

Lettuce Workers: Acoustic Archaeology

I was first drawn to this piece because of my personal experiences with agriculture from the summers I have spent on my grandfather's farm. Instantly, sounds of shovels scraping against tightly packed dirt, insects buzzing about and men sighing sprang forth. There are many evident keynote sounds that I can find in the piece. In the distance, there are the sounds of the old wooden wind turbine turning, of people busying themselves in the houses, of the powerlines running. As you approach the subjects, other, more precise sounds begin to grow: the irrigation creek, hoes in the dirt, foot and body movement in the crop, cloth rubbing, the breaths of the workers... These are all the sounds that emerge quite literally from the drawing based on what is laid out visually. However, the process of researching this work revealed a much deeper story with huge potential for inspiration.

I was not able to find any information on this specific piece, and I could only find a very short biography of the artist, Jeannette Maxfield Lewis, that was repeated almost word for word on every art website. The only useful information from this biography was that Jeannette had produced the majority of her art while traveling and living in Europe, Mexico and southwestern United States (1). By looking at the dates and locations of some of Lewis' other works, I was able to deduce that she was likely either in California or Mexico around the time that this drypoint was made in 1934 (2). I then began to search lettuce agriculture in the 1930's in California and Mexico which led me to discover that one of the main American agricultural areas for the growth of lettuce is Salinas Valley located in the Monterey County of California where Lewis made a painting depicting the Carmel Valley (3). Moreover, this so-called "salad bowl" of America was home to a renowned worker strike precisely in the year 1934 (4).

At the time, the work of salad cutting and picking was done mainly by Filipino immigrants while that of salad packing was done mainly by white workers who had been displaced as a result of the Great Depression which had ended the year before in 1933. Both of these groups went on strike, but in the end, the white workers were able to negotiate and return to work while much more time and the involvement of the Filipino Labor Union were needed in order to meet the demands of the Filipino workers (5). The significance of this event matched with the darkness and dejectedness in Jeannette Maxfield Lewis' *Lettuce Workers* leads me to believe that the piece represents these Filipino workers around that time and in the Salinas Valley.

These details mainly inform the tone as well as the soundmarks that likely marked the time and space represented. Obviously, the tone of the sound piece is therefore quite pained and tired which can be conveyed through the sounds of the workers and the sharpness of their hoes in the dirt. Moreover, the dark etchings in the upper corner hint at ominous weather. Based on my research into the weather of the area in that time, Monterey County had been experiencing a very dry period up until the end of 1934 which leads me to avoid sounds of a coming storm (6). However, strong winds in dry desert-like environments can be evocative of the dark sky and add to the tense tone. In order to specify the identity of the workers as Filipino immigrants, I had my friend who is talented at whistling whistle the tune of a Filipino Kundiman song. One that I found in my research is "Jocelynang Baliwag" which was written around the 1896 Phillipine Revolution and was sung to inspire the belief in a future of freedom (7). This whistled tune evokes the isolation of the workers and symbolizes their hopes.

Finally, another inspiration for my piece is Steinbeck. Indeed, Steinbeck grew up in the Salinas Valley and most of his stories occur in the surrounding area, so the descriptions found in his novels can be applied though they are not set in the exact time of Lewis' piece. One quote on the area from his book *East of Eden* goes as follows: "I have spoken of the rich years when the rainfall was plentiful. But there were dry years too, and they put a terror on the valley. [...] The land dried up and the grasses headed out miserably a few inches high and great bare scabby places appeared in the valley. The live oaks got a crusty look and the sagebrush was gray. The land cracked and the springs dried up and the cattle listlessly nibbled dry twigs. Then the farmers and the ranchers would be filled with disgust for the Salinas Valley" (8).

This serves as another indicator for the sounds of the soil and atmosphere of Salinas, but also implies the idea of contradiction. To highlight this contradiction, my piece follows a kind of path from the town in the distance where there are sounds of nature and people cooking, down along the creek to where the unhappy men are working the crop, and into the darkness of the fog and wind. There are both sensations of suffering and dryness and sensations of beauty and abundance which I tried to bring forth with the opposing sounds of dry air and the wet creek, of the pained grunts of workers and the peaceful nearby town. All in all, my piece is quite atmospheric, but the changes in atmosphere and ambience serve as key indicators of the changes in tone of the landscape.

Sources

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