Environmental Justice and Artistic Expression in California's San Joaquin Valley

CRD243: Critical Environmental Justice Studies

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Introduction

California's San Joaquin Valley is a region marked by drastic changes in the physical, cultural, and social landscape. The ancestral lands of the Yokuts, Miwok, Kitanemuk, and Chumash indigenous peoples, now known as the San Joaquin Valley, were once home to one of the most biodiverse regions in the world. Nutrient rich soil blanketed the valley floor, a result of thousands of years of wetland organic matter decomposition. Massive swaths of land were transformed into intensified agricultural "factories" of sorts. Throughout the past three centuries, the entire flow of life in the valley has metamorphosed as a result of human intervention by both oppressors and revolutionaries fighting to protect their natural existence. This book is concerned with artistic expression, including the purposes for and the societal factors influencing art's creation in the San Joaquin Valley. The art forms examined in this literature are just a sampling of the vast creativity present throughout the course of the valley's history.

The violent dispossession and displacement of indigenous peoples in the San Joaquin Valley was a product of settler colonialism and the concept of manifest destiny propagated by the United States government to justify the westward boundary expansion of the country. Statues, plaques, and artistic representations were resurrected throughout California in honor of those who conquered the land; however, this is not unique to California. Within the United States Capitol Building, these same monuments to settler colonialism and manifest destiny remain. A statue of Father Junipero Serra, a prominent Catholic leader of the California missions, lies in the Old Hall of the House of Representatives. Immortalized in the fabric of our institutional halls are depictions of historical figures fulfilling a religious “prophecy” of sorts. The

Capitol is also the site of a mural by Emanuel Leutze named “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way,” a relic of the U.S’s state sanctioned violent campaign of outward expansion of the country’s territory in the West. In "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way”, westward pioneer William Clark and military leader Daniel Boone are depicted in the shining light of the day leading a band of white settlers to the “Golden Gate " in San Francisco Bay. These art forms, also found in the San Joaquin Valley, represent a cognitive dissonance ingrained in our history. Landmarks such as the statue of Francisco Garcés, a Catholic friar who “discovered” the Tejon Pass in 1776, in Bakersfield are evidence of art in everyday life in the valley that portrays a triumphalist vision of European civilization while ignoring the reality of the original peoples and physical landscapes that were destroyed as a direct result of the processes of settler colonialism.

White bodies, economies, and politics overtook the valley. With their presence came the destruction of an abundance of biodiversity; wetlands were drained, rivers diverted, and entire lakes disappeared to create the massive agricultural industry we see still in existence today.

Capitalists, such as Henry Miller and Charles Lux, transformed the natural landscape of the valley into commodified natural resources to be taken, consolidated, controlled, and dominated (Igler, 2005). Massive takings and consolidation of land paved the way for the seemingly never-ending fields of monoculture owned by a select few agribusiness corporations. Capitalist greed permeated the soil, infecting issues of every aspect of life in the San Joaquin Valley. Agricultural laborers and migrants were a commodity, an extension of the land, another resource from which to extract capital gains. Workers faced horrific living conditions, little pay, and strenuous, laborious days in the fields for decades.

Racial capitalism shaped the physical landscape as well. It was nearly impossible for nonwhite persons to own land due to the racist property ownership system created by anglo-saxon white males of the time. A worker's race and ethnicity determined the labor they were allowed to perform, and therefore the pay they could accrue. Mexican ranchers were exploited by Miller and Lux for their traditional ecological knowledge of the valley, while never compensated equivalently to their white counterparts (Igler, 2005). Chinese men were emasculated and pigeonholed as cooks. The racial divide of labor determined what bodies were exposed to toxic chemicals in the fields in a post-Green Revolution world. Growers held the lives of laborers in their hands, a power which they continually advocated to expand while nonetheless abusing it. The bracero program that brought thousands of Mexican migrant farm workers to the valley was a means for growers to skirt the demands of domestic laborers advocating for fair pay and working conditions. Despite the unnecessary importation of migrant farm workers under international treaty, growers still worked to dismantle any regulation placed on their exploitation of labor (Mitchell, 2012). To this day, farm workers in the San Joaquin Valley are still struggling under the systemic oppression, albeit renamed and repackaged.

