H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Nano Riley, **Davida Johns**. *Florida's Farmworkers in the Twenty-First Century.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002. xvii + 208 pp. $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-2592-6.

Reviewed by Kelly A. Minor (Department of History, University of Florida)
Published on H-Florida (November, 2003)

Hidden Harvest: Making Florida's Farmworkers Visible

Hidden Harvest: Making Florida's Farmworkers Visible

Nano Riley and Davida Johns should be pleased to learn that they have accomplished their primary goal in *Florida's Farmworkers*and more. Riley writes, in the tradition of Edward R. Murrow's "Harvest of Shame," *Florida's Farmworkers* "is an attempt to make people aware of these invisible workers and their lives at the beginning of the twenty-first century" (preface).[1] I know they were successful because more than ever, when I peruse fresh vegetables at the store, I find myself consciously thinking about the workers I know had helped raise and harvest these foods. Moreover, *Florida's Farmworkers* raises issues which reach beyond agricultural, labor, Florida, and Southern studies, to touch on Florida's very identity. Riley is a Florida native and her vested interest in the future of the state is admirable. As such, this is a work valuable to a variety of readers in the general public and academia alike.

Johns's abundant photographs are a rich supplement to Riley's text. Together, these representations spotlight the many, and significant, challenges embedded in the farmworker experience. Riley introduces readers to a host of issues, ranging from pesticides to education, facing farmworkers in Florida today. "Moving with the Crops" and "Immigration" examine the often illegal and typically dangerous process workers endure to find work, and most of the remaining text spotlights the particular problems, such as wages, housing, health, and safety, which workers and their advocates struggle to control. Finally, Riley and Johns explore family and community life, those rituals of affection, devotion, and tradition that sustain workers over the long term.

Before I discuss what Riley and Johns have done well, let me mention some areas I think could have been stronger, though the shortcomings do not detract from the overall impact of their work. Since not everyone who reads this book will be familiar with Florida or the East Coast, some simple but good maps could effectively illustrate the seasonal work migrations of workers, their places of origin, and where they tend to concentrate within the state. At the very least, a map of Florida and its counties could be quite helpful, especially since Riley discusses migrant workers not only in the southern tip of the state, but in its center and in the Panhandle. Next, though Riley's descriptions of worker hardship is compelling, it could be even more so were it to focus intently on the most salient issues–rather than mentioning repeatedly that the labor itself is hard (all non-mechanized agricultural work is laborious), Riley could more effectively drive home the central necessity for compensation that matches the work. She does this, for example, in her discussion of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers' campaign against Taco Bell and the farms supplying the corporation. She notes that the ultimate concern of the coalition was that workers are not being appropriately compensated for their labor, that they are "denied the rights to organize and to receive overtime pay, and they receive no health insurance, no sick leave, no paid holidays, no paid vacation, and no pension" (p. 60). Likewise, more visual records of what advocates and workers have accomplished could be an illuminating balance to the majority of Johns's photos, which depict neglect and hardship. Like the pictures of worker schools, which demonstrate that there are people on workers' sides and that their efforts have been fruitful, some photos of the housing, for example, which prudent and concerned farm owners or advocates have built and maintained, could serve to illustrate more fully the fabric of the farmworker world, and the concrete developments underway to improve that world.

That said, *Florida's Farmworkers* has a number of notable strengths. First, its photography is illuminating and compelling; it reinforces the reality of these people's lives, at once spotlighting hardship and endurance. Johns's experience in the Peace Corps clearly has influ-

enced her ability to portray her subjects with compassion. Second, Riley highlights the very diversity of the farmworker population in Florida. Probably most Americans associate migrant farm labor with Latino, usually Mexican, men and women (and usually with the western United States). In fact, among Florida farmworkers are Haitians, Jamaicans, Dominicans, Guatemalans, and, relative newcomers, political refugees from southern Mexico and Central America. Within these groups is still more variation. Employers and advocates who can speak Spanish are not guaranteed easy communication with workers; some laborers, notably those of Mayan descent, speak a dialect foreign to all but their own community. Another excellent distinction is Riley's repeated differentiation between workers who arrive and work in families, which include children and grandparents, and those who work here alone, usually single men, in order to someday return to or send for families left at home. In addition to these categories, Florida also hosts a population of temporary workers known as H2-As, who are allowed to enter the country and work during harvest. These distinctions are significant, because they impact how workers are hired, paid, and housed, and how they respond to challenges. For instance, since many single men are in the country illegally, and most expect to return home as soon as possible, they are less likely to complain or seek redress for inadequate working or living conditions. On the other hand, workers who have families and have been in the United States for some time often work toward "settling out," and many have succeeded. They have constructed permanent lives here, and naturally regard their circumstances differently. Some long-term workers have become crew bosses, and others have joined the ranks of advocacy. In either case, their experience and permanency makes them an effective voice among farmworkers. It is clear that farm laborers comprise a sizable, but hardly monolithic, portion of Florida's population.

