SIX  “Because They’re Lower to the Ground”

NATURALIZING SOCIAL SUFFERING

THE HIDDENNESS OF MIGRANT BODIES

“There are no migrants here; why are you looking here? I haven’t heard of any. If you want migrants, you’ll have to go to the other side of the mountains in eastern Washington. There are lots who pick apples around Yakima, I think. But there aren’t any over here.” A regional public health officer in Washington State advised me thus in fall 2002 as I explored the possibilities of ethnographic fieldwork in Skagit County.

The Skagit Valley is an active node in the transnational circuits of thousands of Mexican migrant laborers, including my Triqui companions from the Mexican state of Oaxaca. So how can thousands of people, the very people who make the valley’s famous agriculture possible, be overlooked? How can postcards of the annual tulip festival erase the workers who care for and harvest the tulip fields? The public gaze—especially that of the wealthy public who shop at elite grocery stores and live in exclusive neighborhoods—is trained away and spatially distanced from the migrant farmworkers. A white resident of the Skagit Valley with whom I became friends during my first summer on the Tanaka Brothers Farm explained to me, “For the world in which I live and the people I live with and surround myself with, the thing that frightens me most is that [Mexican migrant workers] don’t exist. They’re totally off our radar. They just don’t exist. It’s more likely we would get involved with a child in Acapulco in an orphanage because it is more glitzy or, I don’t know, less scary than finding out that there are people five miles away that I could be interested in.”

In many of the rare instances that this gaze focuses on Mexican migrants in the United States, anti-immigrant and racist rhetoric along with hate crimes result. Here, as in many places where diasporic laborers struggle to survive, the hiddenness of migrant bodies is just one factor that enables their continued mistreatment and suffering.

In order to work consciously to bring about the amelioration of social suffering, people must first be aware of the inequalities that cause suffering. This applies not only to the white residents in the Skagit Valley and Central California but also to the migrant workers themselves. In addition, these hierarchies must be recognized as historically and socially constructed and, thus, changeable. Conversely, the perception of inequities as normal, deserved, and natural permits the reproduction of such destructive social formations as well as indifference to them. It is vitally important, in this case, to understand how the ongoing mistreatment and suffering of migrant laborers has become taken for granted, normalized, and naturalized by all involved. This is a critical first step toward working for respect, equality, and health in the context of U.S.-Mexico migration.

SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE

Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence has proven especially helpful for my understanding of the ways in which the order of inequalities described thus far has become unquestioned and unchallenged, even by those most oppressed. Symbolic violence is the naturalization, including internalization, of social asymmetries. Bourdieu explains that we experience the world through doxa (mental schemata) and habitus (historically accreted bodily comportments) that are issued forth from that very social world and, therefore, make the social order—including its hierarchies—appear natural. Thus we misrecognize oppression as natural because it fits our mental and bodily schemata through which we perceive it. Bourdieu writes, “The effect of symbolic domination (whether ethnic, gender, cultural or linguistic, etc.) is exerted not in the pure logic of knowing consciousness but through the schemes of perception, appreciation and action that are constitutive of habitus and which, below the level of the decisions of consciousness and the controls of the will, set up a cognitive relationship that is profoundly obscure to itself.” In other words, symbolic violence acts within the process of perception, hidden from the conscious mind. Whereas Sartre’s concept of bad faith inheres a sense of consciousness in that individuals knowingly deceive themselves in order to avoid realities that disturb them, the activity of symbolic violence is hidden precisely because it works through the very categories and lenses of perception.

Continuing with his metaphor of the social world as a “game,” Bourdieu describes illusio as “investment in the game.” All social actors in a given field must “buy into,” via some degree of illusion, the rules of the game. One of the primary rules of the social world is that the actor’s “being is a being-perceived, condemned to be defined as it ‘really’ is by the perception of others.” Taking this into account, the victims of symbolic violence, by definition, unknowingly consent to their own domination by inhabiting the game in the first place. In Bourdieu’s book Masculine Domination we see that both the dominated and the dominant are victims of symbolic violence, although quite differently. Here, both men and women perceive themselves and the other as part of a world “naturally” made up of such dichotomous schemata as “high/low, male/female, white/black, etc.” Thus social actors have no other option than to perceive themselves and their world through schemata produced by asymmetric power relations. The asymmetries comprising the social world are thus made invisible, taken for granted, normal for all involved.
Many of the words used to refer to Mexican migrant workers by other area residents function to exclude them from the assumed “us”—based on a symbolic assertion that they are out of their proper place. As discussed further in the conclusion, the word migrant carries assumptions of moving between one bounded “sending” community to a separate “receiving” community. Given that migrant is used almost exclusively to describe a person residing and working outside his or her hometown, the word connotes the person being out of place in the current location and belonging elsewhere. Other commonly used words like Mexican, foreigner, and Oaxacan imply that the referent is from, pertains to, and belongs somewhere else. Interestingly, the usage of these words by most white area residents has very little to do with official citizenship, in other words, whether one is legally a Mexican or an American. Thus, J.R., one of the white residents of Central California whom I came to know, did not think twice when he referred to the Latino mayor of a nearby town as a “foreigner,” even though in order to qualify to run for election as mayor he must be a U.S. citizen. Furthermore, the mayor to whom he referred, unlike himself, was a California native. This usage belies an unspoken fear of the ethnic Other such as in J.R.’s elaboration, “The first thing you run into when you have some foreigner running your community, he doesn’t know nothing about politics or nothing. The only thing he wants to do is take over.”

I came to know J.R. and his wife, Janet, through their nephew, who was one of my close childhood friends growing up. J.R. moved to Central California with his family from the Midwest as a poor “Okie,” to harvest crops in the 1940s. His family lived in tents and picked grapes for a dozen years before moving into other types of work. When I met J.R., he had recently retired from his job as a mechanic at a large aeronautical company located in California and spent most of his time taking care of their yard and antique cars. Janet grew up in a middle-class white family in Fresno, California. She worked as a supervisor for one of the public transit systems in the region. Over the course of several meetings, they served me soda and fruit and I tape recorded our conversations.

