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Special Issue
In Memory of
César Chávez
1927-1993
Guest Editors: José A. Carrasco and Randall C. Jiménez

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Remembering Speechlessly
... a Warrior’s Journey

Jose A. Carrasco

The call from Channel 11 caught me by surprise;
You had fallen asleep in Arizona, resting ... they said,
you did not awaken to the gallo’s call.
Danny said you passed peacefully
without announcement, fanfare ... wealth.
Son, husband, father, brother, friend
Warrior of our time ... a simple man
accomplishing eternity without scorn, without guilt.
You moved the world to challenge beyond its ranked illusion,
to see the costs of deprivation and complacency
underscoring the loss of human dignity.
Who would have thought so much security
Entombed in the stature of a man who was not my father.
Sitting in the comfort of my office, dazed
surrounded by books of other people’s tales and experiences,
interpretations, myths distilled of modern appetites ...
Students milled endeavoring to seek ambitious paths
like the rest of us, wannabes, yet to brave life’s tribulations.
You are in those books ....
My first thought after hanging up the telephone.

Recollections enveloped in a deluge of memories.
Moments embalmed in pregnant silence
release their pensive hold, while,
heaving up their chronicles
decades issue forth venerable mementos;
Transfixed, I reminisce about us standing, praying amidst the vineyards
in 1966
lined in unison along the country road at Sierra Vista
awaiting, witnessing in vigilance . . . as
Di Giorgio's priests herded human stock into the old railroad depot.
I see a replay of men and women . . . like my parents
reaching deep within themselves to extract the courage of human
conviction;
momentarily casting off the manacles of fear . . . of deprivation,
they break rank from others frozen in position
. . . others being corralled into the make-shift polling place
where they would mark, without voice, without heart, malice,
a ballot for the teamsters, by the teamsters . . . for Di Giorgio.
Scurrying under the lined busses, the hauling trucks, the trailers,
the pilgrims scrambled to join fellow pickets along the roadside
while, mechanically, sheriffs and highway patrolmen
measured center-road to property-line . . . arresting hopes
which dared extend beyond the borders of acceptability.

We came to Del Rey . . .
seeking, in frustration, deeds to cherished phrases.
From the great Councils of ministry,
from the scattered bastions of youthful optimism,
from the roots of ingrained memory, with tears of revelation
we came seeking sight in the valley of creation.
Doña Marina's children, precursing Wobblie souls, and after,
would find in unison the wrath of social conscience swayed
as endless streams of violent peace and deportation
furrowed mindful memories of democracy in action,
events beyond the magnitude of measured comfort.
Names insignificant to the minds of stagnant scholars
would be destined to the graveyards of obscurity,
save, as fodder for up-start fellows in quest of scholarly pursuit;
but yours would be an elegant feat, worthy of heroic measure . . .
the disciples of deception, proud, would wither in revelation.

Shenely's concession brought home a new reality.
For AWOC and Itlong, the contract was a fleeting burst of glory,
for farm workers everywhere, of every shade, a ray of hope;
for Cesar Chavez, Shenely was a catapult into history . . . a baptism of
fire.
Not so for growers long protected by perception's truth;
awakened from their righteous berth on high
they wavered briefly in the fermentation of traditional pride
then clamored to lull a nation back to sleep.
Meanwhile the curators of dead scrolls regrouped to mend
the contradictions to confounded shrines of human spoil; where faith, embellished in current lore, spawned forth sophists who, addicted to an opium of despair, lent credence to Moloch’s persuasion, while drawing from the mouths of children the comforts of hope, spirit, and the American dream. Like Achilles, bequeathed the quest of lifeless glory yours would be a legacy of human inspiration, a muse to the spirit of a languished people; whispering a forgotten language to forgotten minds, and in moments of despair . . . a lost-lanes end.

Rewards for our efforts were made visible when we learned that the first Di Giorgio election was nullified, Governor Brown had acted! What great relief, joy and anxiety, each combining with the other while the taste of victory became brackish, diluted in realization . . . distorted by what was yet to come. The next battle would require far greater stamina! For those who stood in witness, in solidarity . . . an end was possible; we would simply drive off to reclaim options put on hold to “do our thing.” Not so for the families who housed us; Men and women who, regardless of outcome, would awaken and retire each day knowing that the intolerance . . . the anger, prejudice and fear, nurtured by umbilicals of fashioned imagery . . . would be bourne by them and theirs. As parents, they would carry the burden of pride, be denied work, harbor the pain of rejection, and absorb the violent anguish of Coventry. While, armed only with Quixotic pride and valor (proverbial sword of human dignity) their children would inherit, through circumstance, defense of a parent’s honor . . . a people’s struggle.

Ever so little time for rest . . . for laughter. Whether after a ten-hour day in the fields, or, for those branded with the scarlet letter “H” . . . huelgistas manning the front lines of battle; there was seldom time for interaction with family or friends. But the artist’s genius would prove supreme! as rest and respite flowed like manna to tired people. My mind recalls the great hall in the midst of nowhere and a replay of El Teatro, before it was, unfolds:
Cantu, the Chicano Charlie Chaplin,
as farmworker . . . made in the U.S.A.
Seemingly intimidated by the presence of his jefe, the grower,
played by Luis or Lira displaying the Guemmara cigar;
With legs and body trembling . . .
as the antagonist becomes engrossed in self-importance,
Cantu, lifting the visible “farmworker” sign hung around his neck,
reveals the hidden message beneath
that silently screamed out . . . HUELGA ! ! !
Filled with exhausted men and women
the hall bursts with exhilaration, laughter and relief.
The five-minute skit, with stark reality
had captured familiar pains, fears, and courage in a single stroke.
It was there, in the academe of Forty Acres,
I came to appreciate the ancient bard . . .
It was there . . . in the humor of human tragedy,
I understood the meaning of catharsis . . .
in awe, the cleansing of a simple tear.
Life’s script had played out on the edge
unbound by the margins of institutional truth.
I sat remembering, transfixed on faces in the crowd
as they awaited their hero’s familiar response of defiance . . .

As always, you were there.
Whether in prayer, battle, or business . . . you were there
meeting, relaxing, laughing, momentarily relieved of burden
yet ever vigil, eyes ever flashing . . . alive.
You alone, in the labyrinth of your solitude,
could awaken insipid dreams which families shared with painful courage;
dreams long numbed by social truth, by ritual’s metered fantasy.
For them, risk was renewed vulnerability to the scars of reprisal;
the loss of heaven’s self-imposed asylum in a heartless world
where pain and disappointment are seldom strangers,
and dreams no longer linger to distract from survival.
A place where hope . . .
harnessed to the dinner table . . . to a coyote’s favor,
is gnawed upon incessantly by hunger.

Like movie reels, the Movement unravels . . .
events succumb to names and faces.
Returning to Earlimart, Delano!
small stucco homes that sheltered us in ’66 reappear.
Photographs of smiling youth, attired in hues of patriotic fire,
many willingly sacrificed in Europe, Korea, Vietnam,
adorned revealing walls in proud display... while their families struggled on a forgotten home-front.
Up at 4:00 am, parents prepared each day making coffee, tortillas, breakfast; waking kids, loading trucks, etc, etc.
Each day the same... save Sunday when a half-day off provided time for other work and worry.

A surreal image: recollections bringing back childhood memories.
... Tortillas baking on the placa in the early morning, the sound of burning wood crackling in the stove!
I'm awakened at 5:00 am to eat and prepare for work. The aroma of refried beans and fresh tortillas, only, compel me to awaken...
Each day my inclination was to roll on over, pretend that I didn't hear; to feign illness... remain sleeping in hope of eventually awakening from the nightmare of poverty: less poor, less hungry, less tired... having a place with electricity, a bathroom! a home of our own...
But, like Sisyphus, I awoke each day just to begin anew: we returned from the fields each night, numb, exhausted, sore from the stooping, bending and kneeling in the open sun; tired of looking for a spot to relieve ourselves without embarrassment; Feeling emptied by the violent loss of pride, of living in fantasy, too tired... too weary to eat, to play... to be a child. Yet, each of us would learn, in time, things happen, the sun would rise beyond the gates of Eden; the sal si puedes of despair would become battle grounds for minds and spirits; Basta! things would happen with deliberateness.

What strange engulfing power, beyond the right of human dignity to seek out justice, drove you to enthuse and guide the dormant spirit? A spirit long considered beyond resuscitation.
Behold, even the great, humbled in your presence, you were not cast to carry the beacon of other’s pride for you, the journey was a walk in unison...
So powerful the march as to move the Roman temple to search its heart; to take note of what is, was, and what should be in a world that is yet to come. Your spirit issued forth a Pentecost in a dark world to reignite the embers in a people's wounded soul.
The march goes on...
across the divisions of sacred boundaries.
Released from the sanctuary of our despair,
embracing your brilliance in her smile,
La Morena . . . Guadalupe . . . the tireless Dolores,
sets the pace for new life journeys;
without beginnings, ends, unwearied without complaint.
Her solicitous embrace is freed from the colonial cell of history!
Freed, finally, from her Aztec sleep,
too long shrouded in Solomonic vestibules;
the brown madonna, ever vigilant, unfailing
casts light beyond your shepherd’s path
as peregrinos continue the warrior’s journey.
Across the valleys, boulevards, highways
Across the corridors of sanitized democracy,
the march goes on...
The Azteca eagle flies, alone . . . in solidarity,
a ray of hope for wanderers, lost
amidst the great divides of American pageantry
. . . in search of the great forgotten language.
César Chávez was a farm worker, and leader of farm workers, and it seems right that his funeral took place in Keene, California, the heart of our state's farm region. But it is also appropriate that a memorial for him take place in a university. And, it is fitting that a professor of speech communication, like myself, might be part of a memorial to Chávez.

The university is a center for teaching and learning spoken and written persuasion, or public address, and the study of it. I believe that these two topics interlock in ways central to Chávez’s life. For a few moments I’d like to look at Chávez from the point of view of a teacher and student of rhetoric, of persuasion, of words.

César Chávez grew up the child of farmers who lost their ranch near Yuma, Arizona, during the Great Depression of the 1930s, and became migrant workers—and young César too became a crop-picker. Here he learned first-hand of the injustices to farm workers, of the wretched aspects of their life, of their suffering. From his family he also learned and believed the Christian doctrines taught by the Roman Catholic Church: that Christ loves the poor and hates injustice, that the Church must stand up for and care for the oppressed, and that a supernatural God loves us all and can control human events. From this beginning he took his religious views, his love of family, his hatred of the injustices done to farm workers.

In the 1940s César moved to San José and for a time worked in various jobs. Soon he met Father Donald McDonnell, a Catholic priest who influenced him to dedicate himself to fighting for legal and social rights for the poor, especially for farm workers. After he discovered that churchmen, for all their wonderful ideals, did not understand how to organize underprivileged people into effective pressure groups, he joined the Community Services Organization. Operating on the assumption that American institutions would respond to pressure, the CSO concentrated on
organizing poor and working-class Mexican Americans to obtain their rights. It would be a perfect training ground for Chávez to develop his rhetorical skills.

For ten years in the 1950s and early 1960s Chávez worked for the CSO as an organizer; and organizers, he soon discovered, must talk to people, must convince them to join with others to seek their rights. But Chávez was by nature a quiet and modest man. At first he was very awkward and nervous when speaking to groups. Yet he also realized that persuasive public address was essential in organizing. He began speaking frequently at homes and in other places, often agonizing over his words. By his own description, here is what happened after his speeches: “I often lay awake at night, going over the whole thing, playing the tape back, trying to see why people laugh at one point, or why they are for one thing and against another.” He also learned that clear and concrete examples and illustrations are more effective than philosophizing. As he said: “You have to draw a simple picture and color it in.”

César Chávez was mastering the art of spoken persuasion; it was on-the-job training. He would soon need all of his rhetorical skills.

In the spring of 1962 the thirty-five-year-old Chávez moved to Delano, to begin organizing farm laborers into an effective union. Few people believed he would succeed. California farm workers had typically been illiterate, penniless, and migratory; and growers had easily broken all unions since the first one in 1903. Moreover, Chávez initially lacked co-workers, personal wealth, and political power. He appeared to be no match for California agribusiness.

To even the odds a bit, Chávez launched an intensive rhetorical campaign. It was to last his lifetime. During his first eleven months in Delano he worked in the fields all day and then drove to farm workers’ camps and homes almost every night, attending hundreds of house meetings while canvassing for members in eighty-seven communities within a hundred-mile radius.

His talking and efforts at organizing quickly produced results. By 1965 he had established a union with more than two thousand dues-paying members. His union soon offered precedent-setting services, such as a credit union, health clinics, and old age benefits. By 1972, the United Farm Workers passed thirty thousand in membership and was affiliated with the powerful AFL-CIO. The UFW’s victories would include agreements regarding growers use of pesticides; contracts with many major wineries and other growers; and the nation’s first collective-bargaining legislation for farm workers.

Although Chávez suffered many setbacks—his problems with the rival Teamsters’ Union; boycotts that failed; political winds which shifted against him—he never lost his deep faith in words. He continued to speak and write extensively, and to engage in other dramatic symbolic events
which captured public attention: strikes, marches, fasts, pilgrimages, boycotts—all of which established his reputation as a charismatic leader and the most persuasive union spokesperson in a generation, and won his UFW union support from many prominent political figures and organizations. His audiences expanded far past the homes of farm workers in and around Delano, and by the early 1970s included congressional committees, college students, political gatherings, viewers of television, and even Pope Paul VI. By then his written message was carried in national newsmagazines through his interviews.

César Chávez’ persistence, which had typified his initial campaign in Delano, always remained a striking feature of his career. During a lengthy speaking tour in 1965, for example, he addressed a college audience which had members who threw eggs and tomatoes at him. Although he was nearly exhausted on this tour, a weary Chávez scarcely seemed to notice the flying food and continued calmly to present his case—and the audience applauded him for his apparent coolness. In 1969 he made a three-month speaking tour of some ninety cities in the US and Canada. That’s an average of a speech each day, for three months. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s he continued to make intermittent speaking tours.

Why did Chávez have so much faith in words? Why did he say what he said, and in the way he said it? And what accounts for his effectiveness as a speaker? I believe that a key to answering these questions, and thus a vital element in any understanding of his success and influence as a leader, lies in his interconnected views of God, reform, public address, and contemporary history.

