

María L. Cruz-Torres. 2023. *Pink gold: Women, shrimp, and work in Mexico*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press. ISBN 9781517913991. \$34.95.

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Anthropologist María Cruz-Torres' ethnography *Pink Gold* delves into the informal urban economy of market stands and roving hawkers through her study on the *changueras*: the female shrimp trades of Mazatlán, a city in the Mexican state of Sinaloa. Through long-term fieldwork with these women, she demonstrates the connection between shrimp, their estuarine habitat, and these women working to provide for their families in a changing world.

Cruz-Torres' approach operationalizes feminist political ecology by showing how the women employ traditional ecological knowledge while working within an increasingly modern and corporatized Mexican seafood economy. She also reveals the importance of social relations in the movement of commodities, emphasizing their monetary, social, and cultural value (p. 15). Finally, she describes the seasonal, precarious, and gendered nature of Sinaloa's seafood industry. These core theoretical notions motivate her study and connect the shrimp, a prized local commodity, to both their environment and the women who sell them.

Cruz-Torres examines how the *changueras* established their street market. She explains that, for decades, Mexican authorities considered the sale of shrimp outside of official export markets illegal. Thus, these women who grew up in fishing communities and knew shrimping well utilized various strategies to smuggle shrimp into the city, where they could fetch higher prices, but they had to operate illicitly (p. 58-60). They established their own space in the city first through unionization, and then by taking up space and formalizing their market on the streets of Mazatlán (p. 78). Women built networks and fought off the misogynist claims that they are promiscuous and untrustworthy, as well as continuing claims that they are an impediment to Mazatlán's modernization (p. 118, 128). These resilient women have formalized their market and role as merchants selling affordable seafood to customers from Mazatlán, across Mexico, and worldwide.

Changueras hold multiple identities: they are businesswomen providing economic labor for their households as well as wives and mothers providing the reproductive labor of raising children, cooking, cleaning, and other domestic tasks. There is great physical and mental strain on *changueras*, who rely on their knowledge and skillset as they work long hours while purchasing shrimp, constructing their stands anew each day, and taking a charming, friendly, yet measured approach to sell their shrimp to potentially rude and picky customers (p. 196). Shrimp is a perishable commodity whose demand ebbs and flows. As such, *changueras* balance their intensive physical labor with the soft skills of negotiation and customer service.

Cruz-Torres demonstrates that empowered *changueras* seek ways to buy shrimp on credit or with loans; however, because of this, they often face monetary debt. Sometimes, they have the necessary capital to pay off expenses, but often lack the funds to pay debts, let alone to buy medicine or food (p. 228). To master this balancing act, women have formed reciprocal social bonds and built consensus with wholesalers, moneylenders, and family members. The ties between these women and their lenders are so tightly bound that it becomes unclear even to Cruz-Torres where the social ties end and economic relationships begin (p. 248). These relations show the critical importance of social bonds even in the locally-situated exchange of commodities.

Cultural representations of the *changueras* demonstrate that, despite their precarity, they serve as a collective cultural icon for the Mexican state of Sinaloa (p. 260). The *changueras* have even appeared in a local *telenovela*, showing that commodities like shrimp in Sinaloa are at the core of the local cultural imaginary (p. 280). These broader cultural representations also include a *changuera corrido*, a regional genre of song which mythicizes their lives but shows them to be active, dynamic heroines (p. 286). These women are crucial symbols of Sinaloan life: they embody a hardworking, rustic spirit since they persevere and sell a desirable local product.

The approach by Cruz-Torres in describing *changueras* as a united front versus as distinct individuals was a point of contention during my reading. The individualized agency of the *changueras* collapse when she recounts the complicated, bureaucratic story of the union's formation. She shows the skills and networks of each woman, but not the utility and value of a union beyond the need for an established geographic space in which

to sell. Cruz-Torres describes the market where these women work as communal; however, each individual *changuera* buys their own shrimp from wholesalers, stores their own gear, obtains their own ice, and completes other tasks. Their union connects them, protecting their location and resolving disputes, but it does not override their individual skills and knowledge. Cruz-Torres also calls the *changuera* market an intentional community; I argue this is also an imposed community thanks to local institutions regulating commerce, the societal expectations of women as caregivers, and the demands of unionization. While there may be some intentional ambiguity embedded in the delineation between the collective action of these women and the individual efforts of each shrimp trader, this book shows how external forces weigh heavily on this sector and the agency of women.

This case study of the *changueras* shows their history, current positions as local icons, and their critical role as providers for their families. The multi-generational skills and economic impacts of this sector in Mazatlán are clear: many *changueras* have raised successful children who often return to help their mothers in the market. The arguments and excerpts from interviews with the women display the power relationships inherent in the movement of local commodities like shrimp. This book is a valuable resource for anyone interested in informal urban economies, coastal marine contexts, or with any group so intrinsically bound to a seasonal, perishable resource—like the titular pink gold of shrimp—for their economic and social well-being.

Reference

Cruz-Torres, M. L. (2023). *Pink gold: Women, shrimp, and work in Mexico*. University of Texas Press.

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