**Book Review**


DAVID KARJANEN
University of Minnesota

*Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies* is an ethnographic study of indigenous Triqui migrants from Oaxaca, Mexico, who move to the United States to work in the fields of central California and the Skagit Valley in Washington State. This detailed and bravely insightful ethnography will frustrate readers looking for a clear research question and straightforward answers, but is remarkably rewarding for the depth, insight, and theoretical framing of migrant farm work in the United States and, in particular, of indigenous migrant farmworkers from Mexico. Holmes is both an anthropologist and a physician, so his study of migrant farmworkers incorporates a critical political economy perspective from anthropology and a medical perspective on the public health issues at stake for the migrants.

Methodologically, Holmes makes a point to explain (in an appendix) why there is no traditional “methods” section to his book. As an ethnographer, he aims to approach his subject matter — Triqui migrant farmworkers — from the standpoint of highly self-reflective participant observation, rather than a specific set of methods. His ethnography, he suggests, should be judged by the depth and scope of theoretical findings, rather than according to a specific methodological approach. From an ethnographic point of view, this work is remarkable. Holmes conducted his research in multiple sites and participated in the migration process, leaving Oaxaca with indigenous Triqui migrants, crossing the border illegally (and being apprehended by the border patrol), and then moving to California’s Central Valley. In California, he lived with other migrants, typically in cars, until they found a “slum apartment” which could be rented without credit histories. He also lived and worked in Washington State, where much of the book centers. Very few accounts of migration go through such depths to understand the plight and challenges which migrants face. From this vantage point, Holmes provides an account rarely seen and frames the suffering and costs of this experience within broader understandings and theorizations of power and inequality.

The bulk of Holmes’s study focuses on the experiences of farmworkers in Washington’s Skagit Valley. This valley is a large agricultural region and forms a crucial node within a transnational migrant circuit connecting farms in the valley to villages in Oaxaca. Holmes lived in a 10-by-12 foot “cabin” in a labor camp and worked with Triqui migrants in the fields. From this deep participant observation, he documents the challenges facing farmworkers and the farmers themselves. This is a welcome contribution to the burgeoning scholarship on migrant farmworkers in the United States. Research widely documents the often-appalling conditions farmworkers live in, but Holmes describes the farm owners and management as neither uncaring nor blind to the difficulties facing the workers and the conditions in labor camps but, instead, as hostages to market forces which make it very difficult to compete in the increasingly global agricultural marketplace. Both workers and management want to improve things, but it is the market which Holmes cites as the real issue: driving down wages and prices and encouraging a race to the bottom for produce. After working in Washington, Holmes moves with some of his migrant colleagues to farms in California’s Central Valley. In both cases, he finds an informal system of segregation and hierarchy in the farm industry. White or Asian workers
have the easiest jobs, with more respect, greater financial security, and better health. Below are US-born Latinos and mestizo Mexicans. At the bottom are Mixtec and then Triqui Mexicans. This continuum reflects the broader political, economic, and racial hierarchies of Anglo/documented and indigenous/undocumented, which shape migration across the US–Mexico border for many.

Keeping the focus on broader structural inequalities, Holmes describes how Triqui migrants face structural violence and repression in both Mexico and the United States, just in different forms. For these workers, seeking a better life in the United States has meant embodying the damage which the farm labor entails. In detailed medical cases in both the United States and Mexico, he describes how part of patients’ problems are the structural location in which they find themselves socially, politically, and economically, not a specific individual pathology. Conventional biomedicine, however, can only see individual pathologies and, thus, is very reactionary in understanding Triqui suffering and physical illness. The most striking conclusion Holmes makes is that these forms of suffering are rendered normal by both Triqui, who internalize suffering, and the broader society in both contexts.

Overall, this book makes a very welcome and important contribution to understandings of transnational migration, indigenous migration, and farmwork. Holmes’s lack of a clear set of research questions and digressions into debates within anthropology and critical medical anthropology may not be useful for some readers, but the stunning first-hand ethnography and theoretical framing will be.