



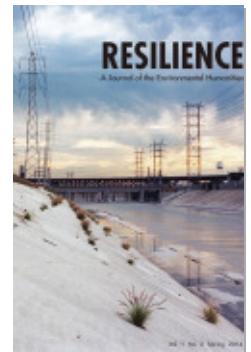
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*Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies: Migrant Farmworkers in the
United States* by Seth Holmes (review)

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Seth Holmes, *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies: Migrant Farmworkers in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013)

In *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies: Migrant Farmworkers in the United States*, Seth Holmes exposes the contemporary food system's reliance on human suffering. He uses participant observation to examine the experiences of an indigenous Mexican community, the Triqui, who harvest crops in Washington and California. The Triqui people are among the newest groups to engage in regular transnational migration between Mexico and the United States. They do not choose to migrate, but rather experience the violence of migration in order to survive. Holmes's book shifts the concern with so-called healthy food from the choices consumers face about what to eat to the lack of choices facing those who engage in agricultural labor in California and Washington. He emphasizes the way racialized labor hierarchies naturalize social injustice, especially in the food system. His work contributes to conversations in food studies, ecocriticism, and environmental justice, even if Holmes does not self-consciously situate his work within these fields.

As a graduate student completing his dissertation research, Holmes arranged to live on a berry farm owned by a third-generation Japanese American family in Skagit Valley in northwestern Washington. He harvested fruit alongside Triqui families from San Miguel, Oaxaca, during two summer seasons. Holmes befriended several families during his time on the Tanaka Brothers Farm, and traveled with one extended family to the Central Valley in California during winter. There Holmes and the Triqui family lived out of their cars for a week until a local slumlord rented them an apartment. Nineteen people shared this three-bedroom apartment as they sought work pruning grapevines. After building relationships with several Triqui families, Holmes arranged to spend a season in San Miguel, where he ultimately convinced a group of nine men to allow him to cross the border with them. The book opens with a gripping first person account of this crossing including run-ins with cacti and rattlesnakes—and, ultimately, capture by the border patrol.

Holmes's study deepens our understanding of the experiences of migrant farmworkers in US agricultural landscapes through nuanced attention to what Holmes identifies as an ethnicity-citizenship hierarchy at work in agricultural landscapes. He exposes the social structures through which the ethnicity-citizenship hierarchy of the farm is reproduced and naturalized. He aims not only to conduct a study from the ground up, but also to "study up" by analyzing a "vertical slice" of the social hierarchies at work at the farm.¹ Thus, while Holmes points out the division of labor among indigenous Mexicans, mestizo Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and Anglo teenagers on the farm, he also attends to the administrative assistants, the managers, and the owners of the farm. Many executives and managers have lofty intentions constrained by lo-

cal and international markets; Holmes presents them as somewhat complicit but also as “human beings doing the best they can in the midst of an unequal and harsh system.”² Holmes’s vertical slice approach reveals that “this injurious hierarchy is neither willed nor planned by the farm executives and managers; rather, it is produced by larger social structures.”³ Racialized social structures remain unseen by those at all levels of the farm hierarchy. Individuals perceive their place in the hierarchy as natural and irrefutable.

In these ways, *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies* offers an implicit corrective to the dearth of scholarship regarding the categories of labor and immigration in the field of food studies. Holmes joins scholars such as Deborah Barndt and Steve Striffler in placing the labor and experiences of transnational migrants at the center of the story of contemporary eating.⁴ As a medical anthropologist, Holmes addresses the food system’s effects on the health of the indigenous Mexican farmworkers, not the health of privileged consumers. Holmes, moreover, contributes to the critique of industrial organic agriculture that scholars such as Julie Guthman have developed.⁵ The farm Holmes studies has several fields devoted to organic blueberries—as part of a plan to diversify economically. Holmes points out that the Tanaka Brothers Farm is required by its organic label to harvest their organic crop by machine. Thus, no workers benefit from the one part of the farm safe from pesticides. Although popular debates on organic food focus on whether organic is healthier for consumers, little work has been done on its health implications for workers. It is clear from Holmes’s scholarship that the consumer demand for local and organic will not on its own diminish farmworkers’ experiences of suffering. The solutions cannot come from consumer empowerment alone.

Instead, Holmes contends farmworker suffering results from the combination of structural and symbolic violence. Structural violence refers to the bodily manifestations of suffering that occur from structural inequities, such as a lack of access to quality healthcare. It is a useful framework in which to explain the physical harms that result from uneven access to institutions and resources. Holmes employs French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic violence to explain the psychological harms resulting from the way individuals internalize particular understandings of race, class, and gender. Symbolic violence naturalizes social inequity and also justifies structural violence by keeping it hidden from public perception and outrage. Holmes’s analysis of various types of violence could be further enhanced through Rob Nixon’s concept of slow violence, violence rendered invisible because of its accumulation over time and because of a lack of immediately perceptible causality. In one chapter Holmes offers three case studies of Triqui people’s interactions with physicians in the United States and San Miguel. These cases, including a knee injured through repetitive field work and a headache that grows worse when the patient is called

racist names and mistreated at work, fit within a slow violence framework. In all three cases physician diagnoses ignore the patients' perceptions and knowledge by focusing on decontextualized physical exams and racist assumptions. One physician writes off a patient's stomachache as a result of poor eating habits (such as "too much hot chili") without discovering that patient's history of chronic pain following their experience of torture.⁶ Understanding Holmes's ethnography through the lens of slow violence reveals the environmental injustice shaping the lived experiences and epistemologies of migrant peoples.⁷