Many white residents of the Skagit Valley and Central California labeled U.S. citizen Latinos “Mexicans” in a deprecating manner. Janet told me, “One of these days, California will be 75 percent Mexicans.” The dichotomy between “Mexican” and “American” and the assumption that “American” means only someone who is ethnically white became clear later in the same conversation when she complained, “It drives me nuts when I go to the grocery store and they have [ethnic clothing] on . . . it’s like, ‘Why don’t you start dressing like an American!’”

The underlying fear of difference was clarified when J.R. explained, “Entertainment in my day in [Central California] was busting a Mexican up.” I asked, “Just because?” He clarified, “You know, knock him out if you caught him on the street, because sooner or later he was going to do you that way. . . . Just beat the hell out of one of them. Catch him out alone and stomp him, man, real good. Just because he’s a Mex.” “But you see,” he continued, “he was an endangerment to us. He was taking farmworkers’ jobs.” Janet corrected him that white people stopped being willing to pick in the fields in California before the farmers had to recruit Mexicans. J.R. agreed to this and concluded, “Plus, he was different than me.”

This distaste for difference was clarified in this conversation when J.R. responded to Janet’s musings about potential solutions to interracial tensions. He countered, “Why would it ever change? It’s because they’re not hungry. So, he’s going to stay Mex. That’s just the way it is. Too much free welfare. You get your person hungry, and he’ll blend; he’ll blend then. But until then, why should he change his name, you know like Gonzales instead of Smith? He’ll stay Gonzales, and he’ll be getting all that free stuff. There’s the biggest problem, the welfare. . . . He’s a burden to me because he doesn’t want to change.”

Here, difference—“staying Mex”—is blamed on the assumed receiving of welfare, “getting all that free stuff.” In a separate interview, Janet made a similar criticism: “We let those Mexican people come here. When they get to feeling like, ‘Gee, we don’t want to pick cotton, we don’t want to pick this,’ we let them on our welfare.” However, none of the Mexican migrants I knew qualified for or had ever received welfare. Thus the people J.R. and Janet imagine on welfare are confections of Mexicans and American Latinos. In this way, their words indicate that U.S. citizen Latinos are out of place, are not American, and do not belong here. In another conversation, J.R. said, “That’s why the Mexicans are having problems and now your Hmongs are having problems is they don’t want to change. They want to keep their culture. You’ve got to get people blended right away. People have to mix. If you don’t mix and you’re alienated over there, guess what? You’re different.” Not only is difference considered a problem, but it is equated with “staying Mex” instead of “blending” into what is understood to be (white) American.

J.R. reiterated the assumption of “acculturation” in both popular imagery and public health literature. This concept suggests the progressive erasure of difference via movement from the “ethnic” culture to the “mainstream” culture. Linda Hunt and others explain problematic suppositions in the model of acculturation in the public health literature: “Thus, the ethnic culture is understood to lie in contrast to the advantages and pitfalls of Western culture, with the acculturating individual proceeding away from tradition and toward modernity.” And Matthew Gutmann criticizes the same literature: “Discussion . . . is frequently based on an implicit standard of differences when compared with the ‘normal.’” However, the public health literature, as well as J.R.’s statements, strangely avoids any definition of the “normal” or the “mainstream.” Gutmann posits that the unmarked, assumed mainstream toward which immigrants acculturate is the white, American middle class. Thus the concept of acculturation conflates citizenship, race, class, and habitus (including clothing style) while erasing history and international politics. “Hybridization” is offered as an alternative by scholars in diaspora studies, who remind us that the practices of immigrants are simultaneously maintained and transformed through ongoing contact with other people and places.

Another alternative is offered by my Triqui companions, who do not want to stay in the United States long term or become American citizens. Instead, Samuel and my other Triqui friends want to obtain legal permission to work in the United States seasonally while remaining Mexican citizens. They tend to see the entire transnational migration circuit linking San Miguel, the Skagit Valley, and Central California as their spatially extended community. At the same time, they conceive of San Miguel as their primary home and desire to be located as much as possible with their nuclear and extended family there. However, they want permission to work seasonally in the United States so that they and their families can survive without having to cross the dangerous desert. Some of my Triqui friends have attempted to migrate for work to the primarily mestizo town of Tlaxiaco near San Miguel, but the wage they are offered there is much lower. The wage they are offered increases with the distance from San Miguel, receiving slightly more in Oaxaca City, more in Mexico City, more in Baja California, and even more in the United States. Thus, ironically, in order to afford to
live as much time as possible in their hometown, my Triqui friends migrate as far away as possible. Most work toward a specific
goal—enough money to finish construction on their houses, pay for a year of food and school uniforms, or offer bridewealth to the
family of the woman they want to marry—and plan to return to San Miguel as soon as possible after its realization. The experience of
my Triqui companions highlights another deep irony in contemporary U.S.-Mexico migration, namely, the more dangerous and
expensive crossing the border is made by “closing the border” through militarization and the building of physical walls, the longer
Samuel and my other Triqui friends stay in the United States.

RACE, PLACE, AND EXCLUSION

Local residents perceive migrant laborers differently, depending on their own social location and proximity to the inner workings of
U.S. agriculture. The white residents I came to know in the Skagit Valley and Central California usually considered anyone of Latin
American descent, regardless of citizenship, “Mexican.” Those involved in agriculture, yet relatively removed from Mexican migrant
workers—such as the executives and crop managers on the Tanaka farm—tended to recognize a difference among U.S. Latinos (whom
they usually call “Hispanics”), mestizo Mexicans (“regular Mexicans” or “traditional Mexicans”), and indigenous Mexicans from the
state of Oaxaca (called simply “Oaxacans”). Those who worked directly with Mexican migrant workers, such as the Latino crew
bosses on the Tanaka farm, tended to distinguish among U.S. Latinos (“Tejanos” or “Chicanos”), mestizo Mexicans (“Mexicanos”),
Mixtecs, and Triquis. A realistic understanding of the many ways in which social inequalities are reproduced and the social suffering
of migrant laborers is normalized requires recollection of this multilayered landscape of social categories.15

