

BOOK REVIEWS

***Scratching out a Living: Latinos, Race, and Work in the Deep South.* Angela Stuesse. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2016.**

Dvera I. Saxton, California State University
dsaxton@csufresno.edu

How do the residents of increasingly diverse, rural, and disenfranchised communities in the U.S. Deep South make sense of race, class, and work? How do these understandings affect efforts to organize for workers' rights across race, gender, and class boundaries? How can anthropology use its methodological and analytical tools to further the aims of grassroots workers' movements in ways that also attend to the nuances and complexities of these fragmented and mostly low-wage industries? Angela Stuesse's *Scratching Out a Living: Latinos, Race, and Work in the Deep South* explores these questions in the context of demographic and economic transitions in the poultry industry of Central Mississippi. Through archival research into the history of labor and social-justice organizing in the Deep South and interviews with past and present Black and Latino poultry employees, former executives, union leaders, and residents from different race and class groups in Central Mississippi, Stuesse shows that local workers from diverse backgrounds often have more in common than they realize. Despite sharing histories of colonization, exploitation, and abuse, Black and Latino workers frequently harbor animosity toward one another, as Stuesse notes, thus inadvertently reproducing oppressive local and transnational racial hierarchies. Large poultry corporations, in turn, exploit these tensions to their economic advantage, and neoliberal policies such as the so-called "Right-to-Work" and corporate welfare exacerbate vulnerabilities shared by Black and Brown low-wage workers.

Stuesse's positionality as an activist and ethnographer, and as a white female outsider, enabled her to support the labor-organizing efforts of poultry workers both directly and indirectly. She conducted years of participant-observation as a community organizer with the Mississippi Poultry Workers' Center by means of a partnership between worker-justice movements in the U.S. South and the Department of Anthropology at the University of Texas at Austin. In this role, Stuesse took part in campaigns to raise workers' wages, access health care following occupational injuries, create

unions, and file lawsuits against abusive corporations. These activities provided her with intimate knowledge of the everyday lives and the seemingly endless struggles of low-wage poultry workers of color.

The first third of *Scratching Out a Living* is based largely on Stuesse's archival research. As she reveals, several marginalized populations have worked in Mississippi's poultry industry over the past 70 years. From the 1940s to the 1960s, white women toiled on the processing lines in poor conditions and for very low wages, while the era's policies of segregation forbade the employment of Black workers. Stuesse documents how civil rights and Freedom Summer organizers led consumer boycotts against companies that refused to hire Blacks. Some of these campaigns were successful, and gradually, the shop floors of poultry factories became integrated during the late 1960s. Despite this victory, the largely Black female workforce endured appalling working conditions. Archival materials, and in some cases Stuesse's interviews with sage elders, describe the horrendous and hostile conditions that instigated the workers to lead courageous production stoppages and walk-outs. As Stuesse writes,

A grandmother in her fifties revealed that she was fired from her job in a chicken processing plant in the early 1970s when she refused to sleep with a supervisor. Another remembers... "The supervisors mistreated us. When a young lady would come in looking for work, they would tell her they had to examine her in order to get the job [...] Yes, she would have to sleep with 'em. That's just how bad things was back then..." (131).

Black labor organizing routinely elicited violent and repressive reactions from poultry executives, regional politicians, the police, and angry white residents. This latter group included white women workers who left their positions and refused to be on the production lines with Black coworkers, let alone join their unionization efforts, despite the fact that they too were heavily exploited. These formidable obstacles notwithstanding, Black worker organizing gave rise to the first poultry workers' union in 1972, even as prevailing racist attitudes about the "inherent deficiencies" of Blacks continued to shape corporate suppression tactics against these workers' best efforts to organize. The more insidious attempts at this racist union busting included firing veteran Black workers, creating artificial

labor shortages, and recruiting the first guest workers from Latin America in the late 1970s.

