as breadwinner: “The pressure to


\(^{131}\) Transcript, Janice Marshall oral history interview, April 12, 2000, page 4, by Kelly Feltault, CBMM.

\(^{132}\) Hartmann, “The Family as the Locus of Gender,” 373.

\(^{133}\) The menhaden is a small, oily fish used mainly for fertilizer and fish oil supplements.
return with money was great...if a crewman was not catching fish and therefore not making money, in addition to being absent from the home, his status as the provider and head of household was threatened. Crewman feared losing control of their women and losing power as a family man.” Garrity-Blake points to a traditional menhaden chanty (or sea song used to help crewmen work in unison) that emphasizes this concern.

I left my baby  
Standing in the back door crying  
[repeat]  
She said, ‘Daddy, don’t go,  
Lord, Lord, Daddy, don’t go.’  
I can’t go home,  
Ain’t got no ready-made money,  
[repeat]  
To pay my fare.  
If I can make  
June, July, and August,  
[repeat]  
I’ll be a man,  
Lord, Lord, I’ll be a man.  

For these men from both black and white families, the earning of a wage was an obligation in order to maintain their masculine role in the house.

Janice Marshall of the Smith Island Crab Meat Cooperative comments that there are no career options for women on Smith Island, suggesting that fishing, the Island’s major industry, is not an acceptable or favored career for women. She notes a sense of obligation to her family in her decision to start picking crabs. But her decision must not been seen as a one-dimensional motherly sacrifice: Marshall says that crab picking gives women something to do during the day, it allows them to make money through the sale of their

134 Garrity-Blake, 99.  
135 Ibid.
crab, has given them a feeling of independence, and, not least of all, is enjoyable for many of its participants.

Because I remember when I was a little girl, no women ever drove cars because for one thing, you couldn't afford to have one on the mainland. And I thought that was the greatest thing. And one thing picking has done for women, I think it's made 'em have a feeling of independence, of being a help in the family, and it's give 'em the chance for that extra money to buy a car on the mainland.136

Marshall emphasizes both independence and pride in women's ability to financially assist their families, which makes these cooperative workers feel like they are being helpful. They were able to purchase automobiles with those contributions, which allowed them to get away from the island for awhile. Though perhaps driven by a sense of obligation to their families to work picking crabs, Marshall and the women on Smith Island reap the same sense of fulfillment from their labor as those women who work in the Eastern Shore canneries.

**Why Women Fish: Vocation**

If we do not accept Yodanis's logic that female fishermen are submissive to the gender constrictions of their society and obedient to the demands of their fishing husbands, if we allow that they might have some choice in the matter, then we find women who actually need or enjoy their jobs. For many women who work in Alaska's fishing industry, despite the hardships of the fishing lifestyle and the harassment from male crewmembers, the feeling that they can do "men's work" is entirely liberating. Says Martha Sutro:

In a way I liked it that there were not women there. I like being able to enter the world of men and, you know, exist, and breathe and prosper. It makes you feel like you don't

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136 Transcript, Janice Marshall oral history interview, April 12, 2000, pages 2–3, by Kelly Feltault, CBMM.
have that constant need for relationship, although when you’re off the boat, you’re on the phone immediately. But as much as I think we appreciate the way women integrate things, and they do combine a million things together when they work, there is something about male psychology that’s very defined, very pure...And I feel like being able to draw on a part of me that’s there.  

For Sutro, living on a fishing boat surrounded by men satisfies her curiosity, and she compares the experience to going to a museum or taking part in a "masquerade" where she gets to play the part of a man for four months at a time. Other Alaskan female fishermen talk of working on all-female crews, and relish their achievements as successful and skillful fishermen in a field dominated by men. Patsy Higgs, whose husband left his land-based job to fish with her rather than the other way around, differentiated herself from other women who fished on the Bay. When asked if she knew of any other women who fished, she commented, "...not like I did, you know, for a living, They would go out and give their husbands a helping hand, but I done it strictly for a living. It wasn’t no pleasure thing about it to me." Higgs equates those women who "give their husbands a helping hand" with pleasure fishing. She works hard because she needs to make money, and in a way degrades the labor of those women who do not rely on fishing for a living in the same way that she does.

