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## Grains by Bill Winders (Polity Press, 240 pages; 2017)

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## BOOK REVIEW

*Grains* by Bill Winders (Polity Press, 240 pages; 2017)

Consuming the super-food grain quinoa is almost essential to being a member of the “Whole Foods culture,” or the ongoing wellness movement occurring throughout the West. Yet, minding the fine print of this wellness movement will lead some to question the scale of individualism as it relates to collective concerns. This is where the money one pays for organic, “free-trade” grains, in the name of individual health is weighed against a familiar, pervasive narrative of exploitation and the lust that accompanies monopolizing the staple foods that are essential for the survival of a people. Individuals within these exploited cultures become “others,” or even disappear altogether through super-power nations’ consumption of their crops and avoidance of the deleterious result when individualism gets the upper hand.

In *Grains*, author Bill Winders highlights the nature of the geopolitics of grain production and consumption and how this complex economic concept is heavily influenced by neoliberalism. Winders offers the reader evidence of oppression within the context of the production of grains. Global superpowers (countries like the United States, China, and many countries throughout the European Union), backed by global treaties formed by these nations, clearly aim for growth of capital with little or no regard for the consequences of their actions.

“The geopolitics of grains draws our attention to the question, for whom are grains produced?” This is one of many questions that Winders uses to frame his argument on the geopolitics of grains. Ultimately, these questions force readers to examine their own behaviors. While this may or may not have been intentional, one cannot help but question the individualistic role that we as consumers play while reading this book.

At a structural level, Winders achieves a goal that many writers strive for: dense subject matter with artful composition that allows the reader to feel challenged in meaningful ways. Winders does this in *Grains* without rigid formalism. Winders’ ability to engage the reader is evident in the composition of the first and last chapters of the book. The first chapter provides readers with an overview of the geopolitics of grains. The last chapter not only provides a summary of each subject, but also introduces how the economy surrounding wheat, rice, and maize is changing with the result of political mobilization. Often times, exposing readers to new information later in a non-fiction work (or any scholarly writing) can be fatal, leaving readers to wonder if they might have missed this new element of the work in previous chapters. Likewise, an author’s choice to devote an entire final chapter to summary can result in a missed opportunity to develop a nuanced perspective with the ideas presented in the preceding chapters. Winders avoids both of these scenarios successfully.

Within his writing, Winders’ storytelling works subconsciously, embedding stories of the resistance of those who are largely ignored in the process of production and consumption: the producers of the grains. These stories, as distributed throughout each chapter of the book, provide historical context and narrative to what would otherwise be a litany of statistics, regulations, and treaties. The third chapter, titled “The Search for New Markets,” begins with the story of

Mexican Zapatistas rebelling in response to changes in land rights and neoliberalist ideals of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). This “search for new markets” was to the detriment of Mexican peasants’ livelihood and culture. This story, among the others within *Grains*, illuminates the extent to which one can forget that laws were created by humans with their own motives in response to, or aiming to direct, those that inhabit certain social spaces. These stories sever such absent-minded detachment.

A question that might arise among readers centers on what makes the geopolitical importance of grains pertinent enough to compete with other worthy discussions, especially considering the immense amount of injustice around the world. For instance, knowing that many regions of the world lack access to water can lead one to engage in a defeating argument regarding which injustice is worse. While this book aims to tackle a particular issue, it illuminates another way capitalism and neoliberalism ultimately lead to exploitation of marginalized groups who depend upon these base resources (e.g., grains, water, fertile soil), planting the seeds (no pun intended) for more complex arguments regarding the ways that industrial farming, land grabbing, and exploitation manifest themselves in our western existence. Ultimately, readers should come away from reading *Grains* with the knowledge of how complacent, and even helpless, they are in systems that they either shun or embrace. For instance, even though you might eliminate carbs found in bread or white rice from your diet in favor of quinoa, you are forced to reckon with the first world dilemma that accompanies the inner conflict of choosing between weight loss or appropriation of a centuries old dietary staple from Peru.

One of Winders’ most compelling arguments is that of the divisive nature of feed grains and food grains. Animals are raised on “feed grains” and are then slaughtered and prepared for consumption. Grains used for feed, instead of food, “fueled the expansion of global meat consumption.” Even so, individuals from countries, like the United States, seek out alternative proteins like quinoa. The consumer demand for quinoa, as mentioned above, leaves communities that have relied on this grain for centuries competing with health-conscious Americans, so heavily influenced by individualism, that the fate of people who actually use quinoa as a primary food source simply becomes an afterthought. These realities are strewn throughout *Grains* as examples of the raw statistics in practice. Though it may be trendy to think one is living the “farm to table” lifestyle, within this façade lingers self-motivated consumption.

Hope springs in *Grains* through the theme of resistance: the resistance of farmers, indigenous people, and disenfranchised groups who often embody more than one of these categories and span the globe. Resistance, as Winders writes, takes the form of passive to rightfully aggressive activism. Some farmers uproot fields of crops that were planted in the name of profit for agriculture corporations like Monsanto. Others, like the Zapatistas in Mexico, respond to these threats with war. With this, Winders effectively illustrates resistance to food oppression, as it often is absent from discussions about the political nature of food consumption.

“Importantly, then, grains are not a unitary force in politics or economics and part of the influence of grains has emanated from the divisions between them,” Winders states in response to the sincere efforts of groups resisting exploitation in the final chapter titled “Seeds of Change.” This is not a hollow attempt to guilt the

reader in to recognizing the ways in which they are complacent within interweaving spheres of consumerism and oppression. But, it is yet another opportunity to force the reader to realize that individual changes will not save them anymore. Neoliberalism and the capitalist emphasis on individualism is one of the many pathways that lead to these harms. Mass change (i.e., systemic change) will be the only thing that will matter in correcting the mess that is the geopolitics of grains. Whether the mental gymnastics the reader inevitably performs was Winders' intention in *Grains* bears no weight on the effect of continually hearing the message promoted throughout the book. Through developing an understanding of the geopolitical nature of grain production and consumption, one is not left understanding the full spectrum of oppressive capitalist behaviors. However, this exposé into another realm of oppression fosters self-awareness of instances where one might marginalize certain types of oppression as less important than others. Bill Winders' book *Grains* illustrates a facet of this spectrum: what might be one grain of brown rice to one person can be a link in a chain of loss to the next.

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