Chávez believed in God, and believed that God had a plan for the world. But it was not just any plan. It was a millennial plan, a plan to improve conditions, to end injustice. Thus he told audiences that the protests and reforms of the turbulent 1960s were evidence that the poor were on the march in a revolution to change the nation. To him, the UFW was a unique union, because it represented the poor and downtrodden who were part of the revolutionary movement to change social conditions. And because history was moving toward this millennial future, history was on the side of farm workers. As he said as the 1960s ended: “People are not going to turn back now. The poor are on the march: black, brown, red, everyone, whites included. We are in the midst of the biggest revolution this country has ever known.” Or, to another audience: “Our cause is just, history is a story of social revolution, and the poor shall inherit the land. We will win, we are winning, because ours is a revolution of mind and heart, not only of economics.”

Thus Chávez saw his goals as divinely sanctioned. But he also believed that success required human agents. God used human spokespersons to spread the facts and arguments and explanations to a public which, when properly informed, would inevitably end injustices. If
he presented his case clearly and with ample facts and thoughtful arguments, then listeners and readers would inevitably recognize its truthfulness and respond to his persuasive appeals.

So César Chávez was a very different kind of labor leader. His conviction that God guided him and other human agents led him to select a characteristic content and form for his major speeches and also explains how he spoke and worded those speeches—and why he was so persistent. His ideology shaped his rhetoric.

What did his formal speeches look like? Well, they were very clearly organized, with many transitions, previews, other clarifying devices, all to make sure the message was easily understood. They bulged with evidence—statistics, examples, quotations—to support his well developed arguments which demonstrated the legal, economic, and social justice of the farm workers’ cause. He spoke calmly, gently and quietly at times, unusual for a militant and charismatic leader; and he worded his ideas clearly, sometimes with painstaking efforts to be sure he was understandable—often employing repetition and restatement to make sure points were clear.

The picture or image audiences received of him, or what we in rhetorical studies call his persona, was created both by Chávez’s conscious design in his speeches and writings and by providence through his life and appearance. Audiences saw a modest man who avoided taking any personal credit for his accomplishments, who sought to place all attention on his ideas and evidence and none on himself.

These and other of Chávez’s rhetorical qualities reflected his unshakable trust that his facts and arguments would be persuasive, because God’s plan would bring certain success if only he informed the public. It was as if the truth would speak for itself; he only needed to present it.

Of course, as a skilled and sensitive communicator, he also adapted his ideas to particular audiences. Thus he employed dichos and anecdotes, and formality, especially early in his speeches, all qualities common to Mexican and Mexican American public address and presumably expected by many of his listeners.

If we look at it broadly, Chávez combined his thought and character in his discourse. The man, his ideology, and his persuasion all merged. For students of discourse, this merger helps to explain his rhetorical power. He achieved a double-barreled identification with his listeners in a way which a rhetorical theory developed by Frederick Antczak says can reformulate audiences, can allow them to discover latent qualities in themselves and carry out acts they otherwise would not undertake.

César Chávez, then, was a teacher of truth as well as a labor organizer and union activist. His belief in God’s plan for the world led him to his distinctive rhetorical profile, a profile which audiences found appealing and persuasive; and his unusual interpretation of the role of rhetorical discourse motivated him to persuade incessantly, whatever the
odds—to speak, write, fast, lead pilgrimages, and engage in other rhetorical actions.

Thus the man, his words, and his teaching all come together. Because he was at his base a teacher of truth, it’s fitting that we memorialize him in this university, and that we examine what he said. Now he is no longer among us, and I certainly lack the words to capture our loss. But his own words cannot be unsaid, and their influence cannot be undone—they remain in all of us. I only hope, and, like Chávez, I pray to God, that others will duplicate his commitment to speak the truth incessantly, to carry forth the cause of justice. If such leaders continue this tradition of speaking and writing, this war of words, we will all be better for it—and I can think of no better way to honor the legacy of César Chávez.

Notes

1 This eulogy was delivered at a memorial ceremony honoring the life of César Chávez, at California State University, Hayward, California, May 10, 1993.
César Chávez: A Life of Courage, Struggle, and Commitment

Life, willing to surpass itself, is the good life, and the good life is the courageous life. It is the life of the "powerful soul" and the "triumphant body" whose self-empowerment is virtue.
—Paul Tillich

Richard Griswold del Castillo and Richard Garcia

César Chávez rose from humble beginnings as a migrant farm worker to become the founder of a farm worker union that focused world attention on the plight of America’s most oppressed group of workers. César Chávez established the United Farm Workers Union in California in 1965 and, after five years of bitter strife, in 1970, he succeeded in gaining union recognition and labor contracts from grape growers in the San Joaquin Valley. He became the best known Mexican American labor or reform leader of his generation, gathering support from organized labor, Protestant and Catholic churches, progressive intellectuals and students, and international labor organizations. His union went on to improve wages and working conditions for all farm workers by setting industry standards. Chávez’s struggle to force agribusiness to recognize the basic rights of farm workers continued throughout his life. He remains an inspiring example of a leader who aroused America’s conscience regarding the poor in our society.

The Early Years

César Estrada Chávez was born on March 31, 1927, in Yuma, Arizona, the child of Mexican-born parents, Librado and Juana Estrada, who had settled on a small farm. He grew up, with his four brothers and sisters, nourished by the values of his family and the rural Mexican
community. From his mother he learned the importance of non-violence and self-sacrifice and his grandmother impressed on him the values of the Catholic faith. As a youth he had experience with racial discrimination in school and he absorbed from the Mexican community the folklore of their struggle against oppression in Mexico during the revolution. In 1939, because of the depression, the Chávez family lost their farm and they had to join the migrant stream flowing west into California. For the next few years they traveled up and down the state following the crops.

For the next ten years, the Chávez family worked as migrants, moving from farm to farm up and down California and taking odd jobs to supplement their income when there was no farm work. It was during this period César encountered the conditions that he would dedicate the rest of his life to changing: wretched migrant camps, corrupt labor contractors, meager wages for back-breaking work, bitter racism.

In 1942 César’s father was involved in a car accident and was unable to work for a month. It was then that César decided to quit school (he had completed the eighth grade) and work full time in the fields with his brothers and sisters to help support the family. Chávez’s migrant period introduced him to labor organizing. While moving from crop to crop, his father had joined several unions, the Tobacco Workers, the Cannery Workers, the National Farm Labor Union (NFLU), the Packing House Workers and the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC). Family members participated in many strikes during the late 1930s and 1940s and were quite active in union activities, although none served in a leadership capacity.

César joined the navy in 1944, along with thousands of other Mexican Americans, and like them he discovered a wider world. He went to San Diego for boot camp and discovered that Mexicans were not the only ones discriminated against because of their nationality or language. Sent to the South Pacific he served as a coxswain’s apprentice in Saipan and Guam, assisting in ferrying ship pilots in and out of the harbor.

When César got out of the navy in 1946 he returned to the family home in Delano, a small town in the San Joaquin Valley, and resumed work in the fields. On October 22, 1948, César married Helen Fabela, whom he had first met occasionally when his family had been passing through Delano following the crops. She had been born in Brawley in 1928 of Mexican campesino parents. Her family, like César’s, had become migrant workers during the 30s and 40s. She became an important partner with César as he began to fulfill his dream of doing something to improve the lot of the farm workers. The Chávez’s eventually settled in San José and began raising a family of eight children while César worked for a lumber company.
César’s introduction to community organizing began in 1952 when he met Fr. Donald McDonnell, a Catholic priest who was trying to build a parish in the San José barrio of Sal Si Puedes. From Fr. McDonnell he learned the Church’s social doctrines on labor organizing and social justice, and he read the Life of Gandhi, a book that made a deep impression on the young Chávez. Mahatma Gandhi’s values struck a responsive chord: the complete sacrifice of oneself for others, the severe self-discipline and self-abnegation to achieve a higher good. These values Mexican farm workers could understand, not only in religious terms but in their own daily experience. Especially important to Chávez’s moral development was Gandhi’s teaching on non-violence which echoed his mother’s admonitions and teachings. The philosophy of non-violence later would become the hallmark of Chávez’s leadership of the farm worker movement.

Another organizer who was at work in the Sal Si Puedes barrio in San José also changed young Chávez’s life. In 1952 Fred Ross had been sent as an organizer for Saul Alinsky’s Community Service Organization. After he met Ross, Chávez was genuinely impressed by his sincerity and his message. Ross talked about local concerns as well as the CSO’s advocacy of Mexican rights in police brutality cases. The night they met, Fred Ross wrote in his diary, “I think I’ve found the guy I’m looking for.” Chávez recalled, “My suspicions were erased. As time went on, Fred became sort of my hero. I saw him organize, and I wanted to learn” (Levy 99, 102).

Soon Chávez was working full time for the CSO and in it he learned an important lesson that was to be the foundation of his organizing style: helping people and expecting their help in return was a way to build a strong organization. César worked in many of the small towns of the San Joaquin Valley and eventually rose to be the executive director of the CSO in California. While working for this organization he recruited Dolores Huerta, Antonio Orendain, and Gil Padilla, some of his first lieutenants in founding the UFW. As the CSO executive director in Los Angeles, Chávez met and worked with the early founders of the Mexican American Political Association (MAPA), Eduardo Quevedo and Bert Corona. They had founded a political association in 1959 to advance the Chicano community’s political interests in the state. The CSO, MAPA and the Viva Kennedy Clubs in the early 60s became important training grounds for young Mexican Americans who were beginning self-consciously to call themselves “Chicanos,” a slang term that for decades had been used by natives to denigrate newly arrived Mexican immigrants.

In 1962 the CSO had its annual convention where Chávez proposed that the CSO support a union movement for farm workers. The board refused to support his project, arguing that the CSO was a civil rights, not a labor organization. So Chávez decided to resign and devote himself to building an independent farm workers’ union. Soon after his resignation,
AWOC, an AFL-CIO farm union organization, offered him a job as a paid organizer, but he turned it down because he wanted to be able to work with "no strings attached." In 1962 the Chávez family moved back to Delano. For the next three years César slowly built up membership in the Farm Workers Association. Using his CSO training, Chávez emphasized the service aspect of his organization. He traveled extensively, talking to the workers to see what they thought about a union and the services it should provide. He went out into the fields and into the camps and colonias where he passed out more than questionnaires that people could fill out and mail in. He talked personally to thousands of workers.

Prior to César Chávez's full-time commitment to farm labor organizing there had been a long history of struggle in the fields. One of the earliest agricultural unions, organized by Mexicans in California, was the Imperial Valley Worker's Union (La Unión de Trabajadores del Valle Imperial). In 1928, with more than 2,700 members, the union went out on strike attempting to increase the piece rate for cantaloupe picking, reform the labor contractor system, and get accident insurance for workers. The growers tried to end the strike by getting court orders against picketing, organizing armed vigilante groups, using the police to make mass arrests, and red-baiting the union leadership with hysterical media accounts. Within a year the growers defeated the union. In the process they established a pattern for handling future farm labor strikes that would last well into the 1970s.

Despite this early setback, California became a focus for labor organizing activity in the 1930s. In 1933, for instance, 5,000 Mexican berry pickers in El Monte organized a union, the Confederación de Uniones de Campesinos y Obreros Mexicanos (CUCOM), which went on strike to raise hourly pay for pickers. Strikers were joined by a more militant, communist-led labor union that included some Mexican organizers, the Cannery and Agricultural Workers' Industrial Union (C&AWIU), with 7,000 workers. Because the growers were Japanese farmers who feared a nativist backlash, the Mexican union won its wage demands.

The C&AWIU moved on to organize cotton workers in the San Joaquin Valley. The result was a prolonged and violent cotton strike in 1933. In that strike 12,000 cotton pickers, 75 percent of whom were Mexican, confronted the powerful San Joaquin Valley Agricultural Labor Bureau representing the cotton growers. Events followed a familiar pattern: evictions, court orders, arrests, and violence. The growers hired goons and strike breakers who surrounded union meetings at the towns of Pixley and Arvin and killed three farm workers. During the strike, hospitals refused to admit wounded and sick striking farm workers and their families. People starved because there were no relief or charity funds available, and eventually nine infants died of malnutrition. When the violence and
suffering could no longer be ignored, state and federal officials intervened to negotiate a compromise settlement. The strike ended.

Throughout the 1930s, hundreds of agricultural strikes occurred. Many were spontaneous walkouts in protest over the numerous injustices. During the post war years the AFL organized the National Farm Labor Union (NFLU). Led by Hank Hasiwar and Ernesto Galarza, the union launched a number of strikes throughout California. Along with several thousand Mexican workers, the Chávez family participated in a cotton strike the union organized in 1948. A few months earlier the union had begun a strike against the DiGiorgio Corporation, a family-run corporation and one of the largest fruit growers in the United States. The struggle against the DiGiorgios lasted two and a half years, until it was broken by the use of a government injunction under the Taft-Hartley Act, the recruitment of braceros as strike breakers, and red baiting by the California Senate Committee on Un-American Activities.

This was the previous history of farm labor organizing that Chávez sought to reverse during the 1960s. His Farm Workers Association grew, nourished by personal sacrifice and dogged commitment. The Chávez family frequently had to go without food and clothing to pay for union expenses. He felt that the union would be stronger if, in its early years, it relied only on its membership for financial support. César was the only farm-worker union official in the nation whose salary came 100 percent from the farm workers themselves. In 1962 they held their first convention with 150 delegates at which they adopted the distinctive union flag, the black eagle on a red field. By August, 1965, César’s faith in the union was beginning to be rewarded. They had 1000 dues paying members and more than 50 locals.

The Grape Strike and Boycott

After a series of small strikes that won concessions for agricultural workers in McFarland and Porterville, the UFW had its baptism by fire. They had been asked to join the Filipino grape workers who were on strike for higher wages. After an emotional meeting, on September 15, 1965, on Mexican Independence Day, the members voted to join them. They needed little convincing; the members seemed spontaneously to join a struggle that they had long considered their own.

The Delano grape strike was the largest in the history of California. The region covered a 400 square mile area and involved thousands of workers. The job of organizing picket lines to patrol the fields fell to inexperienced farm workers and urban volunteers who worked side by side. The sheer dimensions of the ranches and farms made it impossible constantly to maintain pickets at all the entrances. Inevitably scab workers (called esquiroles) found their way into the fields and the union had to find a way of convincing them to come out and join the strike. The picket line
then became a noisy place. The picketers cajoled, argued, pleaded, orated, shamed the scabs in Spanish, Tagalog and English, trying to get them to join the strike. Picketers walked the dusty borders of the fields holding hand-painted signs, with "Huelga," "Delano Grape Striker," or "Victoria!" accompanied by the NFWA black eagle.

Whatever its practical effect, Chávez saw the picket line as an educational and recruiting experience. It was the place where you could feel the confrontation between the worker and the grower. It became a way of building a strong membership. He would later say, "The picket line is where a man makes his commitment, and it is irrevocable; the longer he's on the picket line, the stronger the commitment . . . the picket line is a beautiful thing, because it does something to a human being" (Taylor 136).

