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Review of Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies (2023) and First Time Home (2021) by Seth M. Holmes

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## REVIEW

### ***Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies: Migrant Farmworkers in the United States*** **(2nd ed.) by Seth M. Holmes**

Berkeley: University of California Press, 2023

### ***First Time Home*, directed by Esmirna Librado, Noemi Librado Sanchez, Esmeralda Ventura, and Heriberto Ventura**

29 min. Distributed through the website: [https:// www.firsttimehomefilm.com/](https://www.firsttimehomefilm.com/), 2021

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*Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies: Migrant Farmworkers in the United States* by physician-anthropologist Seth M. Holmes was released in its second edition in 2023 by the University of California Press. Given the ongoing plight of migrant farmworkers today and the particular challenges they faced in their living and working conditions and mobility during the COVID-19 pandemic, Holmes's second edition book, along with an accompanying documentary film *First Time Home* (2021), is a timely release for students and scholars concerned about labor in our food systems and migrant rights. Importantly, Holmes attends closely to issues of non-citizenship, Indigeneity, and race relations among migrant farmworkers, making the book an important critique of U.S. state-sponsored exploitation and exclusion of workers so vital to food production in North America.

Holmes reminds readers that while a few things have changed since the first edition of the book was released in 2013, little has in fact been altered in the lives and labor of undocumented migrant farmworkers in the U.S. While their labor has been solidified as "essential" in the specter of the global COVID-19 pandemic, their work and lives are no more valued in terms of wages, work conditions, or welcoming in the U.S. Hence, there is much need to read and re-read this book and allow it to catalyze commitments to migrant worker justice within and beyond academia.

Holmes's book is methodologically and theoretically rich, doing what anthropologists are best trained for as he oscillates between his in-depth knowledge of the local (and transnational) contexts of migrant farmworkers and his sensitivity to the structural conditions that lead to the use and abuse of migrant bodies in Washington State and across the U.S.-Mexico border. Holmes clearly explains and applies theories from a range of disciplines, focusing on Bourdieusian (2003) concepts of symbolic violence, the late Paul Farmer's (1997) use of structural violence, Franz Fanon's notion of interpersonal violence in the shadow of colonialism (1963), and Scheper-

Hughes and Lock's (1987) discussion of the multiple forms and layers of "the body" that have long interested anthropologists. Holmes keeps us close to physical bodies and local contexts while frequently and urgently reminding readers of broader systems that render some bodies more precarious—sicker, more debilitated, or invisible—than others in our produce production systems in North America. The accompanying film, *First Time Home* (2021), adds relational and audio-visual texture to the narratives in the book by showcasing the families of farmworkers in Washington State and California journeying across the U.S.-Mexico border to meet distant family members and build kinship transnationally. Bodies work, move, and live often confined to—but also in spite of—borders.

Despite critiques of Holmes's decisions to cross the U.S.-Mexico border with his interlocutors between editions of the book (see De Leon 2015), the opening chapter of the new edition remains honest to the original edition, depicting in great detail his decision to undertake the journey, his acceptance into the group by his interlocutors, and the challenges he experiences. These challenges include being arrested by border patrol agents and eventually let go with a \$5,000 fine for his covert crossing and escaping potential charges of human smuggling. As I read this story again in the book's latest edition, I am reminded of the awareness Holmes brings to the situation, including the benefits and risks associated with his choices to cross the border clandestinely, and reading this alongside critiques reminds me of the perils, imperfections, and ethical dilemmas that are emblematic of ethnography—all of our choices have ethical implications, risks, benefits, gains in knowledge, and losses in what we chose to do or not do. What is integral to the embodied experience of ethnographic knowing (and its limits), as Holmes clearly states, is to critically and reflexively investigate positionality, privilege, and how the very presence of the researcher's body and being altered events; ethnography always hinges on these contingencies. Whether or not Holmes made the most ethical decision to cross the border—following what he later discusses as a sense of "relational ethics" in his subsequent journey described in the epilogue of the new edition (Holmes and Ramirez-Lopez 2023, 224)—he is honest, transparent, and reflexive about the difficulty of the decision, journey, and risk he may have brought to himself and his Triqui friends.