Finally, Riley's evaluation takes into account the impact of Florida's environmental health on agrarian livelihoods and lifestyles. Florida is a fertile land, and no decent study of its agriculture can ignore the centrality of the environment in the state's history and development. Acknowledging the battle between agriculture and conservation to claim that fertility, Riley devotes a good discussion to the impact of first draining and then reclaiming the muck. As we might expect, she addresses the annexation of parts of the Everglades for farmland early in the twentieth century, and the continued pressure on the area as agriculture continues to expand. Particularly effective, however, is her discussion of "Lake Apopka: Natural Wonder to Disaster." In this tale, human interference in nature, first draining wastewater into the once pristine lake and then draining the lake's edge, created a body of farmland and a wealth of jobs for farmworkers. Those farms' success, though, depended on chemicals and practices that killed Lake Apopka. So severe was the damage that it captured international attention as an environmental disaster and spawned a massive restoration project. Eventually, restoration meant buying up farms on the muck and allowing the land to revert to its natural state. The cost of the original mistake has been high, for not only have the restoration efforts been stymied by seemingly overwhelming environmental distress, but all those who once found employment on the muck farms found themselves out of a job. Clearly, those who are concerned for the fate of Florida's farmworkers must take into account their inherent ties to the fate of Florida itself.

Ultimately, if not explicitly, *Florida's Farmworkers* raises some "big picture" issues. The most significant for the Florida History and Culture Series deals with the identity of the "real" Florida. Riley writes, "Tourists think of the Sunshine State in images of warm beaches, sultry breezes, glitzy hotels on palm-lined avenues, and Disney World, and they seldom venture off the interstate" (p. 1). The implication seems to be that, unlike the working world of rural Florida, the tourist-friendly parts of the state are not real. And those familiar with Florida are aware of its State Park slogan, "the Real Florida," designed to distinguish natural Florida from anything manmade, including agriculture. Florida's image seems torn between paradise and labor, environment and agriculture, native and exotic, solitude and crowds. Riley and Johns highlight some of this in their book, especially since so much of the farmworker story takes place in south Florida, where the boundaries between Miami, sugar, and the Everglades are tenuous. For those who live in Florida, we know that there is no single, or simple, definition of reality. This is a place of diverse and interdependent populations (human and animal), habitats (natural and manmade), and pursuits, and it all has to be accounted for as we struggle to define the state's future amidst rapid change and phenomenal growth. Riley and Johns have made an important contribution to the debate by making it clear that Florida's farmworkers, and agriculture, are an inextricable part of the state's composition.

Note

[1]. Riley and Johns are continuing the tradition of what Cindy Hahamovitch calls "writer-reformers, authors whose aim was to reveal farmworkers' poverty" (p.

7). Though *Florida's Farmworkers* deals with a host of issues related to labor and agricultural studies, it really is a narrative of current hardship more than an in-depth analysis of what has gone wrong and how it can be made right. It is a window onto one part of the Florida experience. For those interested in the history of working conditions and lifestyles among Eastern farmworkers, see Hahamovitch's *The Fruits of Their Labor: Atlantic Coast Farmworkers and the Making of Migrant Poverty, 1870-1945* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997). Hahamovitch's study is a good introduction for Riley and Johns, because the first explains how the conditions facing twenty-first century farmworkers developed. Additionally, Hahamovitch explores some of the ideology related to farmworker conditions, such as the conflicting Progressive ideal of farm life supremacy and Progressive knowledge of farm life degeneration. Her primary concern is highlighting the "relationship of labor and capital to the state," thus pulling farmworkers away from the "no-man's land of poverty studies," where they have been relegated to the "lumpen proletariat," and dealing with them as an integral part of the agricultural labor dynamic (p. 7).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Kelly A. Minor. Review of Riley, Nano; Johns, Davida, *Florida's Farmworkers in the Twenty-First Century*. H-Florida, H-Net Reviews. November, 2003.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8418

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.