From the beginning of the strike, Chávez had emphasized the importance of non-violence as a strategy. He exhorted the volunteers and picketers: "If someone commits violence against us, it is much better—if we can—not to react against the violence but to react in such a way as to get closer to our goal. People don't like to see a non-violent movement subjected to violence, and there's a lot of support across the country for nonviolence. That's the key point we have going for us. We can turn the world if we can do it non-violently" (Levy 196).

Cesar's main activity during the early months of the strike was to travel around the state to the various college campuses to give speeches to galvanize support for the striking farm workers. The national news media helped in generating support for the strike. Television news crews visited Delano and filmed the drama of the confrontations at the picket line. The NBC special "The Harvest of Shame" depicting the tragic conditions of migrant labor in the United States had begun to make people more aware of the farm workers' plight. Newspaper reporters from the big city newspapers and national magazines traveled to Delano to interview Chávez and other union officials as well as the growers. Chávez spoke about how the farm workers were fighting for their civil rights and economic justice. This fit in with a growing national concern with civil rights.

Publicity became increasingly important when the union decided to launch a boycott to put pressure on the growers to recognize the union and sign contracts. They targeted the most identifiable grape products from the largest Delano growers. When Walter Reuther visited Delano in December, 1965, the grape strike and boycott had become a national news item.

Other dramatic events gave a momentum to the strike and boycott. Three months after Reuther's visit, On March 16, 1966, Chávez organized a march from Delano to Sacramento to dramatize the strike and get the support of the governor, Pat Brown. Chávez marched with the procession as it left Delano. They carried the American and Mexican flags, the NFWA and AWOC banners, and a flag with the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico who had been the banner of rebellion during the
Mexican War of Independence in 1810. The march helped recruit more members and to spread the spirit of the strike. As they passed through each small farming town, hundreds of workers would greet them. Others would join the march to carry the flags to the next town.

Just prior to the end of the pilgrimage the first grower, Schenley, announced that it was willing to sign a contract with the UFW. On April 7 the agreement was made public. In a triumphant mood, the pilgrimage ended a few days later on the steps of the state capitol. They had won their first victory and demonstrated the power of their cause. This was the first time in American history that a grass roots farm labor union had gained recognition by a corporation. (In Hawaii, some years earlier, the Longshoreman’s Union had gotten a contract for pineapple workers)

The other large growers remained. The most important was the DiGiorgio corporation. DiGiorgio also had thousands of acres of pear, plum, apricot, and citrus trees and marketed its products under the S & W Foods and TreeSweet labels. Robert DiGiorgio, the patriarch of the family, was on the board of directors for the Bank of America. The DiGiorgio family had successfully broken strikes and unions since the 1930s. John Steinbeck, in his novel The Grapes of Wrath, had used the DiGiorgios as a model for the grower named “Gregorio.”

Chávez was convinced of the power of the boycott and soon hundreds of volunteers, who remembered the previous struggles against the DiGiorgios, joined the boycott drive. Within a short time the company agreed to enter into negotiations to have an election but Chávez broke off contacts when company guards attacked a picketer at Sierra Vista. When negotiations finally resumed, Chávez discovered that DiGiorgio had invited the Teamsters Union to recruit among vineyard workers. Thus, beginning in mid-1966, the two unions, the Teamsters and the NFWA, began an on-and-off jurisdictional fight that lasted more than ten years, resulting in violence, injury and deaths.

About this time, in order to consolidate its power, the AWOC and the NFWA formally merged to form one united union within the AFL-CIO. There was some debate about the wisdom of this move, but not a single farm worker voted against it. Under the final merger agreement a new organization, called United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (eventually to become the United Farm Workers of America, AFL-CIO) was formed with Chávez as the director. The UFW became a full member of the AFL-CIO and as a result received millions of dollars of emergency aid during the early years of the struggle. This was the first time that a predominantly Mexican union had been incorporated within mainstream organized labor. Over the years the relationship proved to be mutually supportive and the UFW never seemed to be hampered in its independence of action.
From the beginning, César had not thought of “La Causa” as a movement that would be motivated by appeals to race or nationality. When he had worked for the Community Service Organization, César had confronted the issue of Mexican chauvinism and had been uncompromising in fighting for the inclusion of Blacks within the organization. While the primary “core” leadership of the NFWA was Mexican American, the staff, and hundreds of volunteer workers were predominantly non-Latino.

Towards a Victory

During the next four years the UFWOC grew in strength nourished by the support of millions of sympathetic Americans who sacrificed for the farm workers. Hundreds of student volunteers lived on poverty wages in the big cities to organize an international boycott of table grapes. Scores of priests, nuns, ministers, and church members donated time, money, facilities and energies to the farm worker’s cause. Organized labor donated millions of dollars to the UFWOC strike fund. Millions of Americans gave up eating table grapes. All this was inspired by the example of César Chávez, the soft-spoken, humble leader who quietly worked to revolutionize grower-worker relations.

In 1967 the union moved from its cramped offices on Albany Street in Delano to some new buildings on some land they had purchased with the help of private donations and contributions from AFL-CIO affiliates. The new headquarters was located near the city dump on 40 acres of alkali land. Volunteers had built a complex of buildings including a service and administrative center, a medical clinic and a cooperative gas station. It was called “The Forty Acres.” It became the center of the farm workers union movement in California for the next three years until the union moved its headquarters to Keane, a small town just outside of Bakersfield.

On April 1, 1967, the newspapers announced the signing of a union contract between DiGiorgio Fruit Corporation and the UFWOC. The contract contained wage increases for workers and set up a special fund for health and welfare benefits. It provided for unemployment compensation and specified that hiring would be done through the union labor hall. UFWOC strikes continued against other Delano growers and by October seven new wineries had signed contracts with the union.

During one of the strikes against Guimarra Corporation, César began a fast to protest the mounting talk of violence. In characteristic fashion he began the fast without telling anyone. He did not know how long it was going to last. On the fourth day, he decided to hold a meeting of the strikers to announce his intentions. “I told them I thought they were discouraged, because they were talking about short cuts, about violence. They were getting so mad with the growers, they couldn’t be effective anymore” (Levy 273).
After the meeting with the membership, Chávez walked to the Forty Acres. He set up a monastic cell in the storage room of the service station with a small cot and a few religious articles. Soon hundreds of farm-worker families began appearing at the Forty Acres to show their support for Chávez and to attend the daily mass that he attended. A huge tent city with thousands of farm workers sprang up surrounding the gas station. There was a tremendous outpouring of emotion during the masses. Daily, hundreds stood in line to meet and talk to Chávez.

The national media helped make the 1968 fast a major event. As the fast went into its twentieth day letters of support came from congressmen and senators, union and religious leaders. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., sent a telegram supporting César. King would be assassinated a month later. Robert Kennedy, who had not yet decided to campaign for the Democratic nomination for president, also sent a telegram expressing concern for his health. Chávez would not let a doctor examine him because he felt that “Without the element of risk, I would be hypocritical. The whole essence of penance . . . would be taken away” (Levy 285). When Chávez finally decided to end his fast, on the twenty-fifth day, he asked Robert Kennedy to attend. On March 11, they held a mass at a county park with more than 4000 farm workers in attendance along with national reporters from the major papers and television cameras. The mass was said on the back of a flat bed truck. César was too weak to stand and he could not speak but Jim Drake read a message he had written earlier. It was a powerful expression of his spiritual commitment.

Our struggle is not easy. Those who oppose our cause are rich and powerful, and they have many allies in high places. We are poor. Our allies are few. But we have something the rich do not own. We have our own bodies and spirits and the justice of our cause as our weapons.

When we are really honest with ourselves, we must admit that our lives are all that really belong to us. So it is how we use our lives that determines what kind of men we are. It is my deepest belief that only by giving of our lives do we find life.

I am convinced that the truest act of courage, the strongest act of manliness is to sacrifice ourselves for others in a totally nonviolent struggle for justice. To be a man is to suffer for others. God help us to be men! (Levy 286)

Over the years Chávez engaged in many other fasts, each one for a specific purpose. His followers soon learned the depth of his commitment to the principle of non-violence so that to violate that code was to affront
César personally. For the most part his followers remained non-violent because of Chávez's moral authority.

In the late spring of 1969, the grape harvest was about to begin. To rally support for the strike and boycott César decided to organize a march through the heart of the Coachella and Imperial Valleys to the U.S.-Mexican border. One of the primary purposes of the march was to dramatize the growers use of undocumented immigrants from Mexico as strike-breakers. On May 10, 1969, César began the march with an outdoor mass celebrated in a labor camp in Indio. As in the 1966 march to Sacramento, the Coachella pilgrimage was a tremendous organizing tactic. Hundreds of farm workers and supporters joined in the colorful procession. Reverend Ralph Abernathy, the heir of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s movement, joined the march on the eighth day, pledging the support of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Walter Mondale, a liberal senator from Minnesota and a future presidential candidate, joined the march along with famous Hollywood actors and Chicano student activists. The march dramatized the strike to hundreds of Mexican workers who were in the fields as the marchers passed. In the evening masses, speeches and teatros educated them about the issues involved. The march lasted nine days and ended in Calexico, the border town across from Mexicali, Baja California, where Chávez gave a speech calling for Mexican workers to join the strike and support the UFWOC.

By 1969 Chávez had expanded the boycott to include all California table grapes. All over the country volunteers were picketing super markets that sold grapes. Shipments of California table grapes practically stopped to the cities of Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Detroit, Montreal, and Toronto. Grape sales fell while millions of pounds rotted in cold storage sheds. In reaction the growers filed a law suit charging that they had lost more than 25 million dollars since the beginning of the boycott. In desperation they turned to the Teamsters and held meetings to try and work out a contract that would bring peace to the fields. But the Teamsters were leery of entering the fields again, given their previous experience in which the growers had reneged on a sweetheart deal when the pressure became too great.

Despite the support of the Department of Defense for grape purchases, the boycott pressures began to be unbearable and gradually, in the late spring of 1969, some influential growers in the Coachella Valley came to the negotiating table and signed contracts with the UFW. By June 1970, the majority of table-grape growers who were still resisting unionization were in the Delano area. Finally, through the intermediaries of a committee organized by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, twenty three companies including Guimarra Corporation agreed to begin negotiations to recognize the UFW.
On July 29, 1970, twenty-six Delano growers filed into Reuther Hall on Forty Acres to sign contracts formally. César gave a short speech recalling the sacrifices that so many had made to make this moment possible and they signed the historic agreement. The contract raised the workers’ wages to $1.80 per hour. In addition the growers would donate ten cents an hour to the Robert Kennedy Health and Welfare Fund. The contract provided for all hiring to be through the union hiring hall and for the protection of workers from certain pesticides. The victory in Delano now meant that almost eighty-five percent of all table-grape growers in California were under a union contract. This was victory without precedent in the history of American agriculture. Never before in history had an agricultural workers union managed such a sweeping success.

The Lettuce Strike and the Teamsters

Soon, however, there were indications that the farm workers were facing another formidable challenge, this time from the Teamsters and growers in the Salinas Valley, who were conspiring to undercut the UFW’s newly won recognition.

The Teamsters organization had several times before threatened to expand their operations to organize field workers. In 1970 the Teamsters and the UFW were both members of the AFL-CIO so this announcement by the Teamsters amounted to a raid on the UFW’s jurisdiction. The Teamsters had signed sweetheart contracts giving the vegetable growers almost all that they wanted while sacrificing workers’ benefits. There was plenty of evidence of collusion. The Teamsters had signed the contracts without even negotiating wage rates for the workers.

Quickly Chávez moved to counter. He and the rest of the staff moved the headquarters of the union to Salinas and began organizing a strike. He traveled to the AFL-CIO convention in Chicago and attempted, with no success, to get the national organization to condemn publicly the Teamsters. Throughout the month of August, César worked to keep the pressure on the growers with Teamster contracts by selective picketing of the largest corporations. About 170 vegetable growers stubbornly refused to switch from the Teamsters to the UFW. This led Chávez to call for a general strike.

During this struggle with the Teamsters, César led the union fight against a farm-labor law passed by the Arizona legislature and signed by the governor, outlawing boycotts and limited strikes, much as the Nixon administration had advocated. To raise people’s awareness over the necessity of repealing the law and recalling the governor who had signed it, César began a fast. For twenty-four days César fasted and directed the recall campaign from a small room in Saint Rita’s Center in a Mexican barrio of Phoenix.
That fall the California growers tried to pass similar legislation, to hamstring the farm-labor movement. They sponsored Proposition 22, an initiative that would outlaw boycotting and limit secret-ballot elections to full time non-seasonal employees. In California, Chávez followed the strategy used in Arizona of getting citizens registered to vote as well as informing them about Prop 22’s threat to workers. During the fall the “No on 22” campaign gathered momentum through the use of human billboards. On November 7, 1972, Proposition 22 was soundly rejected by fifty-eight percent of the voters. The UFW had used the boycott organization to mobilize political support. In this election they proved that they were a serious political force.

Meanwhile the lettuce boycott and struggle with the Teamsters continued. On April 15, 1973, grape growers in the San Joaquin Valley announced that they had signed contracts with the Teamsters. César immediately called for a strike and pulled out most of the UFW workers from the fields. The Teamsters recruited goons and soon violence exploded, with two union members being killed. Finally on September 1st, César decided to call off the strike and resume the boycott, which now included Gallo Winery which had signed a contract with the Teamsters. The decision to abandon the strike was motivated in part by his desire to avoid future violence but also because he felt very deeply that the boycott would be more effective than a strike. Late in 1974, the Teamsters finally gave up their campaign to organize field workers and take over UFW contracts. Nevertheless, the grape and vegetable growers had contracts in place that would not expire for several years. César had to decide on a strategy to keep his union together until then.

The California Farm Labor Act

In 1975, Chávez decided to intensify the boycott of Gallo wines. The AFL-CIO had agreed to support the UFW lettuce and grape boycotts, if the union dropped the secondary boycott of Safeway and A&P markets. Gallo had signed a Teamster contract after their UFW contract had expired and were highly vulnerable. On February 22, César organized a 110 mile march from San Francisco to Modesto, home of the Gallo Wineries. More than 15,000 supporters ended the march a week later. The tremendous turn-out proved again that the UFW had great popular support.

The message was not lost on the newly elected governor of California, Jerry Brown, the son of a former governor, who some considered almost an anti-politician, a perfect type to be successful in the post-Watergate era. Jerry Brown had supported the farm workers’ cause and even marched with them in the Coachella Valley. As Secretary of State
in 1972, he helped the UFW challenge Proposition 22. His election to the governorship in November, 1974, signaled a new opportunity for the UFW.