In one of the largest public high schools in the Skagit Valley, dozens of students started a gang called “WAM,” which stood for
“Whites Against Mexicans.” This gang painted “WAM” on walls, wrote it on their notebooks and cell phones, brought firearms to
school, threatened other students, and provoked fights. The school administration responded by giving detention or expelling anyone
found with “WAM” written anywhere on them or their possessions. In response to WAM, another group of students started a weekly
event called “WAMsketball” to ease tensions and promote positive interethnic relations. Similar to the usage in Central California,
“Mexican” in both these instances did not denote primarily someone of Mexican citizenship or origin but rather someone different,
someone to be looked down on. One of the teachers in the school explained, “There are plenty of kids in the high school who are
proud to be Mexican and flaunt that. Some kids in the high school think they bring it on themselves because they don’t just make the
choice to be like the white kids.” She gave examples of the way students flaunted being Mexican: the kinds of jeans they wore and the
ways they arranged their hair. She went on to say that it was not just racially white students who were part of WAM but also Samoan,
Russian (who are considered a separate ethnic group in the Skagit Valley), Asian American, and Latino students. These practices and
perceptions offer a lens onto competing understandings of race—what it means to be “white” or “Mexican”—in this rural American
valley.

Junior, who self-identifies and is identified by other students as Latino, regularly plays WAMsketball on the white team or serves as
referee. He explained, “It’s an attitude thing. It’s like the Mexicans have the attitude in high school.” His white friend John, who
was active in WAM in the beginning and later joined WAMsketball, attempted to explain Junior’s ethnicity: “I know Junior, he is
Mexican, but not really. [Speaking to Junior] You can’t be Mexican . . . because if you are Mexican, white people can’t talk to you
at our school.” Despite the immediate context of violence recently engendered by WAM, Junior responded, “Mexicans are the ones who
are like gangsters; that is what a Mexican is.” He continued, “When you say someone is Hispanic, it is like saying you have respect for
that person. But if you call them Mexican, it is like saying, ‘You are a dirty Mexican.’”

In Purity and Danger, Mary Douglas explains that dirt is simply matter out of place: “Dirt is essentially disorder . . . It exists in
the eye of the beholder. . . . In chasing dirt, in papering, decorating, tidying, we are not governed by anxiety to escape disease, but are
positively re-ordering our environment, making it conform to an idea.”16 Much like sand is considered “clean” when it is on a beach or
in a sandbox but “dirty” when it is inside a house or on a child’s hands, those considered Mexican, and therefore out of their proper
place, are often referred to as dirty. Area residents and local newspapers used metaphors of “cleaning up the neighborhood” to indicate
a project that functionally displaced those considered Mexican from their area by shutting down a labor camp, a day laborer pickup
spot, and an apartment building occupied primarily by Mexican migrants or U.S. Latinos.

Although in one breath J.R. complained that “[Mexicans] dress better than I do,” in another he called them “dirty” and “filthy.” For
example, he described a local farm labor camp in Central California: “So, what [the Mexicans] had done was they’d blaming the farmer
for their filthiness; blamed him! Says he’s running a slave labor camp out there with substandard housing flats. No plumbing; you
know, none of this. . . . The toilet was break off its plumbing; it hadn’t been cleaned or swept since they moved in; beer cans
everywhere. There he was drinking beer when he should’ve been cleaning his house. Filthy-ass Mexicans for you now.”

When I asked for clarification, J.R. acknowledged that he had not seen the camp firsthand but heard about it through one of the
local news channels. He continued, contrasting his childhood as an immigrant “Okie” in California with the Mexicans:

When we lived in tents, that floor was just as this one [pointing to his spotless white tile kitchen floor] and the kids were
clean. My mother always said, “Soap is cheap.” And there wasn’t no cockroaches in our house. No, because we kept
divings clean. But these wetbacks—what I still call them; now they’re “migrants”—they come into a beautiful settlement
and they tear it up drunk, drinking, and then they want another one. Now, there’s a town out here called Dos Palos. They
had a beautiful setup there, you know, work camps. It was an old airport left over from World War II. They took a
bulldozer to that sucker because the Mexicans were complaining how filthy it was. It was; it was filthy. But it was them.
All you could see in there was fast-food wrappers, fast-food cups. They’d stop off here at the old Taco Bell and whatever
and buy their food and go on eating and then drink cervezas, mucho cervezas, oh, just keep it coming.

J.R. again acknowledged that his description of this work camp came from what he heard on one local news station. Another area
resident I met during my preliminary trips to Central California, who identified herself as half Latina and half Native American,
complained to me, “Those Mexicans are dirty. They are dirty and selfish. They’re taking over like cockroaches!” As an example, she told me of Mexican migrants bathing in the nearby river and leaving trash on the riverbank. Thinking back now on her complaints, I remember again the week I ate and bathed in public parks while sleeping homeless out of cars waiting to find a slum apartment in Madera that would rent to people without credit histories.

As pointed out by George Orwell in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, the everyday living and working conditions of “the lower classes [lead them] to smell.” In a material sense, picking strawberries is a dirtier occupation than working in an office building. The Tanaka Brothers Farm labor camp shacks in Washington were surrounded by dirt roads that alternated between deep mud when it rained and fine dust in the sunshine. It was extremely difficult to keep anything clean; every day I wiped down the inside of my shack as it became quickly covered in light brown dust.

At the same time that U.S. Latinos and mestizo Mexicans are symbolically excluded from the category “American” they enact another linguistic category that excludes indigenous Mexicans. When used by these speakers, the words *Mexican* or *Mexicano* denote mestizo Mexicans only. Despite their Mexican citizenship, Mixtec and Triqui Mexicans are called simply “Oaxacan,” “Oaxaqueño,” or, more deprecatingly, “Oaxaco” or “indio.” At times, U.S. Latinos referred to mestizo Mexicans as “regular Mexicans,” differentiating them from indigenous Mexicans, who become understood as the opposite—“irregular”—in some way. Interestingly, several U.S. Latino crew bosses on the Tanaka farm described Mixtec and Triqui people but not mestizo Mexicans as “dirty.” Samantha, the bilingual white receptionist on the farm, described Oaxacan people as “dirtier than regular Mexicans.” These symbolic dichotomies are some of the many factors enabling white U.S. citizens and, in turn, Latino U.S. citizens and mestizo Mexicans, to become indifferent to the suffering of those considered different, Other, or out of place.