Similarly to the first chapter of the new edition, the remainder of the book is the same as the original edition, with the exception of a new preface and epilogue, with the latter coauthored by Jorge Ramirez-Lopez. While I have always found the book compelling, there may have been a missed opportunity to enrich some analyses not only in response to the criticism Holmes received for his journey across the border but also in light of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on migrant farmworkers. For example, Evelyn Encalada Grez (2022) has documented the disproportionate rates of infection among farmworkers as a result of their poor, cramped living conditions on farms and lack of access to meaningful healthcare. While Holmes briefly speaks to this in the new preface and epilogue, a new introduction, conclusion, or chapter may have offered the chance for Holmes to continue to press upon audiences how the labor of migrant farmworkers is regarded as essential yet their bodies disposable.

The new epilogue presents important updates on Holmes's continued relationships with his interlocutors including collaborating with Triqui teens who became community researchers

alongside Holmes. Holmes and Ramirez-Lopez note in the epilogue that through collaborative and participatory ethnography, “Indigenous migrant communities are not merely victims of exploitation and discrimination. ... Rather, they are also theorists of their own lives and social actors who seek a better world” (2023, 200). Despite what may have been a missed opportunity in some other parts of the new edition to enrich or update analyses, the research and conceptual work done in the book continue to be relevant and timely in 2024, especially with the added epilogue and collaborative work with Triqui families and workers, which is also showcased in the accompanying film.

*First Time Home* is a compelling short film (run time: 29:27) about young people born in the U.S. to Triqui families living in Washington State. These young people venture “home” to San Martin, Mexico, for the very first time. Having been born in the U.S. to parents unable to easily migrate due to status, cost, and labor demands, these young people embark on their own journey by car across the border with Holmes alongside them. Holmes reveals in the new edition’s epilogue that the children’s parents asked him to accompany them and, informed by his sense of relational ethics, he agreed.

The four youths featured in *First Time Home* are not only the subjects of the film, but are also the filmmakers and co-directors, documenting their lives and journey on tablets with fuzzy professional microphones attached to the top. They capture their homes in the U.S., the landscapes they traverse on their journey south, and their heartfelt meeting of kin, adding visual and aural texture to the context of their transnational lives. Not only are the physical landscapes, dwellings, and travels captured for audiences, but relations are central in the film with parents attesting to the physical demands and racial inequities of their labor, young people speaking to their struggles growing up on the edges of citizenship and in poverty in the U.S., and the meeting of those in San Martin—distanced family members met in person for the very first time. Through the filming of the documentary, the youths record and share messages between their parents in Washington and California and grandparents in San Martin, making the film not only for us as distant audiences to witness but also intimate letters that travel across states and into the sphere of kin separated by borders, labor, and inequities rooted in settler-colonialism and racial capitalism.

The film is complemented with a discussion guide, available on the film’s website, <https://www.firsttimehomefilm.com/>. The guide introduces the film and directors and then offers several discussion questions to engage learners. The discussion questions help to illuminate a range of themes in the film, first examining audiences’ comprehension through some media literacy checks and then offering specific questions on Indigenous rights across borders, transnational identities, immigrant youths, and farmworker rights. Rounding out the guide are four action-oriented activities for classrooms and a list of additional resources. The book and film are made even more accessible and engaging through these helpful suggestions for educators who follow a clear learning cycle in the classroom by helping students (a) identify what they saw, (b) delve deeper into the issues through discussion, and (c) engage in action or application steps to address the injustices.

The book and film are well suited for a variety of teaching levels and disciplines. The way in which the book and film span classical and contemporary questions about politics, economies, inequalities, health, and social life would highlight for first-year anthropology students the holistic purview of anthropology. The film further brings into focus Indigeneity, kinship, and the persistence of social relations even when caught up in imperialist borders. Alternatively, I have taught with the book in an interdisciplinary human rights and social justice graduate program focused on body rights. Here, we were able to dive deeper into Holmes's theorization of the body and violence at the intersection of migrant workers' rights and labor justice on and off the farm.

In sum, it was moving to read Holmes's book again in its new edition. I am reminded of my intention several years ago to integrate the book into my teaching, especially by using it as a pertinent example of what ethnography does and can do through keen participant observation in and through the body, conceptual and theoretical thinking about power relations, and, in the case of my graduate seminar, linking the intimacy and phenomenological experiences of the body to larger structures and systems of injustice. The documentary and discussion guide also illuminate more about migrant worker rights, Indigenous rights, borders, and kinship. Together, the book, film, and discussion guide engage richly with political, economic, and social milieus of migrant farm labor while also attending to and amplifying the voices of those often working laboriously and invisibly to pick the fruit so many of us consume to nourish our own bodies.

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