Late in 1974, Cesar began to think that a state agricultural law might help reverse the decline of the union’s strength, but only if the law had certain provisions. First, it had to allow for boycotts. Second, it had to allow seasonal workers to vote in elections (under previously proposed legislation, including the Arizona law, only permanent workers were allowed to vote). Third, a UFW-supported farm-labor law had to allow for legitimate strikes. Initially, the growers opposed all of these conditions for a farm-labor law but by 1975, after the years of strikes, jurisdictional violence and boycotts, they were willing to concede these points.

After considerable political maneuvering, the California Agricultural Labor Relations Act was passed in May, 1975, the first such law in the continental United States governing farm labor organizing (farm workers in Hawaii had a similar law). The law gave the UFW what it wanted: secret ballot elections, the right to boycott, voting rights for migrant seasonal workers, and control over the timing of elections. The growers, for their part, were convinced that the law would end the boycotts and labor disruptions that had cost them millions of dollars in profits.

The struggle with the Teamsters for representation of farm workers continued under the supervision of the state agency. Governor Brown continued to support Chavez and the UFW by appointing a pro-UFW majority to the Agricultural Labor Relations Board, the body that was to oversee the elections and rule on the complaints. A big controversy arose over the access rules for union organizers. The UFW wanted unlimited right to enter ranches and farms and talk to workers about the union, while the growers wanted total control over access, giving preference to the Teamsters.

Another problem was funding. The ALRB ran out of money for its daily operation at the beginning of 1976 and suspended operations for five months until the legislature could vote for a regular appropriation. Because the legislature lacked the necessary majority to pass an emergency appropriation, the ALRB temporarily stopped reviewing and certifying elections.

Cesar decided to attack the issues of funding and access by appealing to the voters. In a massive initiative campaign by the UFW, its workers gathered over 700,000 signatures in only twenty-nine days. The initiative, known as Proposition 14, was to be voted on in November. The UFW-sponsored initiative provided for guaranteed funding for the Agricultural Labor Board as well as assuring union organizers access to workers. Due to an advertising campaign funded by oil companies and agricultural corporations, Proposition 14 lost by a two-to-one margin. The public seemed to have been convinced that the funding of the Farm Labor
Board was already a moot point and that the access provision was a threat to property rights.

**Strengths and Weaknesses: Mixed Results**

Some regarded the defeat of Proposition 14 in 1976 as a turning point in Chávez’s ability to mobilize public support for the farm workers and their union. The promise of the ALRB as a means of helping organize farm workers rapidly disappeared. The Farm Labor Board was increasingly controlled by Republican pro-grower interests who consistently ruled against the many grievances that were brought before it by the union.

There were some victories. One was the result of years of lobbying and complex legal maneuvers: the abolition of *el cortito* or the short-handled hoe in 1975. For decades the growers had required field workers to use this tool that forced the workers to bend over and work for hours on end. Thousands of farm workers permanently damaged their backs and spent the rest of their lives in disabling pain. Chávez and the UFW had opposed the use of *el cortito* because of its damaging effect on the workers’ health. Together with attorneys for California Rural Legal Aid (CRLA), they won its abolishment.

In terms of union building, the period following the passage of the California Farm Labor Act was one of growth in membership and contracts. The UFW had won almost two-thirds of the elections after 1975 and the Teamsters admitted in March of 1977 that they were beaten and that they would not contest future elections. The dues-paying membership of the UFW soared to over 100,000 by 1978.

It would seem that the union had reached a degree of organizational success. But there were troubling signs that all was not well. A number of long-time staff members quit the union. Some expressed their unhappiness with César’s leadership and others admitted to feeling burned-out by the long hours at almost no pay. In March 1979, Jerry Cohen, the UFW’s chief attorney, left after the executive board defeated his proposal to allow his staff to be paid salaries rather than in-kind benefits. A few months later, Marshall Ganz, who helped organize the lettuce strike, and Jim Drake, another long-term organizer, left the union, along with a number of other union leaders from the Salinas area, over a dispute having to do with union policy. The newspaper and journal reaction to these resignations was to magnify them as signaling the end of the Chávez-led union.

César had decided to reorganize the union and some left because they disagreed with his strategies. In late 1975, he called for a conference to discuss ideas for modernizing the union and invited several management consultants to La Paz for staff training sessions. As part of the modernization drive they began computerizing all the union records and purchased a microwave communications system so that they would not be dependent on the public telephones.
Despite these measures, there were indications that the UFW had lost momentum. In 1984, only 15 of the 70 grape growers in the Delano area were under a UFW contract. The Union was winning fewer and fewer elections: in 1976 they had won 276, but in the years since they had won only 56. Union membership dropped to less than 12,000 active members. There were fewer and fewer strikes and the UFW cut down on the number of organizers in the fields, hoping to encourage local leadership and initiative.

The reason for the decline, César felt, was that the Farm Labor Board was firmly in the hands of the grower interests. The Board now was used to stifle unionization. The ALRB took, on average, 348 days to settle disputes over contested elections and about half as long to render a decision whether or not to litigate an unfair labor practice. As of 1984 the ALRB had not rendered any award for violation of the labor law.

As a result of the stalemate promoted by the ALRB, César came to the conclusion that boycotting was the only tactic left to force the growers to sign contracts. So, on June 12, 1984, César announced that the union would embark on a new grape boycott. The UFW had sponsored more than 50 boycotts over the years and the public was confused as to what was and was not under boycott. There remained a tremendous educational campaign for the union to undertake.

For the next few years Chávez targeted the environmental concerns of the nation’s middle class. The UFW produced a movie entitled *The Wrath of Grapes*, in which graphic footage showed the birth defects and high rates of cancer that pesticide poisoning produced among farm workers and consumers. In 1987 and again in 1988, César traveled to the midwestern and eastern cities union support had always been the strongest.

Finally, César decided to protest against pesticide usage by beginning a fast on midnight July 16, 1988. The fast went largely unnoticed by the public until the children of Robert Kennedy visited César in La Paz to lend their support. Finally on Sunday August 22, César gave up his water-only fast. As an expression of support, Jesse Jackson, a presidential candidate, and actors Martin Sheen and Robert Blake vowed to continue the fast for three days to keep alive the “chain of suffering.” Thereafter, for several months, individuals joined three-day mini-fast to demonstrate their support for the union.

During his thirty-six-day fast, César issued a statement that summarized his commitment to the union and the boycott:

> As I look back at this past year, I can see many events that precipitated the fast, including the terrible suffering of farm workers and their children, the crushing of farm worker rights, the denial of fair and free elections and the death of good-faith bargaining in California agriculture. All of these events are
connected with the great cause of justice for farm worker families.2

In the 1990s, Chávez had the same qualities of character that had brought about victory in the earlier boycott. Most of all he was tenacious in his leadership, despite an apparent change in the activist mood of the country. He believed that the modern boycott could be won with an alliance among Latinos, blacks, and other minorities, plus allies in labor and the Church. He also had faith that, for the generation of activists from the 60s and 70s, the boycott would become a social habit. By 1991 statistics of grape consumption seemed to bear out his optimism. During the crucial period from May to August 1990, grapes delivered for sale declined in twelve major cities. In New York City grape consumption was down seventy-four percent; in Los Angeles it declined by thirty-seven percent and by thirty-six percent in San Francisco. The UFW could cite official statistics showing that the growers were selling grapes at a loss.

Chávez was confident about the ultimate success of the UFW struggle, and remained so until his unexpected death in Yuma, Arizona, on April 23, 1993. He had been coordinating the boycott and fighting legal battles against the growers, traveling to raise money and fasting for spiritual enlightenment. The tremendous outpouring of condolences and support that followed his death was a testimony to his importance as a leader who touched the conscience of America. César Chávez’s crusade had been part of a world-wide commitment to human and civil rights, inspired by ideas and issues arising from the age in which he lived. He was correctly identified as a civil-rights leader as much as a labor leader. More than 30,000 people followed his casket for three miles from downtown Delano to the union’s old headquarters at the Forty Acres. Expressions of regret for his passing came from around the world, from international political, labor and spiritual leaders as well as from thousands of the poor migrant farm workers to whom he had dedicated his life.

César Chávez’s most lasting significance as a leader of the farm worker’s movement is that he made millions aware of the plight of Mexican Americans and enlarged the nation’s conscience. In that respect, although he thought of himself as a labor leader, he was part of the U.S. civil-rights movement of the 1960s. Indeed, he knew and communicated with many of the leaders of the civil-rights movement, including Dr. Martin Luther King. The emphasis on non-violence within the farm workers’ movement was reinforced by the civil-rights struggle in the South. In fighting for labor rights, Chávez always was aware that he was enlarging the rights of all working men and women.

Chávez’s strengths were the moral principles he believed in: self-sacrifice for others, courageous struggle despite overwhelming odds, respect for all races and religions, non-violence, belief in a divine soul and moral order, rejection of materialism, and faith in the moral superiority of
the poor as well as in justice. He embodied the struggles of a people, *la raza*, to achieve a better life in America. He will always be remembered for his humility and total dedication to the cause of social and economic justice.

Notes

1 This essay is based on our jointly authored book on *César Chávez: A Triumph of Spirit* which will be published by the University of Oklahoma Press in 1995.


Works Consulted


In this article, I hope to describe and analyze the leadership qualities of Cesar Chavez Estrada during the time he spent organizing the farm-worker union that he led until his untimely death. This piece is neither a eulogy nor a biographical update. Rather, it is intended to shed light on the various and significant contributions Chavez made to leadership and community organization among Mexican Americans in the United States. The fact that Chavez was a Chicano and rose to leadership during the Chicano Movement era made his contributions even more valuable to this ethnic group.

Cesar Chavez was the first Chicano leader to be introduced in English to the United States reading public. The publicity generated and sustained by him and by the union of farmworkers via their public information and communications operations, the regional publications of Chicano Press Association members, and those of the mainstream press, made Chavez a household word not only for Chicanos but also for significant numbers of Americans, some Europeans, and governmental leaders in Mexico. Chavez was the best known of the various Chicano leaders of the era from the mid-1960s into the 1980s. “Cesar,” as he was known to Chicanos and his supporters, was the first Chicano leader to emerge from the Movimiento Chicano generation. He also was the last to remain active in the organization he founded.

Though initially only one of the “Four Horsemen” of the Chicano Movement, Chavez’s only significant competitor in the media was Reies Lopez Tijerina. Tijerina was the leader of the land recovery movement based in New Mexico. During the late 1960s and into the 1970s Tijerina was most active in taking national forest park land by force. And, during the Poor People’s
Campaign in Washington D.C., he was the Chicano spokesman for the contingent of Raza involved with that event. Because of his activity, Tijerina was tried, convicted and jailed for burning a forest park sign, a federal offense. Today, Reies Lopez Tijerina is in self-imposed seclusion near Coyote, New Mexico, and without an organizational base or political program. He does engage in public activity from time to time. In November, 1993, his home, warehouse and adjoining buildings, three in all, were mysteriously firebombed. No charges have been made against anyone and the crime remains unsolved.

Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales founded the Crusade for Justice in the mid-1960s. The purpose was to militate against police brutality and educate La Raza about its heritage. Annually for the past 24 years, the Crusade has held a youth conference in Denver. The 1968 Chicano Youth Liberation Conference issued "El Plan Espiritual de Aztlan." The plan was a revolutionary call to radical social change. Corky became well known for his epic poem Yo Soy Joaquin. Together with La Raza Unida Party activists from Texas under the direction of myself, Jose Angel Gutierrez, the Crusade promoted the formation of an independent political party for Chicanos during the decade of the 1970s. Later, in the mid-1980s the Crusade declined and Corky sold the Crusade for Justice building in Denver. The sale ended what was left of the organization and escuelita "Tlatelolco." He is currently suffering severe health problems related to personal injuries sustained during an automobile accident combined with a stroke. I, myself, remain only minimally active as member, no longer a leader, in a number of Mexican-American and professional organizations in Texas and in immigrant defense work.

Chavez: The Beginnings of a Leader

Cesar Chavez was recruited and joined the Community Services Organization (CSO). It was in CSO that Chavez learned community organizing, direct action tactics, urban electoral politics, and voter registration campaigns. In the early 1960s he left CSO to organize Chicano migrant farm workers in rural California. He first organized the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA). In 1965, Chavez’s NFWA merged with the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC), comprised largely of Filipino farm workers affiliated with the AFL-CIO, into the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFWOC). They now call themselves the United Farm Workers Union of America, AFL-CIO. His unionization efforts beyond California into Arizona and Texas made la causa of the farm workers a Chicano issue. The overwhelming numbers of farm workers west of the Mississippi were seasonal, migrant agricultural workers of Mexican ancestry. His example spawned other unionization efforts among Mexican-American farm workers in Washington, Wisconsin, and Ohio, for example. The Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) in the Midwest under the leadership of Baldemar Velasquez continues to this day. The organizing efforts of a network of support groups nationally and internationally made the name “Cesar,” la causa, his persona, and el...
Movimiento Chicano, household words, particularly to Chicanos. Chavez was not the first to seek to organize Mexican labor, nor will he be the last. Chavez did not reach his goal of a national union of farm workers, in spite of his lifelong efforts. Over his life span his union lost elections and organizing campaigns more often than they won. Chavez and the United Farm Workers Union of America, AFL-CIO, did gain regional influence in the Southwest, particularly California, Arizona and Texas.

The goal of a national farm worker union probably is impossible to reach. Persons of Mexican ancestry in the United States are entering the United States labor market at unprecedented rates in blue-collar and white-collar occupations, not agriculture. Chavez, however, will probably be remembered in history as among the last to organize Mexicano migrant farm workers. The need for agricultural labor in the United States is rapidly declining. What little demand continues to exist for labor-intensive agriculture work is being adversely impacted by advanced technology and mechanization; by chemistry with improved pesticides and herbicides; and, by biogenetic engineering of stronger, bigger, better cloned crops.

The real contribution of Cesar Chavez lies not only in his total and exclusive dedication to la causa of farm-worker unionization but also to his transcendental leadership qualities.

Chavez: The First Voice of Chicanos

Cesar Chavez was able through his organizing work among farm workers to give Chicanos their “first voice.” Cultural anthropologists use this term to identify the first articulation by a leader of an ethnic group interpreting its culture, expressing itself on its terms, and presenting its views on pressing issues of importance to the ethnic group. “Other voices” of ethnic groups and cultures traditionally have been the anthropologists and other social scientists who study the ethnic group. These social scientists interpret, analyze, and comment upon the ethnic group. Social scientists introduce members of the ethnic group under study via quotations and anecdotal reference. The ethnic group subjects are permitted to speak much in the fashion of a ventriloquist’s dummy. Cesar Chavez and the campesinos ended the age of ventriloquism for Chicanos. The farm-worker movement and other social protest movements by other Chicanos in the 1960s began the evidentiary contradiction for the academy of “social science fiction.” In decades past, social scientists utilized faulty conceptual models and paradigms to study Chicanos.

