

Are migrant farm
workers the new
modern-day
consensual slaves?



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Fresh Fruits Broken Bodies

Fresh fruits “ are nature's candy” have you ever heard this phrase before? Have you ever thought about the process that is involved in getting those red sweet juicy mouthwatering strawberries or any of the fresh fruits or vegetables that we enjoy? If you are like me, know you haven't. we often take going to the farm store or supermarkets for granted. Allow me to open your mind and widen your perspective on what the “ the good doctor always tells us to eat... eat fresh fresh—lots of it...” (xi)

Author of Fresh fruits broken bodies, Seth Holmes a cultural and medical anthropologist and a medical doctor wrote an ethnography book based on the lives of immigrant Mexican farm workers of an indigenous group of Mexican farm worker from Oaxaca, Mexico, the Triqui. He was encouraged by a colleague to study the Triqui natives after years of searching for an interesting ethnographic project because the Triqui natives they only recently began to migrate between Mexico and the United States and that they were known for their violent behavior and poor environmental health. The Triqui natives began seeking illegal entry to the United States because their corn production was cut by the US and this was their way of gaining employment and to support themselves and families. There were no jobs available in their village. (3)

During his field research Holmes observed and analyze the experiences of the Triqui immigrants, he conducts interviews and worked along the Mexican farmworkers. He even entered the US without inspection. On his first attempt he and group were caught, Holmes was charged and fine while his

accomplices got deported. It didn't take too long for them to try again. They were willing to risk their health and lives for the opportunity to gain some employment.

This book exposes the unfair treatment against immigrant farm workers and their silent mental, emotional and physical suffering they endure. With hopes of breaking the stigmatized conception of Mexican migrant workers. Some of the themes within this book are racism, structural violence, symbolic violence, hierarchy, health, suffering and segregation.

The concepts of symbolic violence, embodied anthropology, structural violence, social inequality and hierarchy to name a few was discussed. While reading this book I have talked about it with co-workers and have recommend that they read it. I personally was shocked by how much an immigrant farm worker must endure to provide access for fresh fruits for myself and my family to enjoy, it's kind of one those things we take for granted. Not knowing how our produce gets to house.

As a mom of 4 and raising 5 children under age 18 we try to eat as many fresh fruits and vegetables as possible we never thought about the process of how we get access to fresh fruits and vegetables. Growing up with an immigrant background I would hear of someone going abroad to work as a farm worker, but I never gave any thought to what it meant. The scarifies they made to provide for themselves and their families. The Mexican government was forced to erase the tariffs, including that on corn the primary crop produced by indigenous families in southern Mexico with the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), (25). This forced the

indigenous families to flee their country and risk their lives crossing the border looking for work to make ends meet.

The ground work:

The author decided to start his journey field study early spring of 2003 with a visit to the village of San Miguel in Oaxaca, Mexico. As expected because he was fore warned by the villagers of the previous town. He was not greeted with warmth and comfort instead his visit was awkward, and the villagers got suspicious with his presence. Greeted by “ four men, their authorities and cold silence”. After convincing the four men that he met that he was a friend of a fellow acquaintance, they invited him to one of their house to eat. After the meal he continued his journey along the dirt road and they went back to the states.

Upon his return to the states, he enlists the help of his friends who knew the president of one of the larger berry farms in Washington state to gain employment on the farm. He was granted permission to work on the berry farm during the summer and fall of 2003, where he grew close to the other farmworkers and the families of several Triqui, Mixtec and mestizo Mexicans.

(pg5)

At the end of the berry picking season in November, the author traveled by car with an extended family of 23 people. Unable to find housing they were homeless for weeks and took showers at a local city park. They eventually found a three-bedroom apartment that 19 of them shared that winter and seldomly worked a grape vineyard pruning grapevines.

In the spring of 2004 he went back to San Miguel, this time he was not alone. He became friendlier with Triqui villagers by living with an extended family and helped around their yard with chores. The villagers were not pleased at first with his presence they spoke amongst each other and thought that he was a spy, they did not trust him. They didn't think a white man belonged in their village, they threatened his safety (pg6).

“Worth Risking Your Life?”

