Graduate Journal of Food Studies • Volume 5, Number 2

From Ocean to Table: Integrating Marine and Coastal Food Systems into Food Studies

Luis Alexis Rodríguez Cruz

Published on: Dec 11, 2018

DOI: 10.21428/92775833.ee2946c9

License: [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC-BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

David Griffith and Manuel Valdés Pizzini, *Fishers at Work, Workers at Sea: A Puerto Rican Journey through Labor and Refuge* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002).

It is common to hear and read the phrases “farm to table” or “farm to plate” in food systems discussions and scholarship. Less common, is to encounter “ocean to table” or “ocean to plate.” As scholars, we are aware of the issues that farmers and farmworkers face, but it seems that we often fail to acknowledge coastal and marine food systems’ issues. Why? It could be that those systems seem distant to most of us. Even in Puerto Rico, a Caribbean island and U.S. territory, most scholarship focused on food systems ignores the issues that coastal communities face, especially fisherfolks. Today, given the implications of climate change on coastal areas as well as marine deterioration, researchers and stakeholders are starting to give more attention to coastal communities and marine ecosystems. If researchers and stakeholders want to get involved with fisherfolks to develop solutions for the problems that they face, it is imperative to understand the dynamics among those communities. David Griffith and Manuel Valdés Pizzini’s *Fishers at Work, Workers at Sea* (2002) is an invaluable starting point for the study of marine or coastal food systems.[\[1\]](#)

As its subtitle reads, this book is a “Puerto Rican journey through labor and refuge.” Griffith and Valdés Pizzini draw from theoretical work on historical forms of labor production, such as those of peasants and tenant farmers, artisanal, and small-scale producers, to create a framework that allows them to understand capitalist dynamics within the Puerto Rican fishing sector. Through ethnographic methods, primarily by eliciting fisherfolks’ life histories, the co-authors investigate “how the incorporation of independent producers into labor and commodity markets effects their economic activities and sense of self” (ix). Moreover, this book serves as a lens for readers (both within food studies and Puerto Rico more generally) to better understand the power dynamics that manifest between or among communities in an unincorporated territory of the U.S. The co-authors’ overall findings on the living and working conditions of fisherfolks within a U.S. territory as well as their theoretical and methodological frameworks—which contextualize their analyses, interviews, and data collection in the lived realities of Puerto Rico’s history as a colonized “country”—merit more attention in food studies, particularly in research on sovereignty and the Caribbean. They highlight the importance of understanding how marine ecologies have repercussions on fisherfolks’ wellbeing and political dynamics. One interesting question the co-authors ask is: “Do they [fisherfolks] perceive clearly how their work in fisheries, like

work among peasants, maintains and reproduces a reserve army of labor that helps keep wages low?” (10) The authors also conclude that, even though fisherfolks contribute to capitalistic cycles of labor, they still resist common categorizations as wagedworkers. Like land-based laborers, fisherfolks stay connected with the environment where they work; they draw and maintain an identity from the “seascape” (233). Nevertheless, marine and coastal ecosystems should not be simplistically equated with land-based systems.

Although Griffith and Valdés Pizzini focus on Puerto Rican fisherfolks and coastal communities, their work translates to the realities of other Caribbean island territories. Puerto Rico is not the only non-sovereign territory in the region. To this day, the Caribbean is composed of non-sovereign island territories that have to abide to the public policies and political dynamics over which they do not have any agency. Although the Caribbean is heterogenous, its people, nations, and non-sovereign territories share a history of colonization, oppression, and some cultural similarities, such as shared foodways. Furthermore, fisherfolks share many similarities with peasants, farmers, and other small-scale producers. More than a means to generate wealth, stability, and security, their work is a way of life that constructs identity, culture, and heritage. *Fishers at Work, Workers at Sea* generates awareness that our food system includes the sea and the oceans. It is important that we incorporate the issues affecting coastal and marine food systems more critically into food studies when discussing food systems from national, regional, and global perspectives. Griffith and Valdés Pizzini prevent us, as scholars of food studies, from ignoring the interconnections, complexities, and particularities of the dynamics in coastal and marine food systems. Moreover, their approach teaches us that the connection with the sea differs from that with the land, implicating researchers in a different set of methodologies and concerns.

Biography

Luis Alexis Rodríguez Cruz is a Food Systems PhD student at the University of Vermont. His research focuses on understanding challenges and motivators for climate change adaptation and agricultural resiliency outcomes in island food systems. Luis is also interested in understanding how climate change perceptions and psychological distance relate to climate adaptation behaviors. His work focuses on the Caribbean, specifically Puerto Rico. He holds a BS in Biology from the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) at Ponce and a MS in Food Science and Technology from UPR-Mayagüez. Luis tweets [@Luis_AlexisRC](https://twitter.com/Luis_AlexisRC) and blogs at www.luisalexis.com.

Citations

1. <https://gradfoodstudies.pubpub.org/pub/ybuk55g5/branch/2#notes> ↵