Mary Weismantel argues that categories of race are unnecessary without racism. In other words, racial categories come to be used only in the context of exclusion. She argues against entirely biological understandings of race on one pole and immaterially constructivist critiques on the other. Weismantel and Stephen Eisenman posit that contemporary biological conceptions of race erase the body: “The science of genetics disdains the natural history of the human body after conception: its daily interactions with the world and other organisms are an afterthought, unimportant in the face of a biological destiny predetermined by a genetic code that is insubstantial and invisible.” At the same time, they argue against an “anti-essentialism [that] easily shades into anti-materialism.” Based on fieldwork in the Andes, Weismantel and Eisenman describe indigenous conceptions in which “race accumulates within the body, in its extremities and its orifices, its organs and its impulses, as a result of a life lived within a particular human community at a specific moment in time.” In this understanding, one’s race may be altered over time as one’s bodily shape and smell change as a result of daily bodily practices. As an example, the authors describe how smell relates to what it means to be indigenous and white (including mestizo) in Ecuador. Here, indigenous people are recognized not simply by the color of their eyes or skin but rather by the “dirty” smells that indicate their poverty and their residence with animals on subsistence farms. In contrast, whiteness involves the purchase and use of imported products that produce bodies that smell and look like they have had no interaction with other living things. They explain that whiteness is “a set of economic and political privileges passed down from generation to generation” that then affects the appearance, shape, and smell of the body. This embodied and contingent understanding of race applies well to the context of U.S.-Mexico migration, in which people are perceived to occupy different racial categories depending on the social location of the perceiver; people are understood to be “flaunting” their Mexicanness based on how they dress and wear their hair; the violence of white gangs is erased through the act of translation of a “Mexican” style of dress into being a “gangster”; and poor and nonwhite people are considered “dirty” only in contexts in which they are considered out of place and excluded.

**BLAMED FOR SUFFERING**

At every level of the ethnicity-citizenship hierarchy on the Tanaka farm, each group of people believes those below them deserve their plight. White residents of the Skagit Valley and Central California regularly told me that Mexicans are not educated because they are “lazy.” Several white residents explained to me that “Mexicans” have bad jobs because they “don’t try to learn English.” During one of our conversations on the Tanaka farm, Samantha claimed that “they don’t have bank accounts because they don’t know how; they are like kids.” In Central California, Janet told me, “I get kind of pissed off about the Mexicans because they seem like they don’t try to learn English, you know, and they are in our country, why don’t they learn it?” Later in the same interview, Janet explained:

> In the morning, I get up, get ready for work, and turn on the TV to see the news. You can learn how to speak English. It’s “number one,” and they hold up a number one. Every day it’s something different that’s like, “thank you,” “thank you.” They’ll repeat it, and then they’ll hold the word up and show it to you. There’s things on TV, and if people really wanted to—I know they’re out in the field, but still—I think that if they wanted to, they could learn something, as far as to make it.

Janet acknowledges that Mexican farmworkers are in the fields and unable to watch the program she describes on TV, but she leaves out other aspects of the social and material context of learning English. All my Triqui companions told me they wanted to learn English, and several attempted to do so during my fieldwork. Abelino tried to study English in the evening classes hosted on the Tanaka farm but was told the classes were not open to people who live in the labor camps. Next, he signed up for an English as a Second Language (ESL) course at the local community college. He completed one semester and then had to quit because the next-level course took place in the early evening, when Abelino would be finishing his work or taking his family to the local church that gave away free food at that time.

Repeating the commonly held myth of a classless, individualistic society, J.R. concluded one interview, “You can do anything you want in this country. Anyone can be anything they want to. There is no excuse in this country. There are no barriers. Nothing holds you back except for you. You have no one to blame if you don’t become the best you could except for you.” This trope, reminiscent of
Horatio Alger’s myth of the poor young man succeeding based on his hard work alone, erases the ethnicity-citizenship hierarchy that shapes the material lives of those working in American agriculture. In a similarly acontextual manner, many white U.S. citizens blame the country of Mexico or “Mexican political corruption” for the poverty in rural Mexico that is impelling people to migrate in order to survive. However, this narrative eschews the power of the economic interests in the United States that pushed for NAFTA, effectively producing poverty by banning Mexico from protecting indigenous small corn producers while allowing American corn subsidies for large corporate agribusiness.

Within Mexico, mestizo Mexicans often blamed Triqui people for their own suffering. Luz María, one of the mestiza nuns in San Miguel, explained her understanding of why Triqui people are poor:

They are not capable of making sources of work. Many do not know how to live. In everything, in hygiene and cleaning the house and preparing food, keeping animals and doing economics. Someone could make a tortillería [tortilla factory] that would be open a few hours a day, and people could sell their corn to them, or there could be a pharmacy so people don’t have to go to Tlaxiaco or a big grocery store—though that would be difficult because you would have to pay someone to stay watch in order to keep your earnings from being stolen away. They don’t work very hard, and they don’t know how to work very hard.

On the contrary: during my fieldwork I observed several small stores in San Miguel struggling to survive despite the economic depression of the town. In addition, when Luz María stated that Triqui people “don’t work very hard,” I could not help but wonder how picking bent over seven days a week did not qualify. When I asked Luz María how Triqui people are different from mestizo Mexicans, she stated simply, “They are violent.” At one point, this nun admitted that Triqui people carry guns “because of generations of being kicked out of places and defending themselves.” Like many of the indigenous towns of Oaxaca, San Miguel had experienced several consecutive battles with many fatalities over landownership with nearby, encroaching larger towns. Luz María told me in Spanish, “The land conflicts are over just a meter or two. Probably [a lo mejor], these Triquis wanted the line another meter over there and the Mixtecs from Santa Marta wanted another meter this way.” She minimized the causes of violence, implicitly backing up her claim that Triqui people are inherently violent and that they brought the violence on themselves unnecessarily. Juana, one of the nurses in San Miguel, similarly warned me about the violence of the Triqui people and told me that I should think twice before helping any of them in any way.

