

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

**Seth M. Holmes**, *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies: Migrant Farmworkers in the United States*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013. ISBN: 9780520275140 (paper); ISBN: 9780520954793 (ebook); ISBN: 9780520275133 (cloth)

In the vast and growing academic literature on food and agriculture there has been a dearth of work that directly addresses the health conditions of laborers in today's food system. Seth Holmes' book, *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies: Migrant Farmworkers in the United States*, makes an intervention in this field, providing readers with a succinct ethnography of the migrant worker experience across three field sites: Washington State, California, and Oaxaca, Mexico. This detailed account is combined with a clear analysis of the political economy of migration, relating the story of indigenous Triqui migrants from the San Miguel region of Oaxaca. In this telling, Holmes challenges assumptions regarding the laboring body, with consequences for immigration policy, medical practice, and agricultural production.

Along the lines of Jill Harrison's (2011) book, *Pesticide Drift and the Pursuit of Environmental Justice*, Holmes pursues the task of exploring both the social and bio-physical suffering of farmworkers. He argues that they are caught in global food and immigration systems, which are both rooted in race and class based inequality. Although Holmes' dual training as both a medical doctor and cultural anthropologist could lead to a confusing and contradictory analysis, it is precisely this combination and his ability to grapple with these incongruities that make this book so unique and powerful.

*Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies* begins with the author's personal account of crossing the US-Mexico border illegally alongside his Mexican compatriots. In doing so, he is able to personalize the political and abstract notion of the militarized border. He literally risks his own life to understand the migrant experience, exhibiting his tremendous

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personal and professional commitment to transmitting this story. While he tells of his own personal suffering as part of the border crossing, he makes it clear that the risks he takes are not of the same magnitude as those who have no choice but to enter the United States clandestinely. The introductory chapter, titled ‘Worth Risking Your Life?’, reflects a question Holmes sees written on the wall of a church in a border-crossing town. With this vivid account, he exposes the way that such a question, and the subsequent framing of border crossing as an individual choice, masks the reality of Triqui migrants. For them, staying in Oaxaca without opportunities to acquire work, food, or education creates a situation where *not* crossing the border is the greater risk.

Utilizing the complimentary concepts of symbolic and structural violence, Holmes describes the bodily differences produced by a system of labor rooted ethnic inequalities. He explains how Triquis, and other indigenous migrants, are differentiated from ‘regular’ Mexicans on both sides of the border, through a “conjugated oppression,” where “class, race, and citizenship work together to deprive them of physical and mental health” (p.85). This oppression is a lived reality for migrants, as it produces corporal suffering. He explains the ways that farm managers and others naturalize indigenous workers’ low level in the social hierarchy, which results in subsequent physical and emotional distress. Superiors claim that indigenous migrants are physically built to be berry pickers, as they are “lower to the ground”, rather than in other, more desirable or better paid, positions at the farm. Holmes calls these naturalized hierarchies out for what they are - socially and historically constructed as well as malleable.

His description of embodied violence travels geographically between the berry fields of the United States to the workers’ hometown in Mexico, where he depicts the state of political violence in the Triqui region of Oaxaca. Holmes explains the complex local land disputes that have resulted from the global pursuit of capital accumulation.

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Providing this framework, he shows the relations between worldwide inequalities and the very personal bodily pains and individual stories of Triqui migrant workers.

Holmes follows Laura Nader's (1972) call for anthropologists to 'study up', interviewing not only migrant farm laborers themselves, but also their employers and the medical professionals that treat and diagnose them. Through engaging with people at all levels of the socio-economic hierarchy that workers live in, Holmes shows the ways medical providers and farm owners are caught in a complex system of global competition. He highlights the structural constraints of farmers and physicians to improve both working conditions and medical care.

He does this not to lift all personal blame, but rather to show that the inability of individuals to provide better working and healthcare conditions is not simply due to individual cases of racism. The powerlessness of individuals to make change is due to broken food and healthcare systems. In the medical system, he shows the way that some healthcare providers display commitment to workers, yet are unable to provide better care given today's neoliberal medical environment. Physicians in workers' clinics are strapped by the realities of underfunded and understaffed nonprofits, made worse by the fact that most workers are undocumented and therefore cannot qualify for Medicaid or Medicare. Clinics must apply for grants to be reimbursed for their services, further exhausting their limited time and resources. In the food system, Holmes points out that although indigenous pickers are at the bottom of the agribusiness hierarchy, mid-sized family farm owners, despite their relatively comfortable physical daily existence, are also economically vulnerable on the global scale.

Holmes uses the tools of discourse analysis to unravel the structural factors affecting migrant healthcare. He addresses assumptions rampant among medical practitioners, challenging "the ways in which certain classes become written off and

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deemed as less human” (p.44). He deconstructs the lens of healthcare professionals and the objectification of patients. The consistent lack of language interpreters available to migrant workers, combined with healthcare workers failing to ask in-depth questions to properly understand work conditions, results in consistently improper healthcare and continuing bodily suffering. Language barriers and inadequate time and respect afforded to workers’ voice and experience culminates in migrants not receiving workers’ compensation and distrusting doctors, continuing the cycle of improper treatment for injuries and stress. Holmes makes clear that in the case of most practitioners they desire to provide better care, yet are unable to do so given their clinics being overwhelmed with patients, most of who are unable to communicate their needs without proper interpretation.

Holmes explains the ways in which the practice of biomedicine functions to depoliticize sickness, erasing the “structural determinants of suffering” including histories of military torture and economic inequality (p.144). This practice creates material danger for workers, as providers that are unaware of the true causes of worker suffering are unable to properly treat patients, often prescribing inappropriate medications and overlooking the true causes of illness.

Rather than simply bemoan these conditions, Holmes calls for more attention to the psychological and social aspects of patient suffering and for a restructuring of the healthcare system. In contrast the current system, which is based on corporate profitability, he makes an argument for universal healthcare, centered on equal access to services. He contends that we must begin to understand the social and economic factors that lead to poor health for migrant workers and others with improper access to healthcare and move beyond the current apolitical approach to providing care.

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*Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies* does an excellent job explaining the conditions of Triqui workers specifically, yet would have benefitted from helping readers understand the circumstances of new immigrants in the context of the historical struggle for farmworker rights. Holmes could have included more historical background of other racialized groups of farmworkers in United States, including shifts in the ethnic make-up of farmworkers and the various sociopolitical conditions that have lead different groups to migrate, enter the agricultural workforce, and eventually leave agriculture. In addition, the book would have been strengthened by considering the relationship between today's working conditions and past farm labor organizing attempts, contextualizing the ability of new workers to protest their conditions.

Those with interests in our healthcare, food, or immigration systems should read this monograph. Holmes' strength is his ability to clarify the connections between these three systems and the ways in which they produce systematic suffering. The reader is left with a deep understanding of how injustice in the United States is produced and the strength of the individuals that persevere through it.

## References

- Harrison J L (2011) *Pesticide Drift and the Pursuit of Environmental Justice*. Cambridge: The MIT Press
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*July 2013*