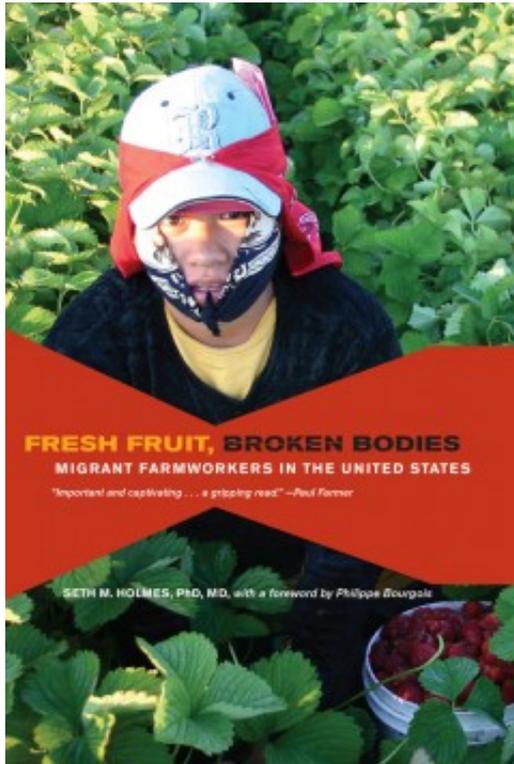


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Seth Holmes' Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies

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By Peter Benson



[Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies: Migrant Farmworkers in the United States](#)

by [Seth Holmes](#)

Foreword by Philippe Bourgois

University of California Press, 2013. 264 pages; US\$ 27.95, paperback

Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies is an absolute must-read for anyone interested in food and the food system, and the ethics, politics, and human consequences that are a part of how stuff gets from a to z in the contemporary economy. To say that the book provides a vivid look at farm labor is an understatement. The author, Seth Holmes, a physician-anthropologist, writes in the tradition of Agee, Murrow, and Steinbeck in exposing the social injustices that are a part of agriculture,

sympathetically casting a human face on back-breaking work, and speaking truth to power. But he also writes in the tradition of Paul Farmer, Didier Fassin, and other physician-anthropologists in disclosing the amalgamation of forces that constitutes medical and health problems and necessitates complex, tailored solutions.

This is a book about Triqui migrants, who migrate up and down the west coast of the United States and Mexico, cycling between rural hometowns in Oaxaca and points of industrialized agricultural production in California and Washington. And it is by following Triqui families that Holmes comes to understand the ethnography of how they eke out a living, the sorts of obstacles and oppression they face, and the sordid realities of a food system built on the backs of poor migrant workers. Taking a cue from his informants, who admonished Holmes that crossing the border is a particular kind of *sufrimiento*, suffering, that he needed to grasp in order to understand their lives, Holmes did follow a group of migrants across the border and writes of the harrowing experience of facing the heat and the landscape, and also of being apprehended and imprisoned by U.S. Border Patrol agents. The stories that Holmes tells of making the trek and of being confronted by officials are gripping, well-written, and teachable. While for some readers this immersive research and writing of risk might come across as a kind of cowboy ethnography, in which the researcher himself is positioned as a heroic figure, this, in my view, is an unfair characterization. Holmes is out to tell the story from the standpoint of the Triqui migrants with whom he works. In narrating their lives and his entanglements with them he writes in ways that are humble, illuminating, and dignified. And it is clear from Holmes' voice, and the style of analysis that he puts forth, that he realizes that the risks faced by the Triqui migrants in their lives, in their pursuit of survival, are very different than the risks that he faced in following and seeking to understand those lives. He powerfully challenges the prevailing notion that migrant workers "choose" to cross the border to make a living, focusing instead on the structural forces that impel migration and put individuals, families, and entire communities at a disadvantage of one kind or another. *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies* indeed ranks as one of the clearest, most appropriate analyses of structural violence that I have come across. It is also one of the most sincere, humanizing portrayals of the condition of migrant farm labor in the United States.

Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies represents a mix of tones and objectives—at times it is an ethnographic description of migrant life and work, at times it is a reflection on how to conduct anthropological field study in the context of transnational migration and mobility, and at times it links an analysis of structural violence to the goal of altering policies and realities. "I hope," Holmes writes, "that understanding the mechanisms by which certain classes of people become written off and social inequalities become taken

for granted will play a part in undoing these very mechanisms and the structures of which they are a part. It is my hope that those who read these pages will be moved in mutual humanity, such that representations of and policies toward migrant laborers become more humane, just, and response to migrant laborers as people themselves” (page 29).

A significant aspect of Holmes’ approach in this book is the notion of “embodied anthropology,” the idea being that the researcher approaches an understanding of the conditions being studied through the immersion of one’s own mind and body into the translocal world of the informants—doing the work they do, making the treks they make, and feeling some of the feelings they inevitably experience. And yet, Holmes is also careful to avoid conflating his experiences with those of the migrant workers with whom he worked, or simply assuming that he could possibly inhabit their social location as a neutral observer. He does his readers a great service by distinguishing between different kinds of labor—that of the fruit pickers being studied and that of the anthropologist—all the while maintaining a critical edge and degree of humbled incisiveness that comes from embodied, immersive study. “From experiences of the living and working conditions of migrant laborers to the intricacies of becoming involved in a web of relationships to the corollary expectations and desires for active solidarity,” Holmes writes, “my embodied experiences enriched my fieldwork in unexpected ways. Alongside the imperative role of record keeper is the critical anthropologist’s responsibility to acknowledge the field notes offered by the body. This embodied experience offers thickness and vividness to the ethnographic description of everyday life, including such critical realities as social suffering, inequality and hierarchy, and local and global solidarity. In this book, I attempt a critical *and* reflexively embodied anthropology of the context and everyday lives of indigenous Mexican migrant laborers” (pages 39-40).

This book is inherently teachable, and for a range of levels. It will be of immediate interest to scholars and students of agriculture and transnational migration, and is a necessity for those working on these phenomena in the United States. But this book’s deployment as a teaching resource really comes into view when we consider its grasp and use of social theory—the concepts of structural violence, symbolic violence, and embodied anthropology, to name a few. This book is an excellent resource for instructors who want to teach on the concept of structural violence, how it works analytically, and its implications for explaining a range of actions and conditions in the setting of an industrial, albeit agrarian workplace. This book nicely straddles the fields of critical medical anthropology, the public health of migrant workers, the anthropology of work and capitalism, and theories of power and experience. It is a welcome addition to the literature on food and will give to all readers a chance to pause and critically consider the forms of risk, harm, violence,

suffering, depravation, and squalor that make up the food system—but also the nuances of experience, the forms of resilience and resistance, and the depths of humanity to be found among the people who pick our fresh fruits and vegetables.

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