Framed in this way, indigenous peoples, farm workers, and residents of the San Joaquin Valley are victims of several layers of oppressive systemic violence and exploitation. However, when we take a closer look at the cultural and artistic representation of peoples of the San

Joaquin Valley from the time before settlers, all the way to present day, we see myriad forms of protest, critiques, and challenges to environmental injustices tied to white supremacy, capitalism, and settler colonialism. It is through the resilience of indigenous ways of life and art, brightly colored print-making from the United Farm Workers Movement, black-and-white photography documenting labor strikes during the Great Depression, among countless other works that we see residents of the valley overcame the environmental injustices they faced through art despite intense and continued subjugation.

Art, like life, contains moments both immense joy and pain. We can see this throughout the course of art history in the valley; artistic expression was used by the everyday person, the oppressor, the rebellious leader, and the dreamer. There is no simple description of what “art” consists of in these chapters, yet there are major threads, or themes throughout this book. The first theme represented in parts one and two of this book is the connection between genocide and the destruction of culture tied to settler colonialism and manifest destiny. Following the first two parts of the book, the theme that will appear evident in part three of this work is art’s role in the critique of social, economic, and political systems that perpetuated harm during an era of deep suffering, the Great Depression. Reflected in the final part of the book is the idea of art as a form of and vehicle for protest for environmental justice in the Valley. Contained throughout the entirety of this book are discussions on the various artist’s relationship to their subjects, the intended audience of the pieces, and the influencing roles societal forces, such as white supremacy, have had on artistic expression.

Part I - Set in Stone - Manifest Destiny & Indigenous Rebellion

Chapter 1: Manifest Destiny

Manifest Destiny, the cultural foretelling of the fated expansion of American settler colonialism across the North American continent, is a concept physically ingrained in our nation's Capitol Building and throughout the San Joaquin Valley landscape. Statues of mission leaders, explorers, and military leaders appear across California's landscape. These artistic expressions of settler colonialism and manifest destiny, including the former statue of Father Junipero Serra in Carmel, now face scrutiny from modern day social justice movements. Yet, many still remain intact, untouched landmarks to leaders of systemic oppression and violence. One such statue of much interest in this chapter is that of Francisco Garcés in Bakersfield, CA.

The statue, named "Father Garcés", was constructed by John Palo-Kangas and is No. 277 of the state's Historical Landmark Registry ("Garces Circle Statue", n.d.). Francisco Garcés was one of the first European settlers to enter the San Joaquin, and the first white man to enter what is now known as the Kern County region. "Father Francisco Garces made the first discovery of the original pass area in 1776, when he came upon the land that snaked through the Tehachapi Mountains, connecting the central and southern parts of California, about 15 miles northeast of what motorists who travel Interstate 5 today consider the Tejon Pass" (Kimble, 2012). Garcés is still considered a martyr of the Catholic Church as he was killed by indigenous peoples rebelling against the foreign occupation of their lands. Although the naming of "manifest destiny" as a concept came after Garcés was long dead, the idea was nonetheless perpetuated by the Catholic Church throughout California,

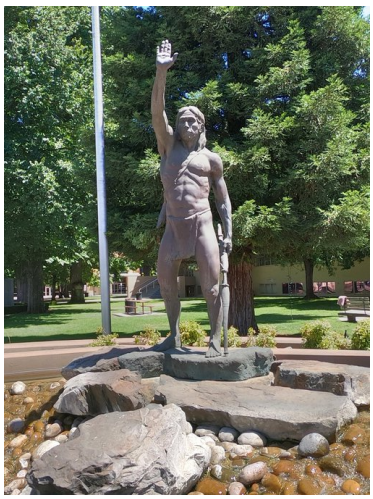
albeit under a different name. The actions and results were the same - the taking of lands, destruction of indigenous ways of life, and the forcing of one way of life upon another.

This chapter will discuss the monument in Bakersfield to Father Garcés as one of many representations of manifest destiny and settler colonialism in the San Joaquin Valley.