Lila Line also tells the story of Susan Briggs, a former nurse and single mother of two with no connections to the water, who started oyster diving from Wye Landing,

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137 Fields, *The Entangling Net*, 42.  
138 Ibid., 43.  
139 Transcript, Patsy Higgs oral history interview, September 3, 1993, by Lila Line (Ryan) and Pete Lesher, CBMM.
Maryland, when she was struggling financially and heard that diving was a good way to make money.\textsuperscript{140} Oyster diving entails suiting up in a wet suit and oxygen tank, then bringing a crate to the oyster bed. The crate must be filled by hand quickly. The work is cold, tiring, and involves up to five or six hours on the Bay’s oyster-rich bottoms. Briggs faced many challenges as a female oyster diver. At first, it was difficult for her to find a waterman who would take her out on his boat—many men were married and their wives disapproved of Higgs changing from wet suit to wet suit on the boat in between dives.\textsuperscript{141} The men turned her away without giving her a try. Once she started diving, she found that there was no way she could work as fast as a man, her hands too small to pick up more than two or three oysters at a time.\textsuperscript{142} Briggs needed the work to support her two sons, but finds it rewarding and enjoyable, “‘like being one with the universe.’”\textsuperscript{143}

It is true that many women, like those who Higgs lightly criticizes, as well as their husbands, take joy in the familial closeness that the fishing lifestyle brings them. In Line’s interview with oyster culler Betty Fluharty, she says that the big draw for her is that she enjoys working with her husband, remarking simply, “‘I like being out with Jack.’”\textsuperscript{144} Some women enjoy fishing for its other qualities: peace, freedom, and the elemental feeling of being close with nature. Mary Lowery comments that in the “early morning [it was] like you were in the world all to yourself. It was relaxing, a lot of fun, no pressures. Be in the

\textsuperscript{140}Lila Line, \textit{Waterwomen}, 34. \textsuperscript{141}Ibid., 35. \textsuperscript{142}Ibid., 44. \textsuperscript{143}Ibid., 46. \textsuperscript{144}Line, “The Oysterwomen of Tilghman Island,” 17.
boat out there by yourself and the sunrise would come up—it was like you were in heaven. Really. You felt like you were the only person around, even though other boats were around...But you were just like ‘My, how lucky you are to be alive.’”

Like watermen, many women who work on the Chesapeake feel free on the water. Laura Era loves the feeling of being her own boss while she culls oysters for her husband and tends to her baby son. Kathleen Poole, who forfeited jobs in the government to start fishing on the Bay, agrees, saying “the best part of working the water is the independence. You never have to worry about being laid off.” Patsy Higgs comments, “You couldn’t have paid me $500 a week to work inside. I like it outside, being my own boss. Nobody telling me what to do, and that’s what the watermen like. They’re their own boss.” Both waterwomen and cannery women on the Chesapeake embrace the freedom of their water-based employment. They are not under the thumb of a boss or corporation, and they dictate the schedule and pace themselves or with a spouse or partner. The testament of at least some of these women thereby belie Carrie Yodanis’s theory that women who work the water are upholding rather than challenging gender norms on a fishing boat. It is too simple to say, as Yodanis does, that all women who fish do it out of obligation, as there are many waterwomen who enjoy what they do; for some women, both of these factors play a large part in their involvement in the fishing industry.