“Want” is a common metaphor through which migrant workers are blamed for their plight. For example, John Tanaka, president of the Tanaka Brothers Farm, told me that the pickers “are not going to take a lunch break. They’re just not going to do it. They don’t want a lunch break.” The next summer, Scott, the apple crop manager, told me almost exactly the same thing, claiming that pickers wanted to work all day without a lunch break. In response to pickers’ complaints about the confusing pay scale, John Tanaka whispered to me, “They don’t want to understand.”

In addition, Mexican migrant workers are regularly blamed for the suffering of those considered American. J.R. considered them “a burden on [him] because [they] won’t change” and because he believes they collect welfare. When I asked a neighbor of the migrant camp in which I lived in the Skagit Valley, named Phil, what he thought of his migrant laborer neighbors, he replied, “I lost my job because of them!” He explained that he had worked for a local white farmer for over ten years but was replaced because that farmer could hire two migrant workers for what he was being paid. His mother then reminded him that he hated that job, and Phil agreed. Phil had been a truck driver, delivering potatoes from a local farm throughout several western states. Now he works at the local fire station, being trained as a firefighter. Interestingly, he blamed the Mexican migrants, excused the farmer who actually made the hiring decisions, and kept silent about the pressures from the international market. Regarding the farmer, Phil stated simply, “I understand where he is coming from; he wants to run his farm efficiently.”

NORMALIZATION

For many white residents of the Skagit Valley and Central California, the suffering of migrant laborers is understood as normal, though for different and sometimes contradictory reasons. First, and perhaps most important, people simply get used to seeing the conditions in which migrant workers live and work. Although the migrant camps are hidden from view for the vast majority of Skagit Valley residents, those who live near the camps walk, bike, and drive past the camps every day. Several of these people told me that they were troubled by the conditions of the camps when they first moved to the area but got used to them and now pass by without a second thought.

Second, many people justify the living conditions of migrant workers based on what they assume is normal for them. John Tanaka echoed what many people told me—that the camps were acceptable because they were much better than the housing the pickers had in Mexico. None of the people making this claim, however, had visited the pickers’ hometowns or asked about their housing in Mexico. Nonetheless, this justification assumes as acceptable the original economic inequalities that leave Triqui people in meager housing in Oaxaca. Ironically, several other people in the Skagit Valley justified the living conditions of migrant farmworkers with the opposite assumption, that the housing the pickers had in Mexico or California was much better than the camps. The owner of the closest grocery store to the camps, where many pickers walked to buy food, told me that the camps were fine because “They all have pools and big houses in Mexico and California and are just here for the summer.” A neighbor of the labor camp where I lived in the Skagit Valley reasoned, “Well, they all have cars, so they don’t need anything.”

A few people in the Skagit Valley described beliefs in economic mobility and ethnic succession. John Tanaka mentioned several times over the course of my fieldwork that “once any particular group of people go through a three-generation move, they’ll no longer be in agriculture.” He based this assertion on his understanding that Japanese Americans had “worked [their] way up” the economic ladder in the United States since they arrived. Several other people told me that they hoped the pickers would “work their way up” in...
society. These statements recognize that picking fruit on a farm is an undesirable and difficult occupation at the same time that they subtly justify the related working conditions as a temporary step along the rags-to-riches mythology of American success.  

Finally, the segregation of the farm aids normalization in various ways. Shelly, the supervisor of the checkers who reprimanded white teenagers if they interacted with the Mexican pickers, explained to me that white teens should not get to know pickers because this would bias the weighing of berries. This active segregation certainly led to, among other things, an everyday violence that dehumanized the Mexican pickers. White teenage checkers regularly carried on conversations without any sign of acknowledgment as Mexican pickers brought their berries to be weighed. They continued their stories and jokes as they weighed the berries and marked the picker’s card as though the picker were not present. While Shelly told me that having teenage checkers work on the farm brings “community value,” it also fosters the sense that ethnic labor hierarchies are normal and acceptable.

NATURALIZATION

When I asked a mestiza Mexican social worker why Triqui people have only berry picking jobs, she explained, “Oaxacans like to work bent over [A los Oaxaqueños les gusta trabajar agachados].” Then she explained that mestizo Mexicans, whom she called “Mexicanos,” get too many pains if they work in the fields. In response to the same question, Mateo, the one Mixtec crew boss, told me that the Triqui people are “tough brutes, raring to go for work [bruto para trabajar].” He said that when he first came to the Tanaka farm ten years ago, all the pickers were mestizo, from northern Mexico. The Mixtec people who began to migrate to the farm picked faster, and over time the mestizo Mexicans stopped coming. Now, Mateo told me, the Triqui people are the fast, “brutish” pickers, and fewer and fewer Mixtecs are coming to the farm to pick.

Later, I asked Scott, the farm’s apple crop manager, why I had not seen any Triqui people harvesting apples, the contract field job with the highest pay. He explained, “The O’xacans are too short to reach the apples, they’re too slow. . . . They have to use ladders a lot more than some of the other guys. The other guys just use the ladders to pick the very top of the tree, where the O’xacans are having to, you know, halfway. . . . And, besides, they don’t like ladders, anyway.”

Ironically, later that week one of Scott’s crew bosses told me that her crew’s fastest picker was Triqui. Scott continued the above conversation by explaining that Oaxacans are perfect for picking berries “because they’re lower to the ground.” In response to my questions about why Triqui people have different jobs from mestizo Mexicans, several other people stated simply, “They’re short.” The sentiment that Mexicans should pick berries was echoed by U.S. Senator George Murphy from California during a Senate debate on immigration in the 1960s; he stated that Mexicans should be farmworkers because they are “built lower to the ground so it’s easier on immigration in the 1960s; he stated that Mexicans should be farmworkers because they are “built lower to the ground so it’s easier for them to stoop.”