Consideration will be given to the ways in which art allows for a selective, often romanticized storytelling of historical events. There are multiple ways to interpret the statue of Father Garcés, whether the audience believes him to be a saint wrongfully slain by primitive peoples or an enemy who was a part of an oppressive religious order in the valley. Artwork such as “Valley in the slope of the Great Basin: leading from the Tejon Pass” will also be examined to understand the artistic representations of the area Father Garcés “discovered.”

Chapter 2: Indigenous Rebellion

In Modesto, a sculpture is dedicated in honor of Chief Estanislao who was also known as Cucuncuhi. A member of the Lakisamni tribe of the Yokuts people, Chief Estanislao is the namesake for Stanislaus County in the San Joaquin Valley. The bronze statue created by Betty Saletta stands in front of the Stanislaus County Courthouse, an ironic choice given that Estanislao was considered a rebel against the settler colonial state (Wyatt, 2021). He was raised in one of California’s numerous Catholic Missions, where native peoples faced harsh treatment at the hand of Catholic friars and "they endeavored to escape from the Mission at the first opportunity” (“Chief Estanislao”, n.d.). Chief Estanislao fled the missions and worked tirelessly to encourage other native



peoples at the missions to do the same. His commemorative sculpture stands in direct contrast to Father Garcés' statue discussed in chapter one, symbolizing indigenous rebellion against the Spanish and the Catholic Church. This chapter juxtaposes the story of Chief Estanislao and Francisco Garcés, setting the scene for discussion on indigenous representation and history in the face of dominant, oppressive historical systems. In addition, the importance of public art reflecting the diverse history of the San Joaquin Valley is discussed at length.

Part II - The Stories We Tell - Settler Colonialism & Indigenous Resilience

Chapter 3: Settler Colonialism in the San Joaquin Valley

State sanctioned violence throughout the process of westward expansion directly impacted the ancestral lands, livelihoods, and cultural practices of indigenous peoples across what is now the state of California. There's an argument to be made that the destruction of indigenous art is tied to natural degradation and exploitation of their land. In a strange twist, indigenous representation in art was overtaken by colonizers themselves. This chapter examines the artists who were party to the settler colonial state, their indigenous subjects, and analyzes the purpose of said art forms.

Colonizers destroyed indigenous ways of life as they documented them, as evident in "Gathering Grass Seed" by Seth Eastman, an artist trained at the United States Military Academy at West Point ("Gathering Grass Seed", n.d.). This print was one of many included in a volume entitled "Information Regarding the History, Conditions, and Prospects of the Indian Tribes of the United States."

Artistic expression on the part of the colonizer, in this instance, was used to perpetuate the Western practice of categorizing and cataloging indigenous peoples. In addition to paintings, artists used photography as a medium of documenting indigenous peoples and ways of life in the San Joaquin Valley. Edward Curtis created collections of black and white photographs displaying staged scenes and portraits of Yokuts and Chumash peoples. “In his quest to photograph pre-colonial Indian life through a twentieth-century lens, he often manipulated and constructed history as much as he recorded it: he staged reenactments, added props, and removed evidence of twentieth-century influences on "primitive" life” (“Edward S. Curtis”, n.d.). Analysis of both Eastman and Curtis’ art forms in this chapter reveals the exploitative, paternalistic nature of depicting indigenous peoples in art created by colonizers. Despite this, their works represent some of the only records of indigenous peoples of the valley. This chapter attempts to reckon with an apparent paradox; settler colonialism destroyed indigenous ways of life, while also preserving them through art, and further placed them on display in museums and in encyclopedias.