April 2003, the journey began with a trip from the village San Miguel as they prepared to cross the border (6). He traveled with eight men from San Miguel and another man from the Triqui village. Each man dressed in dark-colored clothing and a black backpack with a single change of clothes, limited food and approximately \$1000 - \$2000 to pay for bus rides, and food along the way (1). Forty-nine hours and several military checkpoints on a bus and days trekking and sleeping in the desert they made it to Arizona. Their journey across the border was short and not successful. They were caught, detained and the other men were deported, and the author charged and fined for entry without inspection. Is it worth risking your life? “...crossing the border is not a choice to engage in a risk behavior but rather a process necessary to survive, to make life less risky” (21).

Suffering the border

Over five hundred people died in the Tucson sector of the border...most died from heat stroke, dehydration and others direct violence (8). One can only imagine how difficult it must be for anyone to endure and risk their lives and health to find work and support their families. Yet knowing all the risk and <https://assignbuster.com/are-migrant-farm-workers-the-new-modern-day-consensual-slaves/>

dangers these individuals are willing to endure “ sufrimiento” (suffering). The Triqui’s often explain their everyday lives in terms of sufrimiento when crossing the border from Mexico to the United States. (8) .

We are field workers”: embodied anthropology of migration

The author argues that the migrant workers, experience their labor migration as anything but voluntary. Crossing the border is not a choice associated with high risks but rather a process necessary to survive as life at home was made impossible by structural forces. The author strongly emphasizes that only an ethnography that pays attention to the participant observers’ own bodily experiences during fieldwork comprehends the nuances of the everyday lives of migrant laborers, without which an understanding of these structural forces and the suffering they cause to migrants would remain incomplete. An ethnographer of labor migration, suffering, and health needs to follow the Triqui farmworkers from their home in Mexico, across the dangerous border into the United States, to the farms. “ My body was treated as though it had and deserved power, whereas theirs have been treated repeatedly as underlings, undeserving of respect” and that “ When my Triqui friends asked for help, they were often brushed off or told there was nothing that could be done” (36-7).

Segregation on the farm: ethnic hierarchies at work

As a young child I was very familiar with the word segregation among races (Black and White) in America. Whenever I heard the word segregation I immediately think of the days prior to the early 60’s, I would have never thought of segregation amongst immigrant farm workers and their co-
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workers. The author introduces us to segregation on the farms. The hierarchy on a Japanese owned farm in Washington, He describes the labor segregation in American agriculture that leads to highly structured hierarchies of ethnicity and citizenship, deepening the suffering of migrant laborers who are at the bottom of these hierarchies. “ Everyone on the Tanaka farm is structurally vulnerable, although the characteristics and depth of the vulnerability change depending on one’s position within the labor structure” (83). The structure of farm work inheres an intimate and complex segregation, a “ conjugated oppression”, this include Intricate structuring of labor on the farm into a complicated hierarchy. Vertical metaphors: speaking of those as “ above” or “ below” them; of overseeing or of being at the bottom. The responsibilities, anxieties, privileges, and experiences of time differ from the top to the bottom. The vertical metaphor also corresponds to hiddenness and visibility, with those at the top most visible.

Administrative assistants oversee reception, interacting with both local white residents and businesspeople as well as with Mexican farmworkers. Crop managers are in charge of all details involved in the efficient production of a specific crop. Supervisors are each in charge of crew members of approx. 10 to 20 pickers; some can learn English through farm sponsored English classes - open for all workers except oaxacans. This unofficial yet effective exclusion of pickers from the English classes inadvertently shores up segregation on the farm. Mateo’s position as the only Oaxacan crew boss indicates the importance of having the resources to be able to study Spanish and English to have social and occupational mobility. The physical dirt from the labor of the indigenous pickers has become symbolically linked with their

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character, and at the same time the limited possibility of relationships between Shelly (the administrative assistant) and the indigenous workers because of the language barriers had become symbolically projected as an assumed character flaw on the indigenous pickers themselves (not being able to speak English). Although the farm management sees the employment of white teenage checkers as developing positive values toward agriculture and diversity in the valley, checkers also learn that they deserve to have power over the immigrant farm workers. White teenagers are given power over the pickers “ the teenagers are paid minimum wage while being allowed to talk and sit, the pickers have to kneel and work as fast as possible...” (70). The author implied that this type of “ symbolic violence, the naturalization of inequality” is supported by the lens through which we envision our world (71).