Perceptions of bodily difference along ethnoracial lines serve as the lenses through which symbolic violence is enacted such that each category of body is understood to deserve its relative social position. Because of what are considered their “natural characteristics,” indigenous Oaxacan bodies are understood to belong picking berries as opposed to other jobs. On the other hand, other ethnicities have bodies that do not fit well in the picker category and belong doing other forms of work.

When I asked Scott about the potential negative health effects of pesticides, he replied:

The laws are so tight that there’s no way anybody should be able to get sick from pesticides. I mean, it’s that strict. . . . There are a few people out there that are a lot more sensitive, and they show it one in a while. It’s not that we did anything wrong, or a neighbor did anything wrong, they’re just a lot more sensitive to it, and you’re always going to find those people. I’ve been working with pesticides for twenty, twenty-five years. The laws are a lot stricter and the pesticides are softer. Go out and spray and eat it the same day! The chemistry has changed and really advanced. Some of it you can see: pesticide residue. Some of it that people claim is residue is actually dirt, dust.

Here it is not simply ethnic body differences but also individual body differences that deflect blame from the farm for the responsibility for pesticide exposure and its health effects.

INTERNALIZATION

At the same time that symbolic violence is enacted from without in the above ways, the concept inheres a sense of internalization and subtle complicity of the dominated. One does not perceive only others, but also oneself, as belonging in ordained social locations.

During my second day picking strawberries, a tractor with long metal extensions spraying something in the air drove through the field while we picked. I asked Mateo what it was. “Do you really want to know? You sure you want the truth?” he asked. I nodded. “Dangerous insecticides,” he said, shaking his head. Later in the summer, I noticed danger signs (in English only) posted on several large canisters surrounding one of the hand washing and outhouse stations at the edge of the field. Strawberry pickers worked everyday without gloves as the visible pesticide residue dissolved in the mixture of strawberry juice that stained their hands dark maroon. If they ate anything, they ate it in the fields while picking, without washing their hands so as not to take time away from work and fail to pick the minimum weight. Our only education about pesticides came from a short warning cassette tape in monotone Spanish played inaudibly in one corner of a huge warehouse full of over one hundred workers and their children during one of the picker orientations. After the tape, the farm administrator in charge of the orientation asked if we had any questions. After a brief silence, he was satisfied and moved on to explain where we should sign the forms we were given, all of which were printed in English. One of the forms stated in English that we agreed not to organize.
The same week the spraying described above occurred, I received a video I had ordered from the United Farm Workers about the health dangers of pesticides. Several Triqui pickers watched it with me in the shack where Samuel’s family lived. Afterward, I asked them what they thought. One told me matter-of-factly, “Pesticides affect only white Americans [gabachos] because your bodies are delicate and weak.” Another said, “We Triquis are strong and aguantamos [hold out, bear, endure].” The others nodded. These ideas were reflected several times over the course of my fieldwork. One of the Triqui people with whom I traveled to Oaxaca bragged to me that there were many Triqui people in the military in Mexico because “we endure [aguantamos].” Here Triqui people internalized their class position through ethnic pride in perceived bodily differences that ironically aids in the naturalization and therefore reproduction of the very structures of their oppression.

BODY POSITION IN LABOR

In addition, perceptions of body position impute a hierarchy of humanness on the farm. The interpretations of class and body position offered by Strauss and Scheper-Hughes and Brandes prove helpful. The dual meaning of the word position as both a post of employment and a stance of the body hints at one phenomenon. Occupations performed seated behind a desk are symbolically linked to the mind, such that they are more prestigious in a society that subjugates body to mind. Jobs executed standing or walking are seen as more closely linked to the body, less intellectual, and therefore less esteemed. At the same time, these standing bodies are understood as humans of solid standing. This basic respect is seen in the phrases “upstanding citizen,” “upright character,” and “standing up for oneself.” Finally, the jobs at the bottom of the hierarchy that require bodies to kneel in the dirt or bend over in the bushes are the least respected. Like animals, these workers are seen “on all fours.”

This general analysis applies well to the Skagit, where those with the most power and prestige hold desk jobs, where midlevel supervisors stand and walk, and where the lowest-level workers—bent over all day—are derided as perros and burros. Mateo, the only indigenous Oaxacan on the farm who was promoted to supervisor, explained to me that he hopes to continue studying English and being promoted until he can “work with his mind instead of his body.” He explained the superiority of desk jobs over manual labor in the following way: “The body will not always give [no siempre va a dar], and I think it will tire [cansar]. Your mind might tire after years, but not like the body, not enough to give you a sickness [no tanto para darte una enfermedad].” During a strike my second summer on the farm, the pickers complained that they felt treated like they were “lower” than other workers because they picked. Scott dismissed this complaint, explaining to me, “I almost got the feeling that they thought that they were lower just because they were a picker, which, to me, that’s one of the most important jobs on the farm.” While the job of the pickers is clearly important to the harvest, my ethnographic research indicates that this role is not routinely treated with respect or prestige.
A checker stands while pickers kneel in the strawberry field. Photo by Seth M. Holmes.

Over the course of my fieldwork on the farm, berry pickers were treated as subhumans on several occasions. During one Northwest rainstorm, several Triqui women waited outside the farm office to ask a question about their paychecks. They huddled together in the mud, under the overhang of the roof. When Shelly arrived, she said in English, “What are you doing standing in my flowers? Shoo! Shoo! Get, get!” waving her hands as if to scare away an unwanted pack of dogs.

In essence, the migrant body is made to betray itself. Specifically, because of perceptions of ethnic difference and body position in labor, the migrant body is seen as belonging in its position in the very agricultural labor hierarchy that then leads to its deterioration. These mechanisms of rendering inequality invisible are potentiated by internalization into Triqui forms of pride. The structural violence inherent to segregated labor on the farm is so effectively erased precisely because its disappearance takes place at the level of the body, and is thus understood to be natural.