Chapter 4: Indigenous Resilience Through Existence

This chapter is dedicated to indigenous art forms, created by and for indigenous peoples, and their ways of life in the San Joaquin Valley. These lands were historically stewarded by the Yokuts, Miwok, Kitanemuk, and Chumash indigenous peoples. Valley Yokuts were composed of over 20 tribes across the area between the Tejon Pass and Stockton (“Tulare Lake”, n.d.). Some of the prominent tribes remaining include the Tejon Indian Tribe, the Tulare River Tribe, the Chukchansi Tribe, and the Tachi Yokuts Tribe. Settler colonialism not only

physically displaced people, but also violently transformed the environment to the point that thousands of years of cultural practices could no longer exist in the same way. Massive areas of land were transformed into unrecognizable territories, especially where the Tachi Yokut Tribe inhabited. There is a sadistic irony in that the Yokuts “did no farming at all in the days before Columbus,” yet the land has become one of the most intensely farmed in the world (“About Us”, n.d.). The introduction of agriculture in the San Joaquin destroyed what was formerly the second largest freshwater lake in the United States, the Tulare Lake (now the Tulare Basin). William Preston in “Vanishing Landscapes” explained that “the Tulare Lake Basin came to bare the imprint of Yokut identity and values” (“Tulare Lake”, n.d.).

Nonetheless, indigenous resilience has prevailed, with many major crafting and art forms including basket weaving, pottery, sculpture making, and storytelling surviving to this day. Materials historically and currently used center natural materials such as stone, deer grass, bracken fern root, and redbud bark. “The Valley Yokuts depended to a considerable extent upon tule as a raw material for baskets, cradles, mats for rafts and house coverings, and a variety of other items” (EHRAF World Cultures, n.d.). Subjects of their sculptures, pictographs, and designs woven into their baskets center the natural world. Their environment heavily influenced

and continues to impact their art as evident through the materials they used and their motifs of choice depicting natural forms. The boundaries that may exist between artifacts of everyday indigenous life, and art created for the specific purpose of holding an audience may blur. In contrast to the art forms discussed in chapter three, indigenous art is not a reflection of their way of life, but rather an essential aspect of it. The art forms referenced in this chapter include a basket woven gambling tray constructed by Mrs. Dick Francisco, a Yokut and master of weaving, that would have been used by Yokut women to play huuchuish,

an indigenous dice game (“Mrs. Dick Francisco”, n.d.). In addition, this chapter discusses the stories of the coyote passed down through generations of the Tule River Tribe, including “Coyote and the Moon” (Silva, 1975b) and “Coyote and the Sun” (Silva, 1975a) as examples of the resilience of indigenous storytelling and connection to the land.

Part III - Pictures Worth a Thousand Words - Great Depression Era Photography of Worker Exploitation & Strength

Chapter 5: Dorothea Lange & the US Resettlement Administration

As David Igler outlines in his book, Industrial Cowboys, massive corporations and a select few individuals controlled the vast majority of land, resources, and capital in the Valley (Igler, 2005). It was truly the “Golden State” for this small class of power-hungry elites, but the general population faced increasing economic inequality. Meanwhile, the San Joaquin Valley saw a huge influx of Dust Bowl refugees from the Midwest. This mass migration of refugees escaping environmental catastrophe inspired John Steinbeck to write the Grapes of Wrath, and Dorothea Lange’s photography. These new Californians faced many of the same deplorable conditions as Mexican and Filipino migrant farm workers of the time. Severely substandard housing, unsafe work conditions, exploitative wages, and hostility from the dominant white male population pushed these communities to their breaking point.

This chapter examines Dorothea Lange’s photography that documented the rural poor and farm worker livelihoods across the San Joaquin Valley. Lange was commissioned by “the US government’s Resettlement Administration (renamed the Farm Security Administration, or FSA, in 1937), a federal agency created to document and remedy the plight of the urban and rural poor in the 1930s” (“Dorothea Lange. Migrant Mother”, n.d.). The reprehensible living

conditions of those in abject poverty reached the forefront of American consciousness in part through her art. Her photo entitled “Migrant Mother” may be the most iconic, lasting imagery of those living in severe poverty during the Great Depression. Her expedition also unearthed scenes of farm worker exploitation, with photographs depicting Mexican and Filipino migrant farm worker housing and working conditions captioned at times by workers themselves (“Dorothea Lange | Biography”, n.d.). However monumental her work may be, this chapter is less concerned with Lange’s merits and more interested in the involvement of the US government as a monetary sponsor of this work. The FSA had a tumultuous role in the valley’s history as it oversaw the rise of the Bracero program that imported migrant workers from Mexico in droves (Mitchell, 2012). This chapter analyzes Lange’s photography, paired with the rise and fall of the FSA from the Great Depression through its dissolution on the part of growers in the mid 1940s. Prevailing themes discussed are the tensions between the massive agricultural machine driven by capitalism and the US government’s involvement in both providing and protecting farm workers who fueled it.

