

**Scratching Out a Living:
Latinos, Race, and Work in the Deep South**

Angela Stuesse

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In this book, Angela Stuesse offers readers much more than the title promises. As one would expect, the book analyzes the life-threatening conditions workers face in the poultry slaughterhouses of central Mississippi. Yet it also provides an important analysis of Stuesse's experience as an activist researcher. An anthropologist trained in the University of Texas at Austin's tradition of engaged scholarship, Stuesse moved to the Mississippi town of Forest not only to do research but also to collaborate with a workers' center in improving the lives of laborers in chicken-processing plants. Stuesse's discussion of her work imbues the book with a sense of purpose, and also raises pressing questions about the role of the academy in supporting scholars who tackle immigration, racism, and other urgent issues of our time.

Stuesse begins her book with a valuable historical overview of workers' exploitation in Mississippi that contextualizes poultry work as part of a long line of extractive labor. She draws connections between the prominent role of cotton production in the region's history and the emergence of poultry processing during the 1930s and 1940s. White workers predominated during the early years of the industry, with only a handful of the dirtiest jobs going to black workers. As part of the civil rights-era push for economic justice, African Americans fought for and eventually achieved the desegregation of poultry-processing plants. By the 1970s, the majority of poultry workers in central Mississippi were black.

The heart of the book deals with the introduction of Latino workers and the effect their presence has had on social relations and labor organizing. The earliest effort to hire Latin American workers was in the late 1970s. A Chilean former tennis star working at B. C. Rogers Poultry in Morton, Mississippi, helped the company recruit Mexican migrant workers. The introduction of these workers diminished the vitality of union organizing efforts among the industry's growing workforce of African Americans. In her discussion of the ever-increasing recruitment of workers from Latin America, Stuesse explodes two stubborn myths. First, she demonstrates with refreshing specificity that the men and women most people call "Mexicans" have come and continue to hail from a variety of nations, including Cuba, Guatemala, Venezuela, El Salvador, and Argentina. Second, she shatters myths about the laziness of African American workers used by poultry executives and government officials to explain their increased reliance on Latino workers. It was executives' unwillingness to pay a living wage, not a lack of motivation or "labor shortage," that transformed the labor force in central Mississippi.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the poultry industry experienced consolidation, mechanization, and a growing reliance on undocumented workers. A major turning point occurred in 1986, when Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control

Act (IRCA). This law made it a crime for corporations to hire undocumented workers. Stuesse details the devastating fallout of this policy through the example of Tyson Foods, which operated five plants in Mississippi at the time. The processor engaged in mass firings of Latino workers and replaced them with African American workers. Yet IRCA ultimately strengthened employers' grip on its remaining undocumented employees, who dared not complain or resist for fear of losing their job or being deported. Stuesse illustrates how poultry processors managed to exacerbate the vulnerability of undocumented immigrants in a highly original analysis of third-party contractors. These labor agents recruited and paid workers so that corporations could exploit undocumented workers without facing the consequences of directly hiring them. Stuesse argues that the neoliberal state simultaneously supports border control while guaranteeing corporations' access to an expendable and pliable group of workers.

Through insights she gained as an activist, Stuesse addresses the difficulties of bringing together Latin American and African American workers for collective action. Language is a huge barrier keeping these workers apart. Employers take further advantage of this barrier by segregating workers by task and playing them against one another. As a consequence, Stuesse shows, unions have had mixed results in pushing employers to address the dangerous and demeaning risks to workers' health, from the denial of bathroom breaks to lack of workers' compensation for injuries sustained on the job.

Another barrier to collective action is the many different historical experiences of poultry workers. Like LaGuana Gray in *We Just Keep Running the Line: Black Southern Women and the Poultry Processing Industry*, Stuesse shows that African American workers have a long record of resistance and union organizing in the area. Many Latin American workers, in contrast, had less experience with and confidence in collective action. Perhaps more troubling, moreover, is that immigrants have acquiesced in racism against their African American coworkers while investing heavily in the notion of the American Dream, a myth that many African Americans view with skepticism. To address these challenges, Stuesse argues, the labor movement must move away from an approach that stresses class unity and instead embrace workers' differences.

In the balance of the book, Stuesse engages readers in a hopeful discussion of the benefits of activist research, which is allied with and stems from the work of labor, immigration, and civil rights activists to bring about meaningful change. The collaborative nature of this research and the deep ties Stuesse formed with workers produced better scholarship by making her privy to information and experiences she would not have gleaned through a more detached research approach. She explains that theorizing was a collective endeavor that drew upon the expertise of the workers themselves and gave her greater access to "spaces and experiences that produced analytic insight" (245).

Yet she concludes with a more sober reflection on the limits of her efforts. "The cases I've shared with the reader have been of partial and limited success, at best," she writes. "Poultry workers in Mississippi and across the world still labor in terrible conditions, with low pay and with little respect for their basic human dignity" (245). Stuesse inspires readers to consider the efficacy of engaged scholarship. Her six years of advocacy was not in vain in the sense that she helped individual workers. She coached one worker through an encounter with a third-party contractor, for example, and, through her fluency in Spanish, helped bring together poultry workers of different backgrounds. But

would a shift in academic conventions for counting productivity and awarding funding transform activist research into a more successful enterprise? Would activist research bear more fruit if institutions of higher education considered “alternative products of research” such as influencing labor policy and helping to bring about immigration reform when evaluating faculty members for tenure and promotion? Stuesse’s book provides a glimpse of the possibilities.

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