“ How the poor suffer”: embodying the violence continuum

Their bodies hurt so much... (89) While the suffering of the Triqui berry pickers in general is determined by their position at the bottom of various hierarchies. These pains are examples of structural violence of social hierarchies becoming embodied in the form of suffering and sickness (89). Abelino’s knee injury, Crescencio’s headache, and Bernardo’s stomach pains serves to underscore the embodiment of a different expression of the violence continuum. With worsen health status and a resulting need for increased health and social services, migrant farmworkers have many obstacles to accessing these services. Nationwide, migrant farm workers are sicker than other groups (99). Mexican migrant farm workers suffer poor health due to their class position (101). According to the author “ the <https://assignbuster.com/are-migrant-farm-workers-the-new-modern-day-consensual-slaves/>

suffering of Triqui migrant labors is an embodiment of multiple forms of violence” (109).

“ Doctors don’t know anything”: the clinical gaze in the field of migrant health

Have you ever been inside a public community clinic owned by the government? These facilities are primarily found in poor neighborhoods. They are often unstaffed and poorly run. I recently went to one and immediately start judging the interior and how unbothered the staff was. It was as if you aren’t nothing more than another body trying to get service. This was similar and demonstrate the ‘ minimal’ rapport between doctors of san Miguel and the residents. What is wrong with our doctor-patient relationship? As we explore the structural factor affecting migrant farmworkers, anthropologists: Arthur Kleinman; explanatory model and illness narratives. Paul Farmer: structural violence, biomedical resources should be distributed more equally; Michel Foucault: “ the medical gaze”, what is the matter with you? replaced with where does it hurt? Body as object: physicians focus on “ isolated, diseased organs, treating the patient increasingly as body, and ignoring the social and personal realities of the patient, the person; patient is rendered silent while doctors discuss “(115). Medical training: experience of objectification and dehumanization of the patient and physician, medical student presentation training: “ transforms patients and their human, social, and bodily reality into generalized cases of a medical disease that as the same time protect the students from uncertainty (116).

Structure and Gaze in the migrant healthcare

Abelino ended up seeing several doctors and a physical therapist over the next several months, usually without a Spanish translator.... (117). His medical history was not explored, doctors evaluate and place blame or injury on Abelino, saying he was picking incorrectly and hurt his knee because he did not know how to bend over. When Abelino asked for an injection to help with the pain, he was given a referral instead and told him he should not be picking berries (117).

Structural violence victimizes not only the poor and the patient, but also (in a different fashion) the professional physician. They worked in busy, hectic environments with only partial information about the patient and the institutional process. The pressures of the current neoliberal capitalist system of health care and its financing force health professionals into a double bind: either they spend the time and energy necessary to listen to and fully treat the patient and put their job and clinic in jeopardy, or they move at a frenetic pace to keep their practice afloat and only partially attend to the patient in their presence.

Because they're lower to the ground": naturalizing social suffering, the author then analyzes the normalization of social and health inequalities as examples of symbolic violence. Finally, " the possibility of hope, and the difficulty of resistance and change". He " issues a call to listen to migrant laborers, enact solidarity with their social movements, and work toward equality at multiple levels from micro farm practices to macro global issues" (p. 29).

Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies is an intense description of migrant farm labor and laborer's in the United States. A convincing analysis of structural violence; it is also an excellent example of engaged anthropology that wants to change public opinion, policies, and clinical practice. This book will be of interest to scholars and students of agriculture and transnational migration, critical medical anthropology and public health, and economic anthropology. The publication is also a valuable resource to teach research methodologies and social theories. I will most certainly recommend this book. Every anthropology student should be given an opportunity to read this book. This book will make you think twice the next time you reach for a piece of fresh fruit. I am often now reminded of the broken bodies and the pain and suffering they endure. I now have a greater appreciation for migrant farm workers.

References

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