Cesar, while the leader of the farm-worker union, also became a spokesman for the Chicano Movement generation. Even though Cesar primarily addressed only farm-worker issues such as collective bargaining, working conditions, health and safety, product boycotts, and farm-labor contracts, he was nevertheless seen by many non-farm-worker Chicanos as speaking for them. Occasionally, he would accept appearances at other Chicano-related events such as bilingual education conferences, Chicano
Studies student programs, and voter registration colloquia. Public speaking at non-farm-worker union gatherings was an instrument for fund raising.

Chavez was also instrumental in interceding for Chicano students at Mt. Angel College, Oregon. \(^\text{10}\) Chavez also campaigned for the Raza Unida Party slate of candidates in Crystal City, Texas, during 1972. He traveled the United States widely and often, logging more miles than any other Chicano leader of his time in the furtherance of his message.

**Chavez: La Persona**

Chavez used the term “Chicano” as a self-identifier. He referred to himself as a Chicano. He dressed as a working man. He wore khaki pants, most often, with sport shirts, guayaveras, or flannel long sleeved shirts. He did not use name-brand toiletries such as underarm deodorants, hair grooming liquids or sprays, after shave, colognes or eau de toilette; nor did he dye, color highlight or tint his jet-black hair. The scant gray by his temples began to emerge in the last few years. He was natural, at ease, almost stoic but was betrayed frequently by his impish smile. He was comfortable with himself. He usually spoke in Spanish. He spoke in English to staff, non-Mexican audiences and reporters, and on college campuses. He was bilingual and bi-cultural. He didn’t have an eloquent, grandiose or verbose speaking style. He was plain speaking and monotonal. Rarely did he raise his voice to make a point or command attention. He was tireless in all his roles as father, husband, Catholic, leader, Chicano, organizer, staff manager, and man. In his personal simplicity he was poignant. The simplicity of his message—justice for farm workers—made him eloquent. He had a firm belief in the righteousness of la causa. He was tenacious, aggressive and militant. This commitment to los campesinos was total and complete. He looked mestizo. He was dark skinned, short, with high cheek bones, piercing black eyes, and sparse facial hair. He was the embodiment of a Chicano. Chicanos could see themselves in Cesar: clothes, personal style, demeanor and commitment. Chavez inspired himself. And, his inspiration moved Chicanos.

**Chavez: El lider**

As a Chicano leader of farm workers, he introduced a new and fresh leadership style. His rhetoric, slogans, symbols, tactics, strategies, demeanor, appearance, and management and organizational methods were new. Some of his contributions were new to students of community organizing; most were just new to the farm-worker population and to Chicanos, in general. For example, he used both La Virgen de Guadalupe’s image and the religious song of the cursillo movement, “De Colores,” borrowed from the Mexican Catholic church, as an umbrella of symbolic protection. He recruited and used Catholic priests and nuns, Protestant clergy, and Jewish rabbis as his advocates, another umbrella for sheltered opportunity to expand his network of support and blunt
criticism of the Catholic hierarchy in California. He borrowed from Gandhi the notions and rhetoric of non-violence and peaceful civil disobedience. And all the while, his principal leadership cadre, many followers, supporters, his family, and he suffered extreme violence at the hands of many enemies such as growers and Teamsters. Many farm workers have died from violence inflicted on them by those who opposed unionization efforts. Like Ghandi, Chavez fasted, too many times and for too long. He hurt his body. But he made the important politicians come to him during these fasts and even made enemies pray he would end his fasts and the boycotts. Chavez did craft a successful model of organizing the poor, migrant, seasonal, agricultural workers into a union. Chavez modified and re-invented the Black Thunderbird icon of the Hopi peoples as the union symbol—a Chicano phoenix. He made propaganda through political buttons, bumper stickers, lapel pins, posters, newspapers, and videos. He used and promoted el Teatro Campesino to carry the farm-worker message via guerilla theater. He initiated strikes, picket lines, and boycotts. He made many learn to shout “Huelga” while at picket lines and rallies and he made a generation of Chicanos and other supporters stop eating grapes. Chavez even exported his attack strategies and tactics internationally, following the farm products he was boycotting. His brother, Ricardo Chavez, traveled to Great Britain, Scandinavia, and elsewhere in Europe, building a boycott support network. With the international boycott of grapes, Cesar Chavez mastered the Third Party boycott strategy. Chavez built both a national and international support network for his union.

Chavez was the first Chicano leader to bring organized, poor Mexicanos into the political arena. He brought the Chicanada out from the campos into hotels, urban grocery stores, cathedrals, national conventions, and election precincts to make their presence known, felt, listened to, and dealt with by middle class Mexican Americans, white politicians at all levels, national union bosses, agribusiness interests, and other minority groups. In so doing, he made Chicanos present and active and gave them their first voice of power.

Chavez: Transcendental and Transactional Leader

We know that Cesar Chavez became a master organizer of people. The union is living proof of his success. We know and witnessed his leadership. In achieving organizational status, official affiliation with the AFL-CIO, and official contract representation for the membership, Chavez also became a manager. This dimension of Cesar Chavez is not well known. With each union/grower contract victory, Chavez had to make good on the promise of the union as a good thing. Chavez had to grow into a great transactional leader. The transactional leader is one who works on behalf of constituents on difficult problems and who seeks practical, negotiated solutions. Usually, the arena for this type of problem-solving or service delivery is found in institutions and bureaucracies. Chavez, however, was a transcendental leader more often than a transactional leader. The difference between the two is vast. A transactional

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leader is a broker. A transactional leader can arrange a deal; broker an opportunity; negotiate an impasse; effect a compromise; and fix a problem. Examples of such a person are elected officials, political party workers, labor union job stewards, organizational volunteers and members, public relations personnel, maîtres d'hôtel, concierges, and attorneys.

Transactional leaders deal with issues of narrow scope and stay the course on tangible, realizable short-term goals. Their words are practical, simple and clear. On the other hand, a transcendental leader is one who has a big picture in mind. Such a person has a vision beyond the proverbial trees and can see past the forest to the horizon. Such a leader is not bound or focused on the mundane or the detailed. Rather, this leader seeks out the grandiose and moves masses with articulation of a dream. The focus of this leader is long-term and often abstract. Such a leader speaks in symbolic rhetoric that excites and incites. Chavez was such a man for Chicanos. He was one of the migrants. He spoke plainly but articulated larger than life goals for migrants, especially that of building their own union. He was effective because he organized and could mobilize his masses. He made others, both Chicanos and non-Chicanos, accept him as he was. He made being Chicano legitimate to middle-class Mexican Americans and non-Mexican supporters.

The nature of union representation is transactional in nature. The subject is the individual member. The focus often is on employee grievances, contract language, delayed or denied services, missed opportunities for advancement and higher pay, and even slights in recognition for union work done and not praised. Chavez not only organized the unorganized with appeals to higher levels of personal activity and commitment, but also delivered on the appeal. By his mastery of transactional work Chavez made real the promise of an improved quality of life and with union/grower contracts in hand, he made self-determination for individual members possible. But, Chavez was neither chained to detail nor enslaved by union management problems. He was able to transcend the transaction, regardless of the situation.

Chavez, for example, made connections for his audience, campesino and consumer alike, between health and safety issues for farmworkers and consumers of farm produce; between the use of pesticides and herbicides on fruits and vegetables and consumers' health; and between the condition of labor and the national economy. Because of this ability to move his audience rhetorically from the transaction at hand and transcend to the larger issue, Chavez made his name and cause among the most recognized of all Chicano leaders and movements of his time.

Chavez was able to lead and able to manage. He built a vertically integrated union. He developed many programs within the union to offer health care, housing, legal services, communications, credit unions, training, and education to the membership. He almost achieved a full-service union for its members at the headquarters, La Paz, near Keene, California. The union headquarters at La Paz is a nerve center of the organization and a retreat center.
This location is a small city replete with its own telephone system, water supply, housing, health center, and office complex.

Chavez was able, at once, to deal with symbols, images, ideas and the union agenda to the point that taken together as *la causa* the people supporting him and the union became galvanized. They made events happen and became a force in history. Chavez not only focused on the union tasks of tomorrow but also kept in view the goal of the day after tomorrow. With each transaction he worked on for his membership, he transcended them into the future.

**The Lack of Leadership Studies**

In the academic study of political activity among Mexican Americans, there has been a critical lack of academic interest by political scientists. A few exceptions are the recent works of Mario T. Garcia (1989) and Richard A. Garcia (1991), in the area of leadership among Mexican Americans in the United States. But traditional research done by political scientists on Chicano leaders, community organizations, and politics among Mexican Americans in the United States has a distinct bias. The research focus has been primarily on European-American groups. The peculiar ethnic politics of Chicanos have been seldom studied for two major reasons: first, the historical evidence relied upon by social scientists confirmed very limited levels of participation in electoral and political affairs; and, second, this limited participation in politics was considered by these researchers to be insignificant, statistically and qualitatively. Until the late 1950s, recruitment into and membership in United States political parties, trade unions, Protestant church congregations, Chambers of Commerce, country clubs, and even public schools were denied the Mexican American because of race and class standing. Within the Catholic Church there were segregated Mass services and rituals for Mexicanos. This exclusion of Mexican Americans was not taken into account by the social scientists as a proximate cause of their low level of public activity. Ignoring this segregation and exclusion of Mexican Americans is a major flaw in their research methodology.

The lack of study of Chicano leadership and organizations is not due to the lack of leadership or organization. This research focus is simply omitted by scholars. We know from research published beginning three decades past that Mexicano based associations and mutual aid and benefit societies existed in the Southwest and Midwest since the turn of the century, as has trade unionism in occupational strata from vaqueros to factories. And, during all these decades of this century leaders in the Mexican American community were striving for social change. Today, leaders such as Teresa Urrea, Ricardo and Enrique Flores Magon, Aniceto Pizana, Luis De La Rosa, Octaviano Larrazolo, Eluterio Escobar, Maria Hernandez, Dennis Chavez, Emma Tenayuca, Luisa Moreno, Raymond Telles, Eduardo Quevedo, Ignacio Lozano, Carlos Castaneda, Arthur Campa, Alonzo Perales, J. Luz Saenz, Hector Garcia, J.T. Canales, Manuel C. Gonzales, and Virginia Muzquiz, for example, today...
are still without major biographical study. Popular interest in the subject of Chicano biography has been sporadic. Some biographical material on post-World War I to World War II leaders was produced during the Chicano Movement era. During the late 1960s to early 1970s, this type of material was published by beer and tobacco companies in the form of calendars, guides, and paperbacks. Recently, in this past decade, guides on community based organizations and rosters of elected officials of the Mexican ancestry community have been published. Major corporations such as Ford Motor Company's Dealers and Southland Corporation (7-Eleven Convenience Stores) have begun role-model projects. The Ford dealers have an annual dinner—"Hispanic Salute"—to laud local Hispanic leaders in major metropolitan areas across the nation. In 1992 Southland Corporation began a national traveling exhibit entitled "Hispanic Role Models—Inspiring Young Minds To Dream," featuring twenty-six prominent Hispanic Americans. Brochures and posters of leaders in the exhibit are available to the viewing public. Politicians, as a type of leader, are frequently favored as subject-matter by the media and regularly are the focus of scholarly interest.

Local public schools across the nation have always relied primarily, and continue to rely, on material designed and developed in-house on Mexican Americans and other Latinos for use in the classroom, especially during Hispanic Heritage Month (September). There is no college level text or compilation of articles on Mexican American leadership as there is, for example, for African Americans. Some biographies about the Mexican American people, the organizations of LULAC and American G.I Forum, on individuals exist in addition to autobiographies.

During the Chicano Movement era, the leadership received the attention of documentary film producers. Such early documentaries as Yo Soy Chicano and its sequel Yo Soy were followed by feature films such as Jesus Trevino's Raices de Sangre and the Mexican government-produced Chicano on the exploits of Reies Lopez Tijerina. There are various biographical feature films still in circulation today such as The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez, Zoot Suit, and Stand and Deliver on specific historical figures and events. Yet, the inventory of material on leadership of the Mexican American people either in print or on film/video is severely limited. Perhaps the death of Cesar Chavez Estrada, the first and last of the Chicano Movement generation of leaders, will spark a greater and renewed interest concerning the leadership in the United States of people of Mexican ancestry.

**Chavez: His Challenge**

Biography of the Mexican American people, organizations, leaders, institutions, issues, and communities as well as studies of individual leadership are of critical importance. In Hispanic Americans Today Current Population Report, the Bureau of the Census, the U.S. Department of Commerce reports as of June, 1993, that Hispanic Americans have reached a critical mass of
population in approximately nine states of the nation (23-183). The population of this ethnic community grew over seven times as fast as the rest of the Nation’s population during the 1980s. In 1990, one in every ten Americans were Hispanic. As we enter the next century, demographers predict Hispanics will be one of every five Americans. This ethnic community has the most children and fewer elderly than the rest of the Nation’s population. As a sizeable population and distinct ethnic group, Hispanics will figure centrally in the future of America.

The challenge of governance and leadership in the next century rests largely on the shoulders of Mexican Americans and other Hispanics. The road taken by Cesar Chavez and how he traveled that road are examples of ways in which such leadership must develop.

Notes

1 Available biography on Cesar Chavez Estrada, somewhat dated, includes Day, Dunne, Kushner, Levy, Matthiessen, Meister and Loftis, and Taylor. These publications capture the character and personality of Cesar Chavez as well as chronicle the early union efforts. The value of these materials is three-fold: they were written about a Chicano leader at a time when few publications on Chicanos existed; they were published by national publishers; and, they are descriptive and journalistic in nature, not analytical.

2 See Meier and Rivera. According to these authors, in a chapter entitled “Four Horsemen,” four Chicano leaders have had considerable impact since 1965. They are Cesar Chavez of California, Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales of Colorado, Jose Angel Gutierrez of Texas, and Reies Lopez Tijerina of New Mexico. For the other works on Reies Lopez Tijerina see Nobokov, Gardner, Blawis, and Tijerina.