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145 Transcript, Mary Lowery oral history interview, January 30, 1999, by Kelly Feltault, CBMM.
146 Line, Waterwomen, 62.
147 Ibid., 76.
148 Transcript, Patsy Higgs and Joan Elburn oral history interview, November 24, 2003, by Shelley Drummond, CBMM.
In her book about women in the Nantucket whalefishery in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Lisa Norling writes: "Women's roles and responsibilities as wives and mothers were required by the demands of the men's occupation and reinforced by the social relations of work within the industry. The rigid division of labor in the whalefishery, where only men were involved directly in the shipboard processes, meant that family life, household organization, and women's work on shore had to remain as they had been: flexible and responsive to need and circumstance."\(^{149}\) Despite confronting on a daily basis life without their seafaring husbands, whaling wives were held in the gender expectations of the eighteenth century.

Yodanis also assesses the impact of gender norms on men in fishing communities. She writes that in many of these isolated areas where fishing is the main form of gainful employment, to be a man is to be a fisherman. Presented with only one option for wage work, men are expected to fill their roles as men by becoming fishermen and supporting their wives and children. Thus, both men and women in Yodanis's fishing community must work in the industry available to them, both sexes must negotiate the presumption that men fish and women do not.

Yodanis's argument, however, is not universally applicable to all fishing communities. Many women on the Bay may have started fishing with a father or husband out of obligation to the family's financial well-being, but seem to truly love their work. Some cannot recall a time when a waterman criticized them for taking to the water. Some

just need to make money, and find crabbing or oystering a lucrative form of employment. For some women, a combination of all of these factors brings them to the water. Regardless of why Chesapeake women chose to fish, during times of fisheries crisis—of environmental fragility and a culture gradually turning away from their water-based lifestyles—men, women, children, fish processors and fishermen must be, as Norling writes, flexible and responsive to circumstance.

The Water, Environmental Change, and Social Action

Geneva Steele, an activist from a coalmining town in West Virginia, comments that “Women are tired of waiting on men” to fix the problems that plague their communities. In mining towns around the world, women have played prominent roles in union and strike activities, as well as in promoting awareness of black lung and other debilitating health problems that plague miners. What about the women of these fishing communities? Watermen on the Chesapeake Bay are—and have been throughout the twentieth century—very active in campaigning for their fishing rights and livelihood, but how do Chesapeake women recognize and then express their concern for their local environment? Do they speak out on behalf of themselves, their families, and their communities to preserve and protect their way of life? Details of women’s involvement in fisheries activism or their opinions on environmental change and governmental reform in the Chesapeake region are difficult to find. It is clear, however, that women from Chesapeake Bay fishing communities

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have their own opinions—some strong and some subtle—on the current state and future of
the fishing industry. They gather ecological knowledge and form their opinions about
fisheries crisis through their roles as wage-workers and wives.

On the Chesapeake, the ecological knowledge of scientists and the ecological
knowledge of watermen stand at odds. In her paper on the history of the conservation
debates on the Bay, Christine Keiner argues that “by embracing a [conservation] solution
that watermen would never accept, scientists contributed to the deterioration of the oyster
fishery.” Keiner describes Maryland oyster beds in the late nineteenth century as being a
prime example of the “tragedy of the commons”—the oystermen gathering each and every
oyster, including those not yet full-grown, and selling them for profit. As a result, early
fisheries scientists in Maryland championed private oyster cultivation, at one point even
commenting that the northern states were using private beds, demonstrating those states’
“superior commercial and economic fitness,” and that Maryland needed to prove itself
thusly. Oystermen were strongly opposed, saying that privatization would rob them of
their independence and make them “hired employees.” When scientists were still
pushing the promises of aquaculture into the 1920s, watermen finally declared that if
anyone was qualified to make decisions about conservation on the Bay, it was they, who

152 Ibid., 44.
153 Ibid., 48.
154 Ibid., 53.
155 The cultivation of aquatic organisms, primarily for consumption.
had great faith in the regenerative properties of the oyster populations. From the earliest
days of fisheries conservation on the Chesapeake Bay, scientists and watermen have not
been able to see eye to eye. As a result, it seems that very little has been accomplished, and
species continue to rapidly decline.