Thus began the “Latinization” of the Mississippi poultry industry. From roughly the 1980s to the 1990s, neoliberal labor policies began to be passed by the state government in partnership with corporate executives and implemented in workplaces by managers and supervisors. As Stuesse describes, these changes in demography and political economy came to be grafted onto existing race and labor hierarchies, wherein local whites take positions at the top of this scheme, while whiter Latinos (mostly from Argentina, Peru, and Chile) occupy a middle ground, and indigenous and Central Americans, Mexicans, and Blacks are relegated to its very bottom.

Stuesse then brings us to the present. Today’s poultry workers, both Black and Brown, are still fighting for their rights. Yet an unfortunate paradox remains; even as the lives and labor of these workers have been violently devalued, few among their ranks are able to empathize with the struggles of contemporaries from other racial groups. Stuesse’s nuanced and place-based perspective of this seeming contradiction provides some reasons for its persistence. In this light, she posits that poultry workers’ and rural Mississippi residents’ racist and prejudiced beliefs explain in part the persistence of this prejudice. Latino poultry workers, unfamiliar with Black history or the finer details of neoliberal globalization, often merge U.S. white supremacist ideologies with the stringent racial hierarchies originating in their home countries. In a similar fashion, Black poultry workers frequently resent Latino immigrants for “stealing their jobs” and, in turn, for inadvertently weakening hard-fought wage increases and improvements in workplace conditions. Needless to say, these misunderstandings make any efforts to organize and unionize extremely challenging. Stuesse’s ethnographic evidence illustrates how such sentiments are often intensified by language barriers, internal tensions within these diverse populations, differing ideas about what unions and workers’ centers should be doing, and the lack of resources and staff dedicated to addressing pressing labor issues in rural communities.

In addition to providing a historically and ethnographically rich account of poultry work and labor organizing, *Scratching Out a Living* features some refreshingly reflexive descriptions of Stuesse’s efforts as a staff member at a workers’ center. One notable example of this laudable merging of anthropology and activism is how she helped to develop a bilingual worker-organizing curriculum that introduces the histories, languages, cultures, and shared struggles of its participants to coworkers from other racial groups. In this light, the Solidarity/Solidaridad program that Stuesse co-designed for the Mississippi Poultry Workers’

Center could be replicated in other contexts in which similar challenges impede successful worker organizing. Thus, Stuesse’s text provides a concrete and effective example of how anthropology can be mobilized to attain social justice beyond the walls of the ivory tower.

Along these lines, *Scratching Out a Living* is an exciting example of an evolving movement within the anthropology of work. It is among the first books from a new generation of applied scholars who are experimenting with models and methods of “activist research” in the name of workers’ rights. In addition to posing important questions about contemporary social injustices, Stuesse also provides critical reflections on the ethical, personal, and political challenges of undertaking activist research in these especially racist times. Fortunately, as she shows, there exist ample opportunities to link ethnographic approaches, tools, and insights with institutional resources in an effort to address the concerns of the communities and movements in which we as anthropologists are engaged.

Scratching Out a Living is an excellent resource for advanced anthropology students exploring social movements and issues of labor, food, immigration, race, class, and gender. It could also be taught in upper-division undergraduate or graduate-level courses in occupational and public health, social work, community organizing, and U.S. and Latin American history. In addition, the text provides a rare opportunity for labor and union activists to explore critically the histories of the social groups they continue to fight for. As such, I would highly recommend this book to these organizers, as well as to those engaged in the important and pressing work of building the ties of Black and Brown solidarity.

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***Rainforest Cowboys: The Rise of Ranching and Cattle Culture in Western Amazonia.* Jeffrey Hoelle. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2015.**

Ken C. Erickson, University of South Carolina
ken.erickson@moore.sc.edu

From 2007 to 2010, Jeffrey Hoelle spent 18 months with former and present-day rubber-tappers, cowboys, ranchers, and settlers in Acre State, located in western Brazil’s vast Amazon region. Hoelle’s relationships with his interlocutors are the principal foci of this often-engaging and occasionally perplexing text. The title, for example, may mislead some readers, for a detailed description of cowboy work in Acre will