Chapter 6: Subversive Photography of Otto Hagel and Johanna (Hansel) Mieth

Black and white images shot by freelance photojournalists Otto Hagel and Johanna (Hansel) Mieth depicted the same struggles of Great Depression era laborers of all backgrounds, and also the collective strength of migrant farm workers who organized for fair wages and better working conditions. White, Black, Filipino, Mexican, Chinese, and Japanese workers were all subjects of these images, showing the collapse of the capitalist system left

none untouched in the valley. Although their work occurred at the same time as Lange's, Hagel and Mieth were not as fortunate to attend Columbia University for photography, but rather lived as undocumented migrant farm workers during the Great Depression. "Mieth and Hagel led lives fervently committed to social and political independence rather than commercial success or fame. In many instances, the documentary team not only chronicled their subjects, but worked and lived alongside them" ("Otto Hagel", 2019).

The plight and strength of the agricultural worker is at the forefront of this section of the book onward. Hagel and Mieth's images of workers, at times including children, picking cotton and grapes show moments of both pain and joy in the fields. The pair also documented those most marginalized within the valley, including Black laborers at the Livingston Camp and Japanese workers in the fields. In contrast to Lange's work, Hagel and Mieth's portray a sense of hopefulness and energy. Discussion on the framing of subjects and the way this impacts storytelling is emphasized here. This era, although marked by poverty, was characterized by a powerful energy that sparked a massive labor movement to unionize. Towards the end of the 1930s, the publication of "Factories in the Field " by Carey McWilliams detailed this history, both horrific and inspiring (McWilliams, 1939). McWilliams presented ideas as to how agricultural labor could be transformed that were revolutionary, despite their rejection. This chapter considers Hagel and Mieth's body of work in the valley, paired with McWilliams' writing to better understand the radical forces working to alter the landscape overtaken by large-scale agribusiness.

Chapter 7: The Black Okies

During the Great Depression, a significant number of Black farm workers migrated to the San Joaquin Valley in an effort to escape the oppressive systems of the Jim Crow Era of the southern US. The stories of these Black migrant farm workers, named “the Black Okies” for their origins from Oklahoma and surrounding states, went largely untold. The following chapter is dedicated to the telling of their stories, integrating the photography of Matt Black (“The Black Okies”, 2001) and storytelling of Mark Arax (Arax, 2002). Although Black and Arax’s work is contemporary, the stories are those of the Depression era onward. This chapter examines how history may be unearthed, with stories making their way to wider audiences through modern artistic expression. The images taken by Black appear as if they are from a different time. Though they are very much representations of our historical past, these images depict the real lives of Black Okies today demonstrating the racial capitalism that formed the landscape has never truly been extricated from the valley floor.

Part IV - Art in the Age of Revolution - Chicanx Artistic Expression & Farm Worker Protest in the San Joaquin Valley

Chapter 8: Printing the Revolution

The US government doubled down on reinforcing the massive agricultural landscape that was a result of land consolidation and capitalist control. The same landscape that Depression era farm workers fought to alter had played an uno reverse by replacing those domestic workers with migrant labor through the creation and control of the Bracero program. Mexican farm workers were brought to the US under the guise of wartime labor shortages, only to be heavily exploited by growers in the valley. Braceros faced mistreatment, harsh working conditions, and the flagrant breaking of their contracts promised via international treaty (Mitchell, 2012). In the same moment, Filipinos were fighting the Japanese in World War II (WWII) and migrating to California post-war, specifically residing in Stockton. Throughout WWII until the 1960s, the valley saw further expansion of massive agribusiness enterprises in part because of their exploitation of Mexican and Filipino migrant workers.