When scientific measures for fisheries conservation fail, some scholars believe it is
best to look to alternate systems of knowledge for answers and change. Berkes, Colding,
and Folke define Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) as "holistic in outlook and
adaptive by nature, gathered over generations by observers whose lives depended on this
information and use. It often accumulates incrementally, tested by trial-and-error and
transmitted to future generations orally or by shared practical experiences." Standing in
opposition to scientific ecology, TEK serves as one ways of ecological knowing. This
intergenerational transmission of knowledge is embedded in the cultural group's social
systems. Traditional Ecological Knowledge is highly prevalent in watermen's defense of
their way of life. They see the degradation of the Bay's species as cyclical as it had been in
their father's and grandfather's time, a perspective that could also arise out of optimism or
fear of more fisheries regulation during such a time of environmental fragility.

In her thesis on women and the fishing crisis in Newfoundland, Nicole Power
discusses the roles that eco-feminism and Traditional Ecological Knowledge play in
interpreting a fishing community's reaction to environmental change. At the most basic

156 Keiner, "Scientists, Oystermen, and Maryland Oyster Conservation Politics," 104.
157 Fikret Berkes, Johan Colding, and Carl Folke, "Rediscovery of Traditional Ecological Knowledge as
158 Ibid., 1257.
level, Power asserts that since women play different roles in the maintenance of a fishing economy than men do, they experience and interact with nature in ways different from their male counterparts. The Newfoundland women absorb their ecological knowledge from the work they do at home and in fish processing plants, but this work is distinctly gendered. Thus, the knowledge both the men and women take in from their natural environment is distinctly gendered, as well. Literature on women in fishing communities from around the world “suggests that women’s knowledge is integrated and holistic about certain issues but less so about others because of the work they do and the roles they fill.”159 When she asked many women about their ecological knowledge, they drew from their experiences both at work and at home in their non-wage work as wives and mothers, often devaluing their own opinions about ecological changes or deferring to their husbands, who they perceive as having a greater knowledge of the fishing industry. Power goes on to write that cod processing workers have to meet a certain standard in order to keep their jobs in the processing house, so they have to acquire knowledge about the fish products they work with.160 They would notice when the fish started to get smaller or decrease in quality, or when the meat became too soft to be processed by deboning machines, or when they could no longer meet daily output quotas and performance requirements—all indicators of the decline in cod populations in Newfoundland fishing grounds.161

160 Ibid., 30.
161 Ibid., 142.
In contrast to local reproduction and production of knowledge, Power writes, “Science acquires power because of the universalism of its laws. Its application across localities often marginalizes both local knowledge’s and local ecological rhythms.” In the Chesapeake, as in many fishing-rich areas around the country, the word of the scientist is given much more weight than the word of the fisherman. Where scientists have an easier time viewing their solutions in a long-term sense and gather an income regardless of what happens to the Bay, many watermen seek more immediate answers that serve their more immediate needs. As Janice Marshall comments, fishing quotas are set based on scientific observation rather than the observations of those who know the Bay best: “They [fisheries scientists] go out maybe one day a month and drag an area and say, ‘Well, there’s no crabs here.’ You know, where a waterman is out on the bay every day. They know the bottom....so we have people in offices telling us what we’re going to catch and how long we’re going to catch them.” Other women base their opinions of the Bay environment on experience or knowledge passed down from their watermen fathers. When talking about rockfish (or striped bass)—one of the major Bay catches and a fish that declined dramatically during the 1970s and ’80s and was declared off-limits to fishermen in 1989—Patsy Higgs comments that she trusted her own father’s opinion over that of biologists: “And then finally they said, you know, that the rockfish were getting extinct. I don’t believe