3 See Gonzales (1972).

4 See Ignacio Garcia (1989), and Shockley.


8 The concept of “first voice” is best exemplified by recent Nobel Peace Prize winner, Rigoberta Menchu of Guatemala. Her work for peace and defense of the indigenous peoples of Guatemala garnered that award. She insisted that her culture be allowed to speak for itself; to describe its history; to express its art-forms through their mediums; and to stand as different, not deficient peoples among humanity. Recently, in San Antonio, Texas, during a national conference of the National Association of Latino Arts and Culture, Dr. Amalia Mesa-Bains, a MacArthur...
Foundation Fellow, speaking on the needs of Latino art said, "The age of the ventriloquist is over. We are here to speak for ourselves."

9 See Romano. His three essays in *El Grito* (1968-70) are among the pioneering works on "social science fiction."

10 Chavez personally sought an audience before federal officials of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in Washington, D.C. to re-negotiate the terms of a loan for the students in order for them to build an alternative institution of higher education for Chicanos in the Pacific Northwest. The Chicano students had taken over the Mt. Angel campus administration building in the 1970s with a demand to make the liberal arts college a Chicano College rather than close the facility for lack of financial resources to maintain the institution. The property was owned by a local order of nuns. The nuns agreed to the demand provided the loan was re-negotiated and re-issued to another party, not their religious order. Chavez was successful in this refinancing arrangement with HUD. Mt. Angel College became a Chicano college and later changed its name to Colegio Cesar Chavez. It was headed by various Chicano academicians and students. They took the beginning steps toward accreditation. At a most critical and final time in 1981 for accreditation review, the Board of Directors selected one of its own, a non-academic, support staffer and former secretary, Irma Gonzales as President. The Colegio Cesar Chavez was denied accredited status and folded. Assets of the campus were sold by Irma Gonzales. Eventually the remaining buildings were put up on the auction bloc as a foreclosure. Ironically, the minimal foreclosure balance on the note for the Colegio was successfully bid for in 1984 by the local Catholic archdiocese. Ms. Gonzales now serves on the Board of Directors of the National Council of La Raza and is a consultant to the Kellogg Foundation.

11 See Hammerback and Jensen (1980).

12 See Higham (1978). This author totally omitted mention of Mexican Americans and other Latinos in his analysis of ethnic leadership.

13 See Mario T. Garcia (1989). Garcia elaborates on the concept of a "political generation" in the context of Mexican American politics. A political generation is different from a biological generation, the favorite benchmark of anthropologists and different from a historical generation. A political generation not only is a group of heterogenous people engaged in action during a shared historical era but also group membership can span an age as broad as twenty-five years and share in making the political era. In this book, Garcia also discusses the Mexican American generation, a precursor group to the Chicano Movement generation.

14 See Richard A. Garcia (1991). This author discusses the "Mexican American generation" of leaders in San Antonio, Texas, during 1929 to 1941.

15 See Acuna (1988); McWilliams and Meier (1990); and Vigil (1977).

16 These articles have been reprinted in *Voices: Readings from El Grito* (1973). See also Vaca.

17 See Martinez (1979).

18 See Meier and Rivera; Rodolfo Acuna (1988); Escobar and Lane; Montejano; and Zamora.
19 See Oscar Zeta Acosta (1972); Sloss-Vento; and Salazar.


21 The Ford Motor Company Dealers is a local event promoted nationally. The Southland Corporation exhibit information is available at 7-Eleven, Urban Affairs, 2711 N. Haskell, Dallas, Texas 75204. Recently, three more individuals were added to the exhibit. These additions are being co-sponsored by Pepsi-Cola with 7-Eleven.

22 See Acosta and Mendosa (1990), Cardenas, (1990), Dwornik and Mendosa (1993), and Mendosa, (1990), for recent articles on Hispanic political action committee (PAC) takers and givers, funding for political campaigns of Hispanic members of Congress in the House of Representatives, and Hispanic mayors in U.S. cities.

23 In an effort at Mexican-American leadership, see Larralde. This is the first and only such book treating eighteen Mexican American political leaders and Venustiano Carranza, former President of Mexico.

24 See Galarza (1971); Acosta (1972); Gonzales (1972); Sloss-Vento; Tijerina; Allsup; Ramos; Acuna (1984); Matthews; Shorris; Skerry; Marquez; and Newlon.

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Given the history of César Chávez as we know it today, it is difficult—if not impossible—to imagine him ever devoid of interest in forming a union to benefit farm workers. But, in 1952, as a young man living in the east side barrio of San José, that was César Chávez.

That same year, Fred Ross, an activist and organizer for the Community Service Organization (CSO), first met Chávez. The CSO was a movement for civil rights and civil action among Chicanos. In the early 1950s, it had a reputation as the most militant and effective organization of its kind in the United States. And so it was that Ross, national organizer for the CSO, traveled to a barrio in San José to introduce himself to César Chávez, in the hope of convincing him to join the movement.

Though he distrusted Anglos and had several times refused to meet with Ross, whom he considered an intruding organizer, Chávez eventually granted an interview. Ross quickly convinced Chávez that they were on the same side, fighting the system that subjugated Chicanos. Thus began a life-long collaboration between these men, lasting over three decades.
In his book *Conquering Goliath: Cesar Chavez at the Beginning* (1989), Ross chronicled Chávez’s first years as an activist in the sleepy, dusty farming community of Oxnard, California. Ross had “trained Chavez in the art of organizing farm workers for CSO. He convinced his boss, Saul Alinksy, to hire Chavez as a full time organizer with full pay” (4). Chávez spent years representing farm workers who were denied jobs while unregistered braceros were replacing locals in the fields—in violation of the American-Mexican Bracero agreement. Eventually, Chávez exposed the inhuman working and living conditions created by the growers. He also attacked their restrictive practice of forcing workers to register in a growers associations—what amounted to a company-sponsored union—in order to be granted a “work card” permit every day, and then often only to be denied a job. Chávez worked to defer the farm workers’ desire to form a union, by convincing them that job security and decent housing had to be secured first.

Eventually, the locals forced the braceros to leave the fields, through physical intimidation when necessary. This bitter struggle, fought with a religious determination and tenacious discipline, was only won when the growers’ illegal hiring practices were finally exposed to federal authorities. An undying respect for their leader’s tenacity and drive overcame the farm workers’ doubts, and they accepted Chávez as their leader. Working.
together, Chávez and Ross formed over twenty CSO chapters. But for Chávez, it was time to move on, time to get back to his roots, time to take the next important step in his evolution as an organizer.

Chávez and Father Bill O'Donnell

Chávez left the CSO in 1962. With his devoted wife, Helen, and their children, he settled in Delano, California. There, he formed the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA), to represent the Delano grape pickers. Using such tactics as strikes, fasts, picketing, and demonstrations, the NFWA won contracts from several large growers. In 1966, the NFWA became part of the United Farm Workers Organization Committee of the AFL-CIO, and Chávez launched his first boycott against the grape growers—a boycott which has lasted in spirit to this very day.

In 1982, the United Farm Workers celebrated its twentieth anniversary with a party held at Sacred Heart Catholic Church in San José, California. A standing-room crowd of hundreds of Chávez’s supporters and compadres crowded into the church’s main auditorium simply for the chance to meet him. They wanted to shake his hand, or politely gaze into his face and, with their eyes, say
thanks. They wanted personally to bear witness to his triumph over years of injustice against his fellow Americans in general, and Hispanics in particular.

The list of those crowded into the auditorium to meet the charismatic, non-violent activist included politicians and community leaders of every stature, such as U.S. Representative Norman Mineta, Blanca Alvarado of the San José City Council, Fred Ross, Father Bill O’Donnell of St. Joseph’s Workingman Church in Berkeley, actor Kris Kristofferson, and countless others who represented public institutions or organizations working for social change. One young couple asked Chávez and his wife to hold their infant child so that the father might take a picture. Chávez, a father himself, happily complied.

The celebration lasted most of the day. Chávez and family members sat in a receiving line, speaking to every man, woman, and child with quiet patience and pleasure. I was deeply struck by this man’s peaceful demeanor. Though I had come with the idea of interviewing him, I soon realized that it was enough just to be there in his presence. I knew what he was thinking simply by looking into his eyes. César Chávez Estrada was a man of peace, and I am the wiser for having had the opportunity to meet him.

Works Cited

Environmental Justice and Women’s Work: the UFW, Chipko Movement, and Seringueiros

I suspect that among other readers there is a hunger for journalism and art to make visible the passion for freedom and dignity that has moved men and women of every color and class, again and again, to challenge seemingly immutable power. It’s not a question of offering us saints and icons. It’s a question of making vivid the human face of social change, as well as the abuses and violent opposition of entrenched power. —Adrienne Rich

Kamala Platt

This study will present histories of “the human face of social change” in environmental-justice struggles from geographically distant but geopolitically connected parts of the globe—Greater Mexico (as defined by Americo Paredes), the Amazonian watershed in Brazil, and the Himalayan foothills in northern India—in order to discuss, comparatively, environmental justice in a world of conflicting “new world orders” which we, as world citizens, must cope with or resist. I dedicate this article to the memory and continuing influence of the leadership of César Chávez, Chico Mendez and Mira Behn; as leaders, each of these people facilitated the involvement in their communities’ struggles of those most disenfranchized by situations of structural domination.

Texts from each area offer local historical narratives which chart a space of overlapping social concerns; I will discuss the testimonios of a Chicana farm worker and a Brazilian rubber tapper and the philosophical historiography of a South Asian physicist turned environmental activist. The three primary texts through which I come to understand the nature and importance of the work undertaken in these movements are all voiced by those who were or are involved in, or closely aligned with the environmental justice work they describe; in this article I will thus compare three social justice movements—the farm workers, the rubber tappers or
Seringueiros, and the Chipko movement. These groups now have a substantial history of organizing behind them and have successfully evolved over the years to meet new situations and demands. Their work reflects only a small sampling of the resistance work that is going on through education, civil disobedience, demonstrations and other means of protest.

I have chosen to use the term *environmental justice* because the concept has been defined in all three national contexts in compatible ways and because the intersection of the subterms *environmental* and *justice* indicates linguistically and historically the precise social juncture that the three movements share. Furthermore, the focus on environmental justice is imperative because of the mushrooming impact of environmental devastation on “Third” and “Fourth” World communities, especially on women and infants, in both the northern and southern hemispheres. I am particularly interested in the roles—in both leadership and support work—that women have taken as social environmentalists and the variety of ways that women have represented their perspectives on the struggles for environmental protection and social justice in both traditional and nontraditional cultural production.

Within the United States, much of the work done under the rubric of environmental justice has been centered around the disproportionate amount of toxins released in the neighborhoods and the worksites of people of color. Environmental racism has become a concern for institutions as historically diverse as the Environmental Protection Agency and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Internationally, race and ethnicity are also pivotal points in the constellations of environmental politics. In each country in which the environmental organizing that I discuss occurs, there is presently a similar spectrum of environmental oppression that affects the lifestyles, livelihoods and lifespans of various groups differently. Being poor, being a person of color, being an indigenous person, being an immigrant, and being a woman each work against one’s chances of having the choice of an economically and ecologically sustainable lifestyle in a relatively unpolluted, uncarcinogenic environment. Thus race, class, and gender are vital factors that must be studied in tandem in order strategically to resist what is most often corporate-sponsored ecocide and destruction of communities, livelihoods, cultural traditions, and personal health. Understanding the dynamics of these movements as portrayed by the people involved both as “victims” and leaders helps those of us more tangentially affected by environmental racism to know how to offer support and build alliances.

Contemporary narratives that demand environmental justice occur in testimonios, novels, theoretical and philosophical treatments, scholarly and journalistic articles, lectures, field trips, speeches, manifestos, testimonios, poetry, film, video, drama, performance art, guerrilla and gorilla theater,
radio programs, community flyers, installations, performance events, songs, field trips and various forms of static visual art—in particular, public art such as murals. This cultural work occurs in a variety of contexts: the workshop, recording studio, and gallery, at speaker’s podiums, in the streets, in publishing houses, at computers, and at copy machines. In all sites the artists, academics and activists develop strategies for resistance, education and community empowerment.

*Forged under the Sun/Forjada bajo el sol: The Life of Maria Elena Lucas* is the testimonio—edited and introduced by Fran Leeper Buss—of a Chicana farm worker, who has been involved in organizing work for the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) and the United Farm Workers (UFW), both predominantly Latina and Latino groups in the U.S. Southwest and Midwest; in addition to describing her life—growing up in South Texas, working in the fields and factories, and becoming politicized and involved in organizing and support work—Lucas’s book includes a play and poems, some of which have served as organizing tools. Lucas and Buss analyze gender politics and women’s leadership struggles within farm-worker organizations. Because pesticide poisoning can interfere with healthy human reproduction, women who are exposed to pesticides, and the children to whom they give birth, are at particularly high risk of suffering the sometimes deadly consequences of this dangerous agricultural practice. Thus the particular environmental justice issue of most importance to the farm-worker rights struggle has been the fight to regulate pesticide usage by growers. Sprayed by a crop duster herself, Lucas has been living for six years with the effects of having been poisoned with Sonalan.

In *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*, Vandana Shiva, a scientist and environmental feminist from India, writes extensively about the Chipko Movement, a group comprised primarily of women who are villagers in northern India. Vandana Shiva grounds her philosophical ecofeminism in the praxis of the women in the Chipko Movement and offers empirical evidence of the links between the oppression of “women, nature, tribals and peasants.” She discusses at length the resistance movements led by women to preserve their lifestyles and land from development perpetrated from the outside.

On December 22, 1988, Chico Mendes (Francisco Alves Mendes Filho) was assassinated in his home on the western edge of the Brazilian Amazon watershed. An interview conducted shortly before his death is the basis for *Fight for the Forest: Chico Mendes In His Own Words*, which tells of Chico Mendes’s evolution into a trade-union leader representing the rubber tappers, headquartered in Acre, Rio Branco, Brazil, who depend upon a sustainable habitat in the Amazon rainforest for their livelihoods. He discusses coalitions with Indian groups and empates, campaigns against forest clearance, and his early politicization and education, gained through the teaching of his friend Euclides Fernandes Tavora.
Testimonio as Historiography

But even more important to farm workers than the better wages and freedom from exploitation that United Farm Workers (UFW) contracts bring is protecting workers—and consumers—from systematic poisoning through the reckless use of agricultural toxics. . . . There is nothing we care more about than the lives and safety of our families. There is nothing we share more deeply in common with the people of North America than the safety of the food we all rely upon.—César Chávez (Hofrichter 164)

The United Farm Workers (UFW) has conducted an education campaign about the dangers of pesticides since the early 1970s and has attained national support for their grape boycott over the pesticide issue. María Elena Lucas’s Forged under the Sun/Forjada bajo el sol (1993) is one of the first testimonios that focuses on the struggles of farm workers in the U.S.—from the perspective of one Chicana farm worker—against the conditions that perpetuate oppression and, in particular, against pesticide poisoning. Because pesticide poisoning can interfere with healthy human reproduction, women who are exposed to pesticides and the children they give birth to, are at particularly high risk of suffering the often deadly consequences of this dangerous agricultural practice. Thus, the particular environmental justice issue of most importance to farm-worker rights (as César Chávez makes clear in the passage above) has been the regulation of pesticide usage by growers. Testimonios have been a means for many Third World women such as Lucas to describe their communities-in-struggle for outsiders. Testimonios develop strategies for resistance, education and community self-determination, and they help redistribute access to empowerment and knowledge.