RESISTANCES AND REFUSALS

Though powerful, the normalization and naturalization of these social hierarchies and health disparities are incomplete. Very rarely, I caught glimpses of spaces in which people did not entirely accept their own social location and instead offered insightful critiques.

The bank through which the Tanaka farm paid the pickers had a policy that berry pickers had to wait in a separate line at the bank on paydays and let all the other customers go first. Every Friday, there was a long line of Mexican migrant workers spreading out into the parking lot, waiting up to several hours, watching as each white customer who came to the door was escorted to the front of the line. Though I was paid by the farm as a berry picker each week, the bank personnel repeatedly tried to escort me to the front of the line when I arrived on payday with my Triqui companions. While this practice implicitly teaches white and Triqui people the social hierarchy present in the valley, a few white area residents told me that this was not fair, and at least one asked the bank to change its policy. In a minor way, I saw this awareness of inequality also when neighbors of the farm camp admitted that sometimes they felt “guilty” or “bad” when they drove by the camp on their way home. Even more rarely, people in the United States and Mexico employed some degree of broader social analysis. The owner of a small bed-and-breakfast near one of the migrant camps in the Skagit Valley explained many of the international forces constraining farmers in the area. He clarified this statement by saying that if the state of Washington were to raise the minimum wage too far, growers might choose to mechanize, costing thousands of picking jobs and making the situation worse for migrant laborers. He rightfully concluded, “It’s very complex.”

In San Miguel, Pepsi is delivered weekly by a large semi driving through the dirt roads of town, whereas Mexican Rey sodas are sold in small, Triqui-owned tiendas. Some families are beginning to buy huge flats of Pepsi bottles for fiestas like baptisms or weddings, instead of buying Rey from their neighbors. However, there is a common rumor in town among all age groups that Pepsi and Coca-Cola are made with human blood. I asked Samuel’s niece, one of the family members with whom I lived in San Miguel, to explain how the blood was made into soda. She explained that people are ground up, alive and screaming, into a bloody pulp in the
factories of these companies and put into their drinks. Although some of her friends drink Pepsi, she did not want to drink human blood and therefore drank only Rey sodas at fiestas.

Using a “hermeneutic of generosity,” there are many ways in which multinational corporations thrive while grinding up living human beings, especially those who are poor and marginalized. They produce unhealthy products in environmentally unsustainable ways in factories that often have poor working conditions, market them primarily to the global poor and form large conglomerations of soda brands that are all sold cheaply, functionally driving smaller producers out of business. This rumor, then, critiques and leads to practical resistance to unequal and harmful economic structures. Nonetheless, Pepsi and Coca-Cola continue to grow, most smaller companies close, and there is a developing trend to drink Pepsi in San Miguel.

THE STRIKE AND THE MEMO

One morning late in my second summer on the Tanaka farm, the strawberry pickers walked out of the field on strike. The strike was not planned ahead of time. Rather, after learning that the pay per weight was being lowered and that several people were being fired because they had not picked the minimum weight the day before, a few Triqui pickers began to whistle. More and more people joined in whistling until everyone walked out of the field. Afterward, my Triqui friends explained to me that whistling—which I had heard and wondered about while picking blueberries in the midst of a cold rain the summer before—communicates discontent. In the days leading up to the strike, the pickers were becoming increasingly anxious because the berries had become progressively fewer and smaller as the summer wore on, and it was therefore becoming more and more difficult to make the minimum weight. The strawberries become fewer and smaller later in the summer primarily because each of the fields has already been picked earlier in the summer and also because the plants simply produce progressively fewer berries at the end of the season. In this context, firing several people who had not been able to pick the minimum the day before was seen as unreasonable and lowering the pay per weight was considered entirely unjust.

With the help of Jaime, the social worker who introduced me to Triqui families on my first visit to the Skagit, the pickers created a document listing over twenty grievances about the working conditions, from low pay to explicit racist statements from supervisors, from lack of lunch breaks to unfair promotions of mestizo and Latino workers over indigenous pickers. Over the next few days, several executives and a dozen pickers held meetings to discuss the grievances, with Jaime and I translating between English and Spanish. The executives became visibly surprised and upset at the descriptions of explicit racist treatment and differential promotions on the farm. They promptly instructed all the crop managers to pass along the message to treat all workers with respect. More important to my Triqui companions, thirty-minute lunch breaks and slightly higher pay were instituted. The pickers considered this a
success. They called the document a *contrato* (contract) and each of the dozen picker representatives signed it according to Triqui legal tradition. Samuel’s uncle, one of the picker representatives, passed the signed contrato to John Tanaka for the farm executives to sign as well. According to Triqui legal practices, the contrato would become a binding agreement between the signatories. John Tanaka re-printed the grievances, signed the paper, and filed it as a “memo.” The following summer, the lunch breaks and higher pay were silently rescinded, though some of my Triqui friends feel that they continued to be treated with more respect.

Strawberry pickers on strike reading the list of grievances. Photo by Rob Mercatante.

The strike, the temporary nature of its results, and the conversion of the contrato into a memo highlight the complicated nature of power and resistance on the farm. The executives demand that all workers are treated with respect at the same time that their real anxieties over farm survival prohibit them from effectively addressing the primary, economic concerns of the pickers in a lasting way. The increasingly harsh market in which the farm operates coerces these growers to remain complicit with a system of labor segregation harmful to the pickers.

**SOCIAL CHANGE AND SOCIAL REPRODUCTION**

Though there are small signs of awareness of unequal social structures and their detrimental effects, the ethnic-citizenship hierarchy in U.S. agriculture and its correlated hierarchy of suffering are largely unquestioned and unchallenged by all those involved. The normalization and naturalization of farm hierarchies, which foster their reproduction, take place on many levels through various symbolic and physical means. The ethnic-citizenship segregation itself as well as language and social network differences allow certain individuals to become insulting and racist with relative impunity while others attempt to be ethical and respectful. For example, Shelly’s racist attitudes toward indigenous Oaxacans and her actions enforcing farm segregation appear to be invisible to the ethical farm executives, perhaps because she is married to Rob Tanaka. The explicitly racist treatment of indigenous pickers, conducted in Spanish, by Betty’s mother, who is a crew boss, go unnoticed by the farm executives and crop managers largely because they occur in a language other than English.