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162 Ibid., 13.
that in a heartbeat 'cause daddy always told me that rockfishing, it's in a cycle. And every seven years, the bay will replenish itself." Mary Lowery echoes these sentiments about saving the Chesapeake Bay, commenting, "I'm no college graduate, but all you got to do is, and people should use a little bit of common sense." By prefacing her comment with the phrase "I'm no college graduate," Lowery implies that it is not a college degree in biology that will solve the conservation challenges on the Chesapeake, but logic, patience, and experience. And Higgs and Joan Elburn's waterman fathers taught them how to respect their local environment by not throwing trash overboard and keeping oil away from the water. Higgs's father taught her that if she respected the water, the water would be good to her in return. These women—all older and experienced waterwomen and wives—use their Traditional Ecological Knowledge, passed down to them from their fathers, and their experiences in a water-based economy, to form their opinions on the contemporary issues that face the Bay.

Women who hold both wage-earning and non-wage earning positions from many fishing communities around the world have formed activist groups to raise awareness about their own labor, fisheries crises, and to protest government restrictions on catches. Fisheries crises affect not only men in fishing communities, but women, too. According to Martha MacDonald, women's unpaid labor increases with government cuts in health,

165 Transcript, Patsy Higgs oral history interview, September 3, 1993, by Lila Line (Ryan) and Pete Lesher, CBMM.
166 Transcript, Mary Lowery oral history interview, January 30, 1999, by Kelly Feltault, CBMM.
167 Transcript, Patsy Higgs and Joan Elburn oral history interview, November 24, 2003, by Shelley Drummond, CBMM.
education, and social services. In communities around the world, women must "disproportionately bear the burdens of export development and structural adjustment policies" that are part of globalization and the stresses of competing in a global economy. Government interventions in regions of fisheries crisis often have a negative effect or no effect at all. In the Canadian maritime provinces following the fisheries collapse of the 1990s, the government offered job training programs to women in the fishing and processing industries, thousands of whom lost their jobs, but primarily in traditionally "feminine," low-paying professions. Other governments do not even attempt to intervene on women’s behalf. Following the 2005 tsunami in Southeast Asia, women from fishing communities petitioned for aid and compensation from the Indian and Sri Lankan governments, claiming that their livelihoods were destroyed, as well as their husbands’. On International Women’s Day in 2009, Sri Lankan women marched again because their pleas were never answered.

Some groups of women organize to fight for the rights of water-based communities. Even when they do not fish, women from fishing families around the world have been active in supporting those from their families and communities who do. Large associations in Massachusetts and Nova Scotia advocate on behalf of fishermen and their families, depending entirely on the leadership of women. The Gloucester Fishermen’s Wives

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169 Ibid., 24.
Association in the historic fishing community of Gloucester, Massachusetts, is dedicated to “working with local fishermen to establish market-based approaches that will allow fishermen to make a living while ensuring a sustainable fishery,” and advocating both fishermen’s rights to harvest and the preservation of fish stocks through education and environmental activism.\textsuperscript{172} The Nova Scotia Women’s FishNet was established in 1995 to draw attention to “the impact of the changes in the fishing industry on communities, families and women” and encourage inclusion when it comes to matters of policy that may affect fishing families.\textsuperscript{173}

On the Chesapeake, women’s pessimism regarding the future of a fishing life often takes more subtle forms. For some women, this caution means ensuring that their children do not continue to work as fishermen or in fish-processing facilities. They encourage children to get an education so that they have greater options for their future. In his analysis of the African American communities of Chesapeake North Carolina, David Griffith writes that women who work in crab-processing facilities encourage their daughters to go to college and get jobs that provide regular paychecks: “‘Do anything, anything at all, to prevent a lifetime of picking crab.’”\textsuperscript{174} Where once crab pickers fought for the respect of their communities and gained pride in their work, the changing nature of their benefits, the economy, and the modern-day job market have made many young people less willing to participate in fish processing, and their parents and grandparents less

\textsuperscript{173} Shelburne County Women’s FishNet “Home,” www.womensfishnet.com.
\textsuperscript{174} Griffith, \textit{The Estuary’s Gift}, 78.
willing to encourage them to do so. In a 2003 interview, Janice Marshall comments similarly that her waterman husband used to encourage their grandson to start fishing, but that he has changed his mind over the last two years as opportunities dwindle.\textsuperscript{175} She also notes that more and more islanders have left Smith Island for the security of land-based jobs, especially young people.

