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Reimagining solidarity with strawberry farmworkers in the United States

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Review of *The Devil's Fruit: Farmworkers, Health and Environmental Justice*, by Dvera I. Saxton. (2021). Rutgers University Press. Available as paperback, hardcover, PDF, and EPUB; 252 pages. Publisher's website:

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Shortly after finishing Dvera I. Saxton's *The Devil's Fruit: Farmworkers, Health, and Environmental Justice*, I awoke to the rare occurrence of farmworkers making national headlines. H.R. 1603, the Farm Workforce Modernization Act of 2021—providing a path to citizenship for undocumented

agricultural workers—had just passed the U.S. House of Representatives (for the second time). Supported by agricultural trade organizations and a small handful of farm labor groups as a compromise measure (Farmworker Justice, 2021), the bill is also opposed by farmworker advocacy groups such as the Food Chain Workers Alliance for its failure to provide stronger protections (Food Chain Workers Alliance, n.d.).

For anyone seeking to understand the division over this legislation and the current-day complexities of both undocumented and resident farmworkers' lived realities, Saxton's book is a wonderful place to start. As a medical anthropologist, Saxton takes an “activist ethnographic” approach

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to her research, meaning that her labors of care and accompaniment were inseparable from her role as a data collector and witness to the struggle of strawberry farmworkers in California's Central Valley region. While accessible to lay readers and academics alike, the book may be especially useful to anthropology students, as Saxton explores, in first-person narrative, both research methods and the challenges of embedding oneself in a community facing multilayered vulnerabilities.

In Chapter 1, Saxton begins with dispelling myths about immigrant and migrant farmworkers in the United States, including the misconceptions that they are replacing Americans in the labor market, that they are accessing and draining non-existent safety-net benefits, and the racist notion that farmworkers are inherently better suited to physically demanding labor. I was particularly challenged by her explanation of the erosion of labor protections since the breakup of farmworker unions in the early 1980s and the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994; we like to imagine American history as a slow march of progress toward justice and equal rights (Rothstein, 2017), so it is difficult to grapple with the reality that farmworker wages are lower today than 30 years ago, with fewer labor protections and a riskier immigration environment.

In Chapter 2, Saxton discusses industrial reliance on toxic pesticides and agricultural labor shortages, relying heavily on the work of scholar Julie Guthman but grounding the analysis in her ethnographic findings. In fact, Saxton wrestles with the particular issues now surrounding the Farm Workforce Modernization Act of 2021, criticizing the idea that activists should engage with agribusiness to address labor shortages when this capitalist framework does not address the issues of mechanization nor externalized environmental and health costs, including chronic occupational injuries, diseases, and stresses (pp. 81–83). Diverging from Guthman, Saxton does not urge environmental justice activists to compromise with agribusiness, based on her observations that they are considerably embedded in farmworker communities and active participants in the visioning and creation of alternative agricultural solutions. She sees these personal relationships and efforts to create alterna-


tive futures outside of agribusiness as “tensions and complexities” (p. 82) that justify activists’ resistance to aligning with industry in advocating for more labor-intensive, nontoxic farm jobs (e.g., on large organic berry farms).

Chapter 3 walks readers through the “toxic layering” of flawed systems that contribute to pesticide exposure in the strawberry industry, including the shortfalls of the premarket safety and evaluation analyses and the failures of reporting procedures and workers’ compensation systems. As a researcher who supports the work of public health programs and policies, I was asking myself throughout Chapters 1–3, “where are the public health people?” My stomach sank as Saxton opened Chapter 4 with a description of a local fair at which community-based organizations and local public health practitioners offered diabetes screenings and used a culturally inappropriate system of “passport stamps” to engage farmworkers—many of whom lack actual passports and have endured risky border crossings—at their tables. Offering diabetes screenings is an example of “secondary prevention” in public health—focusing on preventing a disease from progressing rather than preventing it from happening in the first place—and more concerning in this context, an approach that puts the onus squarely on individual health behaviors rather than social determinants of health. Despite our ongoing efforts in public health to shift our work “upstream” to the root causes of disease and develop culturally relevant engagement strategies, the scene was all too familiar and a grave reminder of the work that remains ahead to transform and strengthen public health systems.

Ecosocial solidarities—such as an alliance between teachers and farmworkers who have parallel occupational exposures—are explored in Chapter 5. According to Saxton, these alliances are vital not just for the small concessions they may wring from agribusiness, but for the important work of imagining and building alternative food systems grounded in environmental justice. A brief section on cross-border organizing discusses solidarity with striking farmworkers in Mexico, but does not fully explore the context of international trade issues at the time of the 2015–2016 strikes (the U.S. was about to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which would

have eliminated tariffs on strawberries by Japan, Vietnam, and the United States if it had been ratified) (McMinimy, 2016). I wonder what this trade deal might have meant for strawberry farmworkers in both California and Mexico, and how the alternative agreement reached by countries other than the United States has affected working conditions in the industry.

Saxton concludes her book by asking: “How can you apply myth busting, or following and defamiliarizing objects, ideas, policies, or everyday assumptions in your community? What kinds of commitments—emotional, professional and otherwise—are necessary for identifying and reacting to toxic layering and invisible harm where you live

and work?” (p. 177). I used these questions as journal prompts and wrote about two of the harmful assumptions baked into the Farm Workforce Modernization Act of 2021: that farmworkers owe a fine of US\$1,000 for their existence in this country (a steep barrier for families living in poverty) and that they should be required to continue working in an industry that is toxic to their health for 4 to 8 years before “earning” a path to citizenship. After reading *The Devil's Fruit*, I am re-energized and recommitted to dismantling these assumptions and supporting the leadership of environmental justice and labor groups addressing farmworker health and safety, across their various strategies and compromises made along the way. 

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