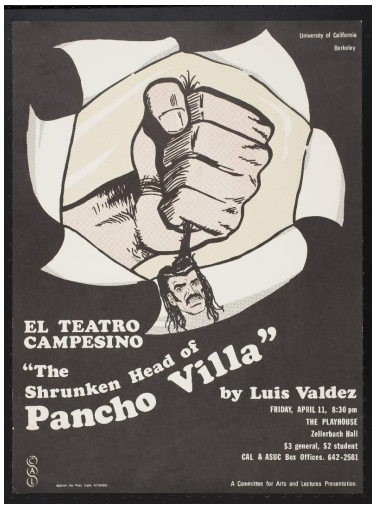
The resulting strikes and protests of the 1960s-70s in response to this oppressive system gave way to an explosion of artistic expression in support of the farm workers' cause. The National Farm Workers Association (NFWA), and later the United Farm Workers (UFW), were labor organizations created by Cesar Chávez in the 1960s that brought national attention to the deplorable conditions farm workers faced in the valley ("1962: United Farm Workers Union", n.d.). Both the NFWA and the UFW benefited from the work of countless Chicanx artists of the time, especially print-makers. "Huelga" by Andrew Zermeño

depicts “Don Sotaco,” a representation of a UFW striker. “Dressed in tattered pants and with a hole in his shoe, Don Sotaco rushes forward with a sense of agency as well as urgency. “I was trying to show the spirit of the workers . . . who were attacking the status quo,” Zermeño recalled. Brandishing a UFW flag proclaiming the strike, Don Sotaco—and by extension the union—calls for action from farmworkers and their supporters” (”Andrew Zermeño”, n.d.). Xavier Viramontes’ “Boycott Grapes, Support the United Farm Workers Union” is a more graphic print in response to violent intervention from the Teamsters during a new boycott on grapes started by the UFW (”Boycott Grapes”, n.d.).

As the farm worker movement progresses and intensifies, so too does the artwork created in support. The print shows “a formidable Aztec warrior squeezing grapes that spew blood instead of juice” (“Boycott Grapes”, n.d.). Everyday Americans were made aware of the happenings of the Central Valley labor movement in large part because of these artistic forms of protest. Even as the UFW’s power waned, artists like Ester Hernandez continued print-making radical statements in response to the environmental injustices peoples of the San Joaquin continue to face to this day. “Sun Mad” by Ester Hernandez is a perfect example of this. “In response to her family's exposure to polluted water and pesticides in California's San Joaquin Valley, Hernandez sought to unmask the "wholesome figures of agribusiness," such as the Sun Maid” (“Sun Mad”, n.d.). This chapter examines the historical events following each of the aforementioned prints and the role print-making played as a form of protest and critique of the dominant agricultural system.

Chapter 9: The Theater of the Rebellious - El Teatro Campesino

Art forms other than print-making had a role in the dissemination of propaganda in support of



the farm workers' cause. El Teatro Campesino founded by Luis Valdez on the picket lines of the UFW's Delano Grape Strike was a significant rebellious art form in support of the movement ("Our History", n.d.). This chapter examines the theater's first full-length play entitled "The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa." The play features a talking head named Belarmino, giant cucarachas, and a slew of racist stereotypes as a means of critiquing the deleterious sentiment of who Mexican farm workers were believed to be in 1950s America ("The Shrunken Head", n.d.). White supremacy informed this dominant culture, and allowed for the continual exploitation and subjugation of Mexican laborers across the valley. Through the analysis of this play and the recounting of historical events leading up to the UFW movement, this chapter breaks down the forces that perpetuated Chicanx oppression and how Mexican Americans responded through artistic protest and rebellion.

Conclusion

We are the stories we tell. As we have seen throughout these chapters, art is as complicated as life itself. It has served as both an instrument of the settler colonial state, and a powerful vehicle to critique and challenge the dominant, romanticized story of our nation's history. The stories told in our landscapes are incomplete, but that implies there is room to add, edit, and rewrite our stories. There are past and future stories to be told here, ones of immense strength, resilience, rebellion, and protest. We need only scratch the surface to reach beneath the withered soil.

There are roots in the San Joaquin Valley deeper and stronger than the forces of white supremacy, settler colonialism, and capitalist oppression. What gallery walk might we wish to see represent OUR San Joaquin?

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