In the oral histories of cannery workers from Maryland and Virginia, many of whom have picked crabs and shucked oysters for upwards of 50 years, several of the women comment that they have noticed that the catch is getting scarcer. Others mention that it is getting harder to attract a workforce. At the Smith Island Crab Meat Cooperative, the number of women who pick crabs has gone from fifteen to five in 2008. Janice Marshall comments that this is because the Maryland state government no longer prosecutes those people who illegally process the meat in their own homes as they once did when the crab cooperative was built. As a result, Marshall says, the Cooperative is getting run out of business.\textsuperscript{176} Because of the changing economic and environmental climate and government involvement in the seafood processing industry, many women who have long made a living from crabs and oysters are seeing the end of the industry.

In an interview with former waterwomen Patsy Higgs and Joan Elburn, the two women agree about the downside of the modern-day Chesapeake fishery:

\begin{quote}
   Patsy Higgs (P.H.): I'll tell you right now, honey. I wouldn't want my great-grandson to even think about working on the water. My son has told him, you know.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{175} Transcript, Janice Marshall oral history interview, September 28, 2008, page 24 by Janice Gaudaire Fleuriel, NOAA.

\textsuperscript{176} Ibid., 11.
Joan Elburn (J.E.): No benefits.
P.H.: Nothing. There’s nothing there.
J.E.: No health insurance.\textsuperscript{177}

From their personal experiences on the water, Higgs and Elburn have learned that fishing is a difficult way to support oneself and one’s family. Higgs comments, “It’s hard for a waterman to make a living because there’s so many damn restrictions they want to put on him.”\textsuperscript{178} Janice Marshall, too, expresses her disgust and defends the watermen:

> You know, and some of the things that bother me more than anything is they talk about how watermen are depleting our bay. You know, they’re overfishing. Well, we live on a little island in the middle of the bay. And I bet we don’t contribute one percent of pollution that goes in that bay. We’re surrounded by cities. You know? And yesterday, when it was raining like that [in New Bedford, Ma.], first thing I look at is all the runoff. Now where is this runoff going?\textsuperscript{179}

Marshall is knowledgeable and opinionated. She sees the watermen around her bearing the brunt of the fishing regulations, while what she views as the real problem—pollution—goes untreated. Linda Crewe, an oyster aquaculturist and wife of a waterman from Newport News, Virginia, also condemns the federal restrictions that hinder a waterman’s ability to work. She has a long history of involvement in the fight for watermen’s rights and culture. In 1986, she formed a local organization called Women of the Water, which raised $30,000 for the Watermen’s Museum in Yorktown. She has spoken in the Virginia State House on fisheries legislation and was a catalyst in filing a lawsuit

\textsuperscript{177} Transcript, Patsy Higgs and Joan Elburn oral history interview, November 24, 2003, page 18, by Shelley Drummond, CBMM.
\textsuperscript{178} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{179} Transcript, Janice Marshall oral history interview, September 28, 2008, page 22, by Janice Gaudaire Fleuriel, NOAA.
against the Virginia Marine Resource Council and their allocation of oyster money.\textsuperscript{180} In 1999, she started a fisheries research grant program, but gave up on it when she had no fight left in her.\textsuperscript{181} Crewe derives her knowledge from her experiences as a waterwoman and wife. Displeased with what she saw in the treatment of local watermen, she took action:

\begin{quote}
I know I’ve stepped on some toes over the years. Men don’t like an aggressive woman messing in their work but, hell, a lot of ‘em don’t understand what the government’s doin’ to ‘em, and I wasn’t about to let the culture go down the tubes because of that lame excuse. Me and some other wives took the bull by the horn—maybe more than we should have because I know I pushed too hard from time to time and it pissed people off.\textsuperscript{182}
\end{quote}