Lucas’s writing serves a direct political purpose as a tool for organizing as well as education. Most of her family and her husband’s family suspect that her creativity is the work of the devil (99) and the fact that, despite this, she herself continues to relate her religion and politics in dynamic interaction through her creativity demonstrates the fortitude with which she sustains her commitments to politics, art, and religion. Her use of the Virgin of Guadalupe as farm worker and organizer, for example, is consistent with the UFW’s depiction of the Virgin on banners in their marches. Lucas’s description of a scene from one of her plays interprets her experiences through a socially conscious faith.

When Rosamaria is attacked by the people carrying the signs of her suffering, she falls and cries to God. Then a woman comes from behind. This is Mother Mary. She’s dressed as a farm worker. She wears her blue cape, but underneath she wears old pants and a shirt, old tennis shoes. She’s got a scarf and a basket next to
her, and she’s carrying something red in her hands. Two angels wait for her where she entered so everybody can tell who she is. But Rosamaría does not see the angels. (185)

Lucas emphasizes the similarity between her own experiences and this dramatic scene when she states: “In a way, Olgha came to me almost like the Virgin comes to Rosemaría in my play” (185). In the message that the Virgin delivers, UFW symbols replace Catholic ones: the UFW banner is the Virgin’s flag. These symbols demonstrate how Lucas’s use of religion is consistently both figurative and political. Discussing César Chávez, the Virgin tells her:

You will find him
where the sun sets
and the beast falls,
where a black eagle flies in my flag.
In the fields
where they sing “De Colores.”
There, reigning you shall find
Justice, Peace, God, and César Chávez. (185)

The play demonstrates Lucas’s own political conscientização process, a process she lays out as a blueprint for her farm-worker audience. The religious role models, with whom the farm workers are already familiar, are put forth as political role models. Lucas plays the role of translator between religious and secular codes.

Scenes in Lucas’s play dealing with exposure to pesticide are clearly drawn from her personal experience, as Lucas underscores elsewhere in the book (211, 227). In her introduction, Buss, the editor, describes the pesticide issue through a history of the farm workers’ experience.

[Since] the late 1940s, the vast majority of commercial crops have been sprayed with pesticides, which are presently available in about thirty-five thousand different commercial products or formulations. Among these is the herbicide Sonalan with which María Elena was poisoned. Agricultural workers are repeatedly exposed to these toxins, resulting in such immediate effects and long-term consequences as damage to the nervous system, disorders of the skin, severe allergies, cancer, birth defects, neurobehavioral deficits, neuropsychological changes, and reproductive and fertility problems. (15)

Perhaps most central to the collaboration of writer and editor in this text is the shared experience of sexist and patriarchal oppression on the border. Buss tells us about a difficult decision that Lucas faced in thinking about the political viability of a gender critique of the movement as well.
The importance of thinking out this process is crucial, because the inability to engage in constructive self-critique is often the Achilles’ heel of the progressive left. Lucas decided to discuss issues for which she does not have final answers, issues that may be less likely to split movements if they are brought onto the negotiation table, rather than sequestered away to harm the women who participate in the imposition of silence against themselves. After agonizing over the decision, María Elena has decided to speak out about the gender discrimination she experienced from the leadership of FLOC. While considering her decision, María Elena felt trapped in a condition faced by a multitude of women in progressive movements. To criticize aspects of the movement is to risk that these criticisms will be used by forces wishing to discredit the movement itself. However, to remain silent is to sentence other women activists in similar situations to the belief that they are alone, and to blunt the potential for equality. (23)

Lucas’s indictments are consistently couched with respect for the men with whom she shares political work. She repeatedly expresses frustration at her internal contradiction of dedication to the struggle of the farm workers and admiration for its leaders, but frustration at the patriarchal relationships that are maintained. This battle is exacerbated by the fact that, though she realizes that sexism is “not good organizing,” she is not in a position to demand restructuring because she is the only woman representative and is sometimes not even contacted for decision making.

Lucas’s concern for the underrepresented extends beyond gender relationships. She is interested in how the farm-worker struggle can cross national borders and build alliances (in linked struggle) in the parts of the Third World where more lax environmental laws attract companies who produce or distribute products that have become outlawed in the U.S. This blatant disregard for human well-being has provoked an outcry from the United Farm Workers and other progressive organizations in the U.S. for years, yet the practice has not been abated.

Lucas’s discussion of farm-worker organizing for environmental, social and economic justice introduces several issues that are echoed in Third World and Fourth World (indigenous communities) sites both within and outside of the First World. She narrates the denial of basic human rights to a healthful environment, sustainable work, and self-determined life style that is commonplace for those within farm worker communities, and she shows how the resulting injustices are largely inflicted upon communities from the outside, often by corporate interests.
Amazonian Seringueiro Organizations

Who gets the risks? The risks are given to the unsuspecting consumer and the poor workforce. And who gets the benefits? The benefits are only for corporations for the moneymakers.—César Chávez in No Grapes

Due to limited literacy, little direct communication with the exterior, and the power of opposing landowners and governments, the rainforest is very rarely discussed in the words of those who have the most to lose, and who have already lost most immediately from its destruction; thus Chico Mendes’s testimonio Fight for the Forest: Chico Mendes In His Own Words (1989) is of particular importance. In addition to providing an historical and political analysis of rubber in the Amazon, Mendes’s testimonio includes photographs, maps and drawings by rubber tappers. These materials, and the fact that his testimonio has been translated into English, almost immediately demonstrate an intention to reach an audience outside the Amazon watershed: an audience of concerned citizens from the English-speaking world, whose support would aid the forest peoples’ movement. This text is, first and foremost, an informative one—a fact which does not diminish, but rather enhances its formal, artistic elements. Mendes’s narration carries out the spirit of the testimonio, as described by John Beverley:

In testimonio . . . it is the intentionality of the narrator that is paramount. The situation of narration in testimonio involves an urgency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival, and so on, implicated in the act of narration itself. The position of the reader of testimonio is akin to that of a jury member in a courtroom. (4)

Mendes relates little of his personal life. When he does speak of himself, it is to describe how he grew up like other rubber tappers, or how (as in the case of his unique education) his life differed in ways that made him able to be a spokesperson for them:

My life began just like that of all rubber tappers, as a virtual slave bound to do the bidding of his master. I started work at nine years old, and like my father before me, instead of learning my ABC I learned how to extract latex from a rubber tree. From the last century until 1970, schools were forbidden on any rubber estate in the Amazon. The rubber estate owner’s wouldn’t allow it. First, because if a rubber tapper’s children went to school, they would learn to read, write and add up and would discover to what extent they were being exploited. (15)
Mendes consistently positions himself as a representative of a group rather than as an individual, in a strategy that privileges the rubber tappers' movement to preserve the source of their livelihoods and lifestyles; he describes the specifics of his own life primarily when they are relevant to distinctive opportunities which led to his development as an astute revolutionary. Most important was his relationship with Euclides Fernandes Tavora which began when Tavora was living in "double-exile" in the Brazilian rainforest about three hours away "along a narrow path in the forest" (15). After he stopped to chat one day, Chico and his father decided to visit Tavora. Chico says, "At that time I didn't even know what a newspaper was, but I showed an interest in them and I think he realized I was keen" (15). Mendes describes how a mentor relationship developed and tells how Tavora slowly began to reveal his past experiences fighting for the rights of the workers in Brazil and Bolivia. Mendes not only learned to read and write but he developed his political acumen by listening with Tavora to international radio news—Radio Moscow, the Voice of America and the BBC were broadcast in Portuguese every afternoon and these, Mendes reports, "had a lot of power in the Amazon" (18). Euclides Tavora first suggested that Chico Mendes join the union.

In 1968 Mendes attempted to organize the rubber tappers, but lack of support and the strict government dictatorship made progress difficult. When, in 1975, Mendes heard that the first union was being formed in Brasilia he "went straight there, without waiting for an invitation" (21). He became involved in union leadership almost immediately and then returned to Xapuri to set up a union there. In 1979 the Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party) was formed and Mendes joined. Mendes was also an active member of the National Council of Rubber Tappers and became president of the Xapuri Rural Workers' Union (Mendes 27).

Mendes explains how the violence that would eventually lead to his own assassination increased as the landowners, seeing resistance movements form among the workers, became worried and began shooting resistance leaders; there was no intervention from the police to curb this violence (30). Along with the rubber tappers' movement, an educational project was formed and in 1980 Projeto Seringueiro was created "to encourage the rubber tappers to identify more closely with the forest, to understand it, to learn more about it and defend it" (32). Mendes describes how the idea of an "extractive reserve was formed when they realized they needed a plan to both preserve the forest and develop the regional economy. He explains the concept: "We mean land that is under public ownership but the rubber tappers and other workers that live on that land should have the right to live and work there" (41). Other workers include those involved in the harvests of brazil nuts, babacu and jute. When asked what else should be done, Mendes suggests that universities throughout Brazil "should spend time researching the Amazon region. I believe if this happened, and if the
government took it all seriously, then in ten years the Amazon region could be very rich and have an important role in the national economy” (44). Mendes, despite his extended exposure to revolutionary politics through Tavora, advocates a role in—rather than an overturning of—the Brazilian economic system.

Mendes’s identification of a role for the university in the enfranchisement of the Amazonian dispossessed is paralleled by many grassroots groups’ demands of educational institutions in the U.S. This observation brings into question the sincerity of university rhetoric that often expresses a desire for “reaching out” to historically excluded groups defined by race, ethnicity and class, while ignoring those groups’ articulation of how the university could serve their struggles. Mendes talks about specific tactics of the movement and its plans for the future. His discussion of violence versus non-violence is engendered by practical considerations. Violence is not the preferred means of struggle, but he does not dismiss the possibility that in the future it might become necessary.

So far we have used non-violent forms of struggle, and that’s how we aim to keep it. If some day we need to use violence, it will be because we have been forced to do so by the circumstances, by the system and the policies of the landowners. Thus far one of the most effective strategies has been the empates. (70)

This differs in emphasis from the discussion of non-violence that comes out of the farm-worker and Chipko movements, but the difference seems more rooted in circumstance than ideology. Mendes’s description of the production of an empate illustrates how the rubber tappers have adopted a strategy for their demonstrations with Brazilian society in mind.

They are organized in the following way. When a community is threatened by deforestation it gets in touch with other communities in the area. They all get together in a mass meeting in the middle of the forest and organize teams of people to take the lead in confronting workers cutting down the trees with their chainsaws and so on—but all this in a peaceful way.... One important point is that the whole community—men women and children—takes part in the empate. The women stay at the front to prevent the police [who offer protection to the landowners] from shooting us. The police know if they open fire, they will kill women and children (70).

Since 1975, Mendes reported they had held over 45 empates, leading to 400 arrests, 40 torture cases and several assassinations but also saving more than 1,200,000 hectares of forest.
Mendes’s description of an *empate* illustrates how women play vital but not decision-making roles. Women lead the empates, because they are less likely to be shot at. Thus, in an interesting role reversal, the women who support the movement defend the men physically. These women have no leadership roles in decision-making—at least in part because the movement is occupation-oriented and the job of the rubber tapper is a male occupation in Brazil. However, Mary Allegretti, an educated urban woman, serves as a main representative for the movement in Sao Paulo, and has been the main facilitator of international representation, albeit largely behind the scenes.

*Fight for the Forest* is an informative document explicating the forest peoples’ struggle in the Amazon. It is a discourse of the subaltern, a discourse which has been heard and discussed in the First World as well as in Brazil. The text is only one aspect of the multi-faceted means by which Chico Mendes helped bring the question of justice and preservation in the rainforest to much of the rest of the world. His travels to receive the Global 500 award in 1987, for example, gave him a name in international environmental circles. However, it was his death that established a focal point for international concern over the destruction of the Amazon rainforest. In *The Fate of the Forest*, Hecht and Cockburn describe this phenomenon: “There are moments in the always ambiguous dialectic between First World conscience and Third World conditions when the former’s concerns reach a critical mass. The murder of Chico Mendes had caught the attention of North America and Western Europe, and presented the plight of the forest like a Passion play” (186). Just as Mendes’s discourse is socially based, so is his death. Its international significance shocked his opponents: “In the wake of Mendes’s assassination, the Brazilian government and the murderers themselves had been stunned by the international outcry over what they regarded as the very ordinary termination of an obscure labor leader” (Hecht 186). The rubber tappers’ and indigenous peoples’ movements that demand their peoples’ rights to sustainable lifestyles in the Amazon rainforest watershed have received international media attention and environmentalist support. Narratives like *Fight for the Forest* have made this unprecedented support possible.

**South Asian Chipko Resistance**

*We’re declaring war, war on the pesticides that are killing our people.*—César Chávez in *No Grapes*

The Chipko Movement, which has evolved from demonstrations to bar detrimental outside development during the 1970’s, has become a coalition of villages working on a wide range of forestry issues, and
cooperative replanting and tree nurturance. They have forestalled major
corporate development in the area and begun reforestation projects. At
times the movement has split predominantly down gendered lines—in these
instances most of the women oppose outside corporate development which
most men support. Their opposition is based on the women’s recognition of
the ways in which development and the global-market economy are
particularly harmful to them, and through them, to their villages, because of
their more vulnerable position in the gender-specific work roles by which
their communities operate. Their success was recently heralded in The India
Magazine: “Chipko, the unique ecological movement, led by the women of
Garhwal to save trees, has assumed folkloric status” (Saidullah 30). The
contemporary “folkloric status” has a precedent, as Vandana Shiva
explains: “Three hundred years ago more than 300 members of the Bishnoi
community in Rajasthan, led by a woman called Amrita Devi, sacrificed
their loves to save their sacred khejri trees by clinging to them. With that
event begins the recorded history of Chipko” (67). The contemporary
movement has, as well, been led by women, but Shiva recounts the names
and acts of women that others overlook.