Holmes considers his project one of embodied anthropology. The Triqui people with whom he is the closest repeatedly explain to others that Holmes "wants to experience for himself how the poor suffer."⁸ For Holmes this statement adequately captures his motivations and methodology. He attends to the experiences of suffering and violence his Triqui companions face, but he also reckons with his own embodied position as an anthropologist. Holmes challenges the Western object/subject divide between body and mind. In embodied anthropology, the body is synonymous with the subject. Holmes counters the phrase "I have" or "I use" the body with the example "I am' my body, and my body 'itself/myself' produces field data."⁹ Holmes presents bodies as embedded in not only a physical material landscape, but as physical manifestations of social relations. He describes the ways social categories are inscribed on bodies; ethnicity for Holmes is not simply a social category, but a somatic category. Drawing on the work of other anthropologists, Holmes argues that socioeconomic histories not only reshape people's bodies, but the perceptions groups of people have of their own bodies.¹⁰ Embodied experiences of suffering and violence both result from and enact symbolic violence.

Holmes's discussion of farmworker bodies shares some concerns with those of ecocritics engaged with the new materialism. Particularly relevant is Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality.¹¹ Holmes's attentiveness to the production of somatic categories and bodies as manifestation of social relations fits well with the environmental justice analysis Alaimo provides. Holmes points out the way that Triqui pickers internalized their position in the hierarchy by claiming they were less susceptible to pesticides than Anglo Americans because "We Triquis are strong and *aguantamos* [hold out, bear, endure]."¹² The Triqui pickers' ethnic pride obscures and naturalizes the uneven risks they faced. Alaimo's analysis might further Holmes's understanding of the relationship between the body and social relationships through its attention to the nonhuman flows and the permeability of the body itself. Both Alaimo and Holmes challenge the way bodily health is perceived and the disjunction between marginalized subjects' perceptions of illness and the medical establishment's inability to see suffering that does not fit established norms of causality. Both see the body as central to the navigation and contestation of social and environmental ineq-

uity. They insist that the body is inseparable from broader socioeconomic and environmental landscapes.

Holmes is acutely aware of positionality. When the border patrol catches the group with whom Holmes is crossing, some of the men blame Holmes for their fate. Holmes allows the reader to wonder if perhaps the men have a point. Holmes's first-person narrative makes the reader aware of his own poor treatment by the border patrol and simultaneously of his incredible privilege in the situation. Holmes repeatedly reminds the reader that reading as an act is not enough. Embodied experience matters. He cannot understand farm laborers without picking strawberries with them, and he cannot understand border crossings without facing death alongside those crossing. This is as much a narrative technique as a methodological one. It is part of why the book is so accessible to undergraduates. His first-person narrative draws the readers in, but also encourages the readers to recognize the various forms of privilege Holmes wields in all of his interactions throughout the socioeconomic hierarchy. This form of narrative lends itself to debate on the ethics of his actions. Should he have crossed the border? Did he put his subjects at risk through his actions? Was the benefit to his understanding of border crossing worth the risks he took? Did the Triqui men have a choice to cross the border like Holmes did? His book provides the kinds of material that would allow undergraduates entry into informed debates about labor, immigration, and the reasons social inequity persists.

Holmes's text would pair particularly well in environmental humanities courses with Helena María Viramontes's novel *Under the Feet of Jesus*.¹³ Teaching the two works together would emphasize the symbolic, structural, and slow violence farmworkers face, particularly if students analyze the ways both texts represent embodied suffering. Viramontes's more intentional environmental justice framework highlights the appearance of such issues in Holmes's monograph, even if environmental justice is not a frame (or even a term) that Holmes employs. Viramontes's novel also depicts the gendered experiences of farmworkers in ways that are not consistently present in Holmes's work. Holmes's explicit discussions of symbolic and structural violence as well as the naturalization of ethnic-citizenship hierarchies would allow students to deepen their engagement with the political critique Viramontes offers. Both Holmes's ethnography and Viramontes's novel ask readers to reconsider the political solutions available when food system injustice is seen from the eyes of workers rather than consumers. Coupling the two works reveals that *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies* is far more in conversation with the key developments of food studies, ecocriticism, and environmental justice scholarship than Holmes, himself, is aware.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sarah D. Wald is assistant professor of environmental studies and English at the University of Oregon. She has published in the journals *Western American Literature* and *Food, Culture, and Society* as well as in the edited collections *American Studies*, *Ecocriticism*, and *Citizenship: Thinking and Acting the Local and Global Commons* and *The Grapes of Wrath: A Reconsideration*.

NOTES

1. Seth Holmes, *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies: Migrant Farmworkers in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 28.
2. Holmes, *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies*, 53.
3. Holmes, *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies*, 30.
4. Steve Striffler, *The Dangerous Transformation of America's Favorite Food* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2007); Deborah Barndt, *Tangled Routes: Women, Work, and Globalization on the Tomato Trail* (Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007).
5. Julie Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams: The Paradox of Organic Farming in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).
6. Holmes, *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies*, 135.
7. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 2.
8. Holmes, *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies*, 33.
9. Holmes, *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies*, 34.
10. Holmes, *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies*, 27.
11. Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 2.
12. Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 173.
13. Helena María Viramontes, *Under the Feet of Jesus* (New York: Plume, 1996).