The working and living conditions of migrant farmworkers are hidden from public view and justified by assumptions about what kinds of housing and jobs different people deserve. Metaphors of dirt and terms of reference exclude them from the category “American” and belie a supposition that they are out of place in the United States. Migrant laborers are blamed for their own suffering, often using the metaphor of “want,” as well as for the suffering of those categorized as “American.” Finally, and perhaps most effectively, Triqui people are understood to deserve their location in the social hierarchy because of what are perceived to be their natural, ethnic, bodily characteristics. This naturalization of oppression and racism is particularly efficient and unquestioned because it is invisibly effected at the level of the body. In order for there to be an effective, broad coalition of people working to change the...
unhealthy inequalities in U.S. agriculture, we must first see such hierarchies as socially and historically constructed and malleable. Only then might we be able to imagine symbolic, economic, political and interpersonal means of working toward equality and dismantling the structures that produce social suffering.
SEVEN Conclusion

CHANGE, PRAGMATIC SOLIDARITY, AND BEYOND

POSSIBILITIES FOR HOPE AND CHANGE

Early in my fieldwork, I began to notice the segregation of workers in U.S. agriculture into a hierarchy of perceived ethnicity and citizenship. I observed economic inequalities and social hierarchies producing displacement, migration, sickness, and suffering, including among my Triqui companions Abelino, Crescencio, and Bernardo. As my fieldwork progressed, I became discouraged by what appeared to be a depressing situation without any possibility for change.

I noticed several ways in which social and health inequalities had become considered normal, natural, and justified. Naturalization occurred via the racialization of bodies and the perception that certain categories of ethnic bodies belonged in certain occupational positions. The normalization of social inequalities occurred through the hiddenness of certain classes of bodies as well as through the subtle meanings of body position. At the same time, Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence incorporates a measure of internalization, which could be seen in Triqui conceptions of pride that may partially function to justify their position in the occupational hierarchy. In addition, the medical gaze of clinicians in the field of migrant health did not allow them to see social inequalities or how these inequalities produced sickness. Instead, they often inadvertently blamed the suffering of their patients on the patients themselves—their behavior, culture, or racialized biology—and consequently recommended interventions inadvertently complicit with the harmful social structure. The naturalization of social and health inequalities was especially effective because it took place at the level of the self-evidently natural, the body. The structural nature of these inequalities is illuminated by the fact that even idealistic and ethical farmers and clinicians operate within a gray zone that neutralizes and sometimes even reverses their efforts at ethical action. The importance of political economic structures was highlighted further by the lack of choice experienced by my Triqui companions as they made the mortally dangerous yet necessary trek through the border desert.

This multiply determined structure of inequalities seemed to explain everything and made it especially difficult for me to imagine social, economic, political, and health change. Whether hope is based in the unknown, the unnameable as described by Crapanzano, or the practice of leveraging knowledge for symbolic, political, and material change as described by Miyazaki, the harmful and overdetermined social and symbolic structures at work in U.S.-Mexico migration seemed to leave little room for hope.

Pierre Bourdieu, whose concepts inform much of the analysis in this book, is often described as a theorist of social reproduction. Scholars use his theories to analyze the ways in which social and symbolic structures lead to the reproduction of the whole social system, including its inequalities and hierarchies. While his theoretical framework is often understood as an overdetermined, all-explaining metanarrative of reproduction with no possibility for change, there are several places in which Bourdieu focuses explicitly on the potential for transformation. The possibility of social change can be seen especially in his concepts of habitus and symbolic violence. For Bourdieu, habitus indicates the historically accreted dispositions and habits of the body. In other words, the bodily comportments of one’s habitus are issued forth and added in layers by the social world over time. Thus one’s habitus can change over time if one’s position in a particular social world or that dimension of the social world itself, which Bourdieu calls a field, changes. In addition, something new and unpredictable is produced inevitably when one’s habitus comes in contact with a field it does not match. If one’s habitus has developed in a particular social position or social world and one later occupies a new position or a new field, this encounter will bring about transformation. Those who study im/migration should be especially aware of this site for potential change.

The concept of symbolic violence is another important location for change according to Bourdieu. In “Gender and Symbolic Violence,” he argues against the possibility of social change solely through the “immediate effect of the ‘raising of consciousness.’” This directly contradicts a common expectation in public health and medicine that education alone will bring about direct health-related— including behavioral—change. Rather, Bourdieu argues that social change occurs “through a radical transformation of the social conditions of production of the dispositions.” In the same section, he writes “a relation of domination . . . depends profoundly, for its perpetuation or transformation, on the perpetuation or transformation of the structures of which those dispositions are the product (and in particular on the structure of a market in symbolic goods . . . ).” Bourdieu indicates that there are strong mutual relationships among social structures, the bodily dispositions produced by them, and the symbolic structures reinforcing them. These relationships permeate or transform power-imbed social relations. Changes on the level of social structures (e.g., immigration and labor policy) will produce new embodied dispositions and symbols (metaphors, stereotypes, meanings, connotations—such as “illegal” vs. “legal” and “unskilled” vs. “skilled”) at the same time that changes in symbols will lead to transformations in bodily actions and, therefore, in the social structures themselves (e.g., votes and the resultant policies). With this fuller picture of Bourdieu’s theories, there may be room for hope—in Crapanzano’s or Miyazaki’s senses—related to the feed-forward loop of transformation through social structures, bodily dispositions, and symbolic meanings.

Many scholars, from Bourdieu to Foucault to Gramsci, have asked what the role of the scholar should be in the world. Considering Gramsci’s proposal of the organic intellectual and Bourdieu’s multidirectional understanding of structure and symbol may lead us to consider the denaturalization of social suffering. If we social scientists are to research, theorize, and confront socially structured