

Unit Three: Evaluating the Author's Techniques

Pre-reading phase: (before you read)

1. Preview the reading, using the steps discussed earlier in class.
2. Connect the reading to your own experience by answering the following questions:
 - a. What were working conditions like at your most recent job?
 - b. How important is it for you to know the source of the food that you eat?

During-reading phase: (When you read)

3. Highlight and annotate as you read.
4. Look up unfamiliar words, using the strategies discussed earlier in class.

Sweatshops at Sea

Virginia Sole-Smith

1 It was a little after eight in the evening, and the sun was just beginning to set over the Gulf of California. Our small motorboat, known here in Santa Rosalia, Mexico, as a panga, sped out over the shimmering water. The breezy sea air felt good and clean after the heat of the day, and soon Delmar, the 26-year-old squid fisherman who had agreed to take us out for his night's work, was cracking open cans of Tecate¹. When we reached Delmar's fishing spot, he cut the engine and flipped on a tiny lightbulb duct-taped to a pole on the middle bench of the panga. Floating all around us were dozens of other pangas, and as night fell, the dots of light twinkled like a hundred fallen stars. It was beautiful and peaceful. Then we began to fish.

2 Delmar unraveled a glow-in-the-dark plastic tube fitted with sharp metal hooks that was attached to a thousand feet of clear fishing line. He tossed it overboard, wrapping the other end around a piece of scrap wood. When the line went tight after a few minutes, he began to pull, bare hand over bare hand, hauling the line back up through hundreds of feet of water. Seconds later, a 40-pound Humboldt squid

¹ a brand of Mexican beer

splashed up from the depths with an enormous spray of salt water and sticky black ink. From tentacles to tail, it was almost as long as the panga was wide.

3 In one fluid movement, Delmar yanked the squid out of the water, slapped it down, grabbed a rusty machete², and chopped off its head. Four hours later, the piles of red squid bodies and heads had grown so large that we had to balance with our feet braced awkwardly against the slick benches. When we had to move around the boat, we'd slip on spare eyeballs and black slime, and occasionally a spastic tentacle would wrap itself around the odd ankle. To make matters even worse, there were no life vests, radios, or emergency lights on board Delmar's panga.

4 It's no wonder that, every season, at least two or three fishermen like Delmar die at sea. The unsafe, grotesque working conditions on the water are just one of the many problems facing the working people of Santa Rosalia, a town of around 10,000 that is located in Baja California Sur. There are no spring break parties here. The dirty waterfront is devoted to three squid factories and the panga docks, because fishing the millions of Humboldt squid swimming in 25 square miles of Santa Rosalia's waters is the only game in town.

5 The squid processing plants—Korean-owned Brumar de San Bruno, Korean-owned Hanjin Mexico, and Chinese-owned Pesquera de Longing, SA—buy each day's catch from middlemen who have frozen the price the fishermen receive for their squid at just two pesos per kilo. That means most consider a \$50 paycheck for a 10-hour fishing trip to be a good night. And it is, at least when you compare those wages to what the fishermen's wives, mothers, and daughters make working in the plants themselves, which—far from the federal labor offices in Mexico City—operate Wild West style.

6 Rosa Cesena Ramirez began working in the Hanjin Mexico factory in 1994. She never knew when a shift was going to start or how long it would last. "You can either drink coffee for hours to stay awake, or sleep on the factory floor like an animal," Rosa explains. "Once the squid arrives, we have to work until it's all processed, even if it takes until the next afternoon. Then we go home for a few hours to sleep and see our kids, and have to come right back that evening."

² a large, heavy knife

7 The breaking point for Rosa came in November 2002, when Hanjin Mexico allegedly failed to pay its workers a federally mandated annual bonus and shortchanged their weekly paychecks. Rosa gathered signatures and filed a complaint with the Santa Rosalia labor office. Rosa says Hanjin Mexico responded by firing her and more than 90 workers. Eight years later, the former Hanjin Mexico workers are still waiting for the labor office to resolve their dispute, and conditions at all three Santa Rosalia factories have worsened.

8 At the neighboring Pesquera de Longing, workers report that only two toilets are available for more than 80 workers. Conditions at Brumer de San Bruno are no better. Most of the workers are migrant laborers who come from other Mexican states and live at the plant in a long, barracks-style dorm. “There are six of us sleeping in one room and whenever it’s time to go back to work, the Koreans just open the door and yell, ‘Let’s go,’” worker Sonia Sanchez says. “They don’t care if you’re undressed or sleeping. We’re treated like slaves.”

9 The owners of the Santa Rosalia factories vehemently deny all of their workers’ complaints, which is why Enlace International, a coalition of unions and worker centers in Mexico and the United States, is now approaching year eight of a campaign to create better working conditions for Santa Rosalia’s labor force. “There will never be any enforcement of the labor laws in Mexico because this is a country with \$212 billion in foreign debts,” says Garr: Evaluatingett Brown, coordinator of the Maquiladora Health and Safety Support Network. “If Americans want to help these workers, getting our government and banks to forgive Mexico’s debt would be a big first step.”

10 Another big step would be to tighten U.S. regulation of imported seafood. According to U.S. Department of Agriculture data, imports of processed squid from China totaled more than 1.1 million pounds in 2009 (along with 120 million pounds of unprocessed squid). But figuring out which U.S. retailers to hold accountable for the dire conditions in Santa Rosalia is all but impossible. “Seafood is often shipped from port to port before it reaches the United States, and it can be relabeled upon entry and exit, so we have no way of telling where it originally came from,” explains Patrick Woodall of Food and Water Watch, a nonprofit consumer advocacy organization in Washington, D.C. “Companies can catch squid in Mexico, then ship it back to China for processing so they can take advantage of even

cheaper labor markets and lower food safety regulations, then send it back to the United States. ... There's just no way to trace it all."

11 Meanwhile Rosa balances her day job at a local supermarket with raising funds for the local union. She holds meetings for interested workers in the playground of the local school and writes letters to government officials. The process is slow, and more workers suffer every day. But Rosa is not deterred. "We know that one day it will be our daughters working in those factories," she says. "One part of my heart is sad for all the bad things that have happened. But the other part of my heart is happy because I know we are supporting one another."