It is from observing and working with the women in the Chipko
Movement that Shiva grounds her philosophical ecofeminism and offers
empirical evidence of the links between the oppression of “women, nature,
tribals and peasants.” She discusses at length the resistance movements led
by women to preserve their lifestyles and land from development based on
what she sees as patriarchal capitalism. In the following passage the
ideological split is illustrated:
The “industrial materials standpoint” is the standpoint
of a capitalist and patriarchal reductionist forestry
which splits the living diversity and democracy of the
forest into commercially useful dead wood which it
valorises, and ecologically valuable weeds which it
characterizes as waste. This waste, however, is the
wealth of biomass that maintains nature’s water and
nutrient cycles and satisfies the needs of food, fuel,
fodder, fertilizer, fibre and medicine of agricultural
communities. (65)
The history of environmental degradation in India is directly linked to the
British colonial project and that history is the forerunner of the detrimental
development that is part and parcel of global capitalism.

Indigenous forest management, as largely women’s
domain for producing sustenance, was thus in an
evolved state when the British arrived. Since the
British interest in forests was exclusively for
commercial timber, indigenous expertise became

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redundant for their interest and was replaced by a one-dimensional, masculinist science of forestry.

When the British colonised India, they first colonised her forests. Ignorant of the wealth of knowledge of local people to sustainably manage the forests, they displaced local rights, local needs and local knowledge and reduced this primary source of life into a timber mine. Women's subsistence economy based on the forest was replaced by the commercial economy of British colonialism. (Shiva 61)

Shiva emphasizes why woman and peasants must be managers of their lives and natural surroundings; their lives are the most direct basis for a theoretical understanding of a sustainable lifestyle that benefits the local ecosystem: “Since it is women's work that protects and conserves nature’s life in forestry and in agriculture, and through such conservation work, sustains human life through ensuring the provision of food and water, the destruction of the integrity of forest ecosystems is most vividly and concretely experienced by peasant women” (65).

Shiva discusses Mira Behn's role in beginning the contemporary Chipko Movement, quoting from a mimeo by Behn which describes how she discovered that environmental destruction due to forestry was destroying local people's homes:

Within a year or two, I witnessed a shocking flood: as the swirling waters increased, [there] came first bushes and boughs and great logs of wood, then in the turmoil of more and more water came whole trees, cattle of all sizes and from time to time a human being clinging to the remnants of his hut. . . . The sight of these disastrous floods led me each summer to investigate the area north of Pashulok whence they came. Merciless deforestation as well as cultivation of profitable pines in place of broad-leaf trees was clearly the cause. This in turn led me to hand over charge of Pashulok to the government staff and to undertake a community project in the valley of the Bhilangana. Here I built a little centre, Gopal Ashram, and concentrated on the forest problem. (69)

The stories that Shiva tells are local ones that narrate popular protests in which women win their battles through performative acts such as embracing the trees to interrupt the cutting, and singing responses to the local pro-development men's retorts. In 1977 in the village of Adwani, Bachni Devi, the wife of a headman of the village led resistance against her own husband, a local contractor. As Shiva describes it, “The women tied sacred threads to the trees as a token of their vow of protection . . . a large number of women
from 15 villages guarded the forests while discourses from ancient texts on their role in Indian life went on uninterruptedly" (75). Shiva explains that this successful protest was a turning point for the movement:

The Adwani satyagraha created new directions for Chipko. The movement's philosophy and politics now evolved to reflect the needs and knowledge of the women. Peasant women came out, openly challenging the reductionist commercial forestry system on the one hand and the local men who had been colonized by that system, cognitively, economically and politically, on the other. (77)

Conclusions

María Elena Lucas, Chico Mendes and Vandana Shiva tell stories of local communities organizing to protect local lifestyles in accordance with an agricultural system based on sustainability and nourishment for those communities. All are voices that interrupt the environmentally and socially destructive forces such as colonialism, imperialism, patriarchy, and global capitalism. All three are spokespeople for communities that are fighting for the basic human and civil rights of self-determination within conflicting "new world orders." As such, they offer models through their words and leadership that allow all of us to think more profoundly about how to support and join those like César Chávez, who have made "vivid the human face of social change."

Notes

1 For most of the farm workers and seringueiros, or rubber tappers, recent immigrant status complicates the disenfranchisement they face on many levels. As Louis Mendoza notes, "For people of Mexican descent, movement is usually generated by social, economic, or military displacement" (22); the rubber tappers as well are largely displaced immigrants from northeastern Brazil, a region that has historically suffered both drought and socio-political strife. For deterritorialized and nomadic peoples, discrimination based on the sedentarism of national structures constructed by pre-dominately settled peoples, often leads to disregard of the immigrant or nomadic community's environmental as well as other civil rights.
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The death of Cesar Chavez in April, 1993, surprised and saddened not only the Chicano Community, but the entire nation as well. His status as a national union leader and movement organizer was well recognized by the world. His success at ideologically unifying the unprotected and often unwilling farm workers of the San Joaquin Valley in California has inspired an entire generation to move into action for a cause. While creating many enemies among powerful growers and politicians in California, he gained that many more admirers as a gifted and ingenious organizer.

According to Chavez, there was no master plan or any step-by-step scheme to his organizing strategy (Levy 161). Even so, various recurring elements can be seen as integral to the success of the United Farm Workers (UFW) union. Non-violence and volunteerism were essential components from its ideological formation to the present. As the farm workers' cause began to receive wider backing, Chavez emphasized the need to have public action rather than public policy as the way to achieve the union's goals. Therefore, to mobilize the public into mass non-violent action, Chavez initiated various boycotts as a form of steady pressure where the growers would feel it. The boycott has been the most effective form of mass protest for the union because it has received international attention and support.

Chavez saw the appeal and power that non-violent struggles had achieved in history. He was greatly influenced by Gandhi and Gandhi's success at accomplishing his goals through non-violent methods. Non-violence governed the actions of the union members throughout strikes and negotiations. So when the growers responded to pickets with violence, such as speeding through the lines, the farm workers maintained their peace. By sustaining their non-violent tactics, they received the respect and endorsement of the public.
This, in turn, greatly helped the cause secure favorable national attention and support for the union’s strikes and boycotts.

Volunteerism became a self-imposed sign of ultimate dedication for Cesar Chavez and his cadre of organizers. Not only having to support his family, but also finding time and money to organize the San Joaquin Valley farm workers left Chavez in a continual state of poverty. Since he did not have money to pay anyone, most of the first organizers were volunteers. These first volunteers were mostly students from the SNCC (Students Non-violent Coordinating Committee) or CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) who then taught the farm workers how to work for a cause without using violence (Levy 196-7). Other organizers who soon joined him, such as Dolores Huerta and Gil Padilla, were often asked to give up their jobs and dedicate themselves completely to the farm workers’ struggle, just as he had. Not many people had the dedication to sacrifice their personal life for a cause. But Chavez saw the union as a collective entity, where the individual need for personal gain had to be put aside for the good of the group. This display of devotion secured not only the farm workers’ trust, but their dedication to the cause as well. Chavez would soon have the farm workers organizing themselves, creating their own union with their donations of time and money.

When the strikes were no longer effective, due to the powerful maneuvers the growers were using to crush the union, Chavez and the UFW turned to a wider form of mass protest. He saw the power in mobilizing the public into a non-violent boycott as an effective force against the growers. The boycott was implemented to broaden support in the cities and across the nation for the farm workers’ cause. The organizers staged various boycotts across the United States and Europe. These boycotts were supported by such a large segment of the population that they successfully pressured the growers into negotiating with the union. Mass public action proved the most effective strategy for the UFW’s victories over the growers. Public action over public policy continues now as a guiding principle and goal in the ideology of the UFW.

The following interviews were graciously granted by Dolores Huerta, a UFW organizer for thirty years; Mark Grossman, Cesar Chavez’s speech writer and press agent; and Rita Medina, Chavez’s sister and UFW organizer. All the interviews were conducted by phone in January 1994. Mark Grossman was interviewed on January 3rd from his office in Sacramento. Dolores Huerta was interviewed on January 12th from UFW headquarters in Delano. Rita Medina was interviewed on January 24th from her home in east San Jose.

Non-Violence

Mark Grossman: Non-violence was one of Cesar’s main strategies, the others being volunteerism and the boycotts. Years later, another theme emerges, the idea of public action as opposed to public policy. Of course it is well known that he was influenced by Gandhi, this is where many of his ideas came about.
Q: Was Cesar always a non-violent person?

Rita Medina: Mainly, it started when we were young, with my mom. My mom was very non-violent. She always got it into our heads, non-violence, and you’re not supposed to fight, you know. So actually, it started when we were growing up, my mom always taught us to be non-violent. And then of course he read the books of Gandhi.

Q: How did the concept of non-violence come about? Was it deliberately planned or something that just happened to come about in the course of UFW’s actions?

Dolores Huerta: It was something that was very deliberately planned. Cesar made it clear to everybody that non-violence had to be our commitment. It first got exercised during the first strike that the Teamsters did on us. When the Teamsters moved in on us, they started beating people up. Then people had to decide whether we were going to remain non-violent or not. Cesar told us that we had to remain non-violent. The majority of the people were for it. Of course we had a couple of hot heads who wanted to settle the score with the growers and the teamsters. They were contained by the majority of us.

Volunteerism

Q: Why was it that no one received large salaries and how did you manage to get so many people to volunteer?

Rita: Like I said he [Cesar] started without any money, so he didn’t have money to pay anyone, period. Everything was volunteer and donations. Up to now, we ask for donations for everything. They didn’t have any money and couldn’t pay anyone; he didn’t have any money to start the union to begin with. After the union started getting some money, then people got money to live, for rent and food. Cesar gave his life for the union and never got a lot of money. Even in the beginning, when they were paying ten dollars a week, they started with five dollars a week, he would get the five dollars and donate them back to the union, because they didn’t have any money and he said he didn’t need it.

Dolores: Cesar read all about Gandhi very thoroughly and he had a tremendous impact on his thinking and his actions. In fact we talked about getting everybody to wear manta, you know the Mexican manta, to make that like the union symbol, so that everybody could recognize us by our manta, the manta shirt. We even thought of carrying the symbol even further than what Gandhi had done. I guess it kind of symbolizes how the farm workers go around wearing second hand clothes all the time like from the thrift shop. But Cesar’s
whole idea was that you can’t go around helping poor people if you are living much better than they are.

The core idea of organizing was to get people to do for themselves, not to do it for them. This was one of Cesar’s great strengths. Manuel Chavez and Cesar, the great organizers of the union, they put the responsibility right back to the workers. You want a union? O.K. then you got to build it. You got to pay for it. That was a very big foundation at the time of our organization.

But then you, on the other hand, as the person who is trying to organize them, how are you going to go over there in a brand new car and you know, the people aren’t going to trust you. Right? You have to be at their level. Then of course later on it turned out to be because of the strike that people worked well with the strikers and gave donations first and foremost; people who were part of the union already knew about not working for money you know.

And then of course volunteers came into the organization especially from the outside—not the campesinos, but those that came from the outside. You know, it was O.K. for a while. But then they missed the luxuries, the good clothes, the good life, and what have you.

And a lot of the antagonism against Cesar and the union. They didn’t have the integrity. They [said] “Look, we don’t want to live like this anymore, we want more money.” Especially when we got contracts, you know, to help farm workers and they were getting a better wage. They started saying, “No, no, no. Why should they get more money than us?” There was a big split in the organization over that. But those people left and we stayed and started working on that basis, you know? It was on a subsistence basis—people get what they need, nobody starves, people get money for their housing—but there were also no luxuries.

Boycotts

Q: How did the idea of boycotts come about?

Dolores: That came about because we tried organizing, we tried striking. They put our people in jail, they got injunctions against the courts. So we were kind of pushed against the wall. And then again, with the philosophy of non-violence, what do you do, you know? So then we came up with the idea of taking the fight of the farm workers to the city and asking the people in the city to boycott the grapes. That’s how the idea of the boycotts was born. This was patterned after the boycotts of the civil rights movement, you know CORE the bus boycott in Selma. We just transferred that whole concept to our struggle.

Q: How many boycotts have there been?

Dolores: There have probably been about sixty boycotts, sixty or seventy. I think the major boycotts were like Grape One, Grape Two, Grape Three, then we did the lettuce, we did Gallo wine, then now we’re doing Coca-Cola.
Q: I understand that you were responsible for organizing the boycotts on the east coast.

Dolores: It started in Chicago, then New York and that was the first grape boycott. Then I came back when after Cesar did that first fast cause he was stricken, he went to work for Bobby Kennedy for his political campaign. That’s when he was paralyzed for about a year and so I was organizing the boycotts on the east coast. From Chicago to Florida to Michigan all the way to New York, Boston, all over the eastern coast. Then I came out here [California] and Cesar was stricken in bed, couldn’t move, so I began to do the boycotts on the west coast.

Q: Is organizing these strikes a difficult thing to do?

Dolores: No, of course not. People want to help, the American public wants to help, they just have to know what to do. You have to give them a way that they can do it.

Q: Isn’t it true that Cesar had a disdain for politics and politicians?

Dolores: Cesar got along with the Kennedys, Jerry Brown—he did respect Jerry Brown—and there were a few other people, too: Estaben Torres, Congressman Howard Berman, the one who fought for amnesty for the farm-workers.

Mark: Another theme in the UFW strategies that emerges in later years is the idea of public action versus public policy. Cesar believed in the idea of public action as opposed to public policy. He believed that the only way to truly get anything done was through public action. He didn’t believe that public policy was the way to create change. As a matter of fact he had a disdain for politics and most politicians. Organizing at a grass roots level was the way to go.

Dolores: What we were trying to do with the concept of public action was we were trying to merge the idea of the boycott. The boycott gives it a public arena, right? We wanted to make it a much broader statement than just the boycott. We wanted it to include other types of activity. So that’s how we came up with the idea of public action.

Q: Who are the greatest enemies of the UFW?
**Dolores:** The growers, then the teamsters who are the agents of the growers, the labor contractors—they are the agents of the growers, right? The politicians that screw over us—they are agents of the growers.

**Mark:** The UFW has had a number of successful strikes but ultimately they were defeated, if looked at from a historical perspective. The reason being that the growers had an oversupply of cheap labor dating back to the late nineteenth century. Also, many times the growers crushed the movement violently. The most publicized of these were the deaths that occurred to UFW supporters in 1972, 1973, 1979, and 1983. Cesar took all losses personally and maintained contact with the families to see what it was he could do for them.

**Q:** Is it safe to say that you, like Cesar, have a disdain for politicians?

**Dolores:** Cesar didn’t have a disdain. What Cesar always said was—and I’m going to give you an exact quote—he said, “You only have a two-year warranty on politicians.” Now you can