On Smith Island, the watermen’s wives take collective action as well, holding a fundraising concert every year. They don costumes and sing fishing-related parodies of popular songs (Sonny and Cher’s “I’ve Got You, Babe” becomes “We’ve Got Crabs, Babe”). The money they raise pays for a lawyer for the watermen to fight the government’s fishing regulations.\textsuperscript{183}

Religious cultures in these communities can help organize and articulate the larger stakes in these conflicts. Tangier Island’s men and women worked with Ph.D. student Susan Emmerich to create a faith-based environmental stewardship covenant. On Tangier, the island’s two churches stand as the most important institutions to its residents, many of whom are deeply religious Evangelical Christians. The residents were afraid that their water-based way of life would disappear and felt powerless against the fishing regulations,

\begin{footnotes}
\item \textsuperscript{180} Mick Blackistone, \textit{Dancing with the Tide: Watermen of the Chesapeake} (Atglen, PA: Cornell Maritime Press/Schiffer Publishing, 2001), 100.
\item \textsuperscript{181} Ibid., 101.
\item \textsuperscript{182} Ibid., 99.
\item \textsuperscript{183} Transcript, Janice Marshall oral history interview, September 28, 2008, page19, by Janice Gaudaire Fleuriel, NOAA.
\end{footnotes}
and faced many conflicts with the Chesapeake Bay Foundation (CBF), the two groups having great difficulty understanding each other's worldview. Emmerich and the islanders worked towards an amiable relationship with CBF, using Tangier’s faith-based worldview to formulate a new kind of environmental stewardship. By working within the islanders’ religious value system, Emmerich was able to convince Islanders that that their responsibility to protect God’s creation was entirely consistent with efforts to change their own futures by controlling their environmental decisions. Tangier’s female residents, who play active roles in the island’s churches, played a prominent role in the Initiative’s leadership, as well. Some women participated in the “Women’s Stewardship Commitment,” where they promised to “reuse and recycle materials, change consumption patterns, and teach stewardship...messages to their children.” Here, the women’s role in helping the environment and conserving the Chesapeake’s fisheries is highly gendered: while men fulfilled their part of the covenant by not throwing trash into the Bay from their fishing boats and not catching pregnant crabs, women made changes in their homes under the guise of household production and childrearing. Emmerich also holds that the Initiative empowered those women who took part. Some of the women got together and formed their own seafood restaurant, and two others went back to school. This social action expanded

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185 Between Heaven and Earth: The Plight of the Chesapeake Watermen (video).
186 Emmerich, “Fostering Environmental Responsibility,” 86.
187 Ibid., 89.
the women's worldview, drew them into the political arena, and connected them to opportunities outside of their isolated island.

As we have seen, it is not just fishermen who know nature, but also the women who witness its fragility and acknowledge its significance in their own lives. In *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau writes: “Fishermen, hunters, wood-choppers, and others, spending their lives in the fields and woods, in a peculiar sense part of nature themselves, are often in a more favorable mood for observing her, in the intervals of their pursuits, than philosophers of poets even, who approach her with expectation.” 188 Through their prolonged exposure to the ways of nature, Thoreau says, those who work and harvest from the land know well its mysteries. Cannery women, waterwomen, and the female family members of those who work the water experience environmental change and formulate theories in a gendered way because of the highly gender-segregated nature of water-based labor. They transmit their pessimism about the future to their children in an effort to ensure them more stable lives. When expressing disgust about pollution or the government's regulations, the women seek to defend their watermen husbands and fathers. Women on the Chesapeake are socially active and environmentally aware. In this respect, they are no different than women in many other fishing communities around the world. As their work is strongly gendered, so too is their social action. They often come to these public debates as wives and mothers, seeing themselves as part of a family unit rather than asserting their rights as just women.

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188 Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1904), 
Conclusion

Although since ancient times and across many cultures the sea has been female, women on the sea have occupied limited spaces. They have clung to bowsprits, their carved, angular breasts breaking ocean into wake; their faces have gone to sea on men’s tattooed arms; their names have labeled the bows and sterns of men’s boats. But few have themselves ridden the waves and worked the boats that sail them.

— Leslie Leyland Fields, *The Entangling Net*¹⁸⁹

Leslie Leyland Fields’s points out an age-old truism: women throughout the centuries and around the world have been part of every bit of seaward enterprise, except for seafaring. Lisa Norling also comments, “Women have served as the foil against which sailors and maritime culture in general have asserted their rugged masculinity and demonstrated their estrangement from land-based society, as they ‘wandered,’ often ‘in exile,’ over ‘the trackless deep’ on ships that were always called ‘she.’”¹⁹⁰ With the exception of a brief mention of Captain Ahab’s wife, there are no women in *Moby Dick*—or in *Captains Courageous*. Contemporary scholars of women in fishing all agree on one thing: that fishing is a male-dominated profession, bound tightly in a gendered framework where men fish and women do not. Those rare women who do fish are treated as novelties, given the thinnest sliver of attention in newspapers and trade journals.

In Chesapeake Bay fishing communities, those women who participate in water-based occupations are present, but the duties that they perform may not be as obvious to those outside the fishing industry. Women work at every level of Chesapeake seafood

¹⁹⁰ Norling, *Captain Ahab Had a Wife*, 2.
production. When a consumer picks up a can of Maryland crabmeat or Chesapeake oysters at a grocery store, he or she may not acknowledge the women who are responsible for turning a whole, steamed crab into chunks of easy-to-eat crab meat. And beyond their roles as workers and producers in the processing houses, for over a century, cannery women have gathered a valuable source of income for themselves and their families, learned necessary skills that they can pass on to their children and grandchildren, nurtured a sense of kinship and community with their sister workers, and embraced the feeling of freedom that accompanies their labor. Many women who harvest marine resources from the Chesapeake on their own or with male family members claim this same freedom that comes from having no boss and no set workday.

For those women who do not fish but belong to fishing families, their work remains no less essential to the industry than their husbands. In his essay on women in Scottish fishing communities, Paul Thompson writes that “the masculine image of the industry conceals the reality of an occupation which, by removing men to sea, makes them peculiarly dependent on the work of women ashore.” In many generational fishing families, the men are largely removed from onshore life for generations, creating a social structure largely unique to those who fish, all around the world. On the Chesapeake, watermen’s trips do not last for days, weeks, or months at a time, as they do in other nations or areas around the U.S., so the absence of a husband or father is not as prolonged.

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191 Thompson, 3.
In many ways, the lives of women on the Chesapeake Bay over the last several decades are not that much different from women from other parts of the world. They take part in a highly gendered industry in which it is expected that they will fulfill traditionally female roles as wives, mothers, and caregivers; or, if they must fish, fish like men, and act like them, too. Despite the many similarities in women’s positions across the global fishing community, it is impossible to say that the attitudes towards female fishermen or the problems that the women confront are universally the same. On the Chesapeake, the Bay’s perilous environmental conditions and regulatory conflicts affect women employed in seafood processing, fishing, and those who participate in the fishery on a secondary level. The continual and unparalleled failure of the state and federal governments to follow up on promises to clean up the Bay, as well as the environmental havoc wreaked by tourists, locals, and watermen themselves have hurt the Chesapeake Bay fishing industry. While watermen are vocal about the ways that these measures have affected their livelihoods, other less-acknowledged portions of the fishing mechanism—cannery women, waterwomen, watermen’s wives, and female entrepreneurs—are affected, too. Women on the Chesapeake must encounter and come to terms with the Bay’s environmental degradation on a daily basis. As women, they interact with nature differently, and respond to nature-based problems in a distinctly gendered way.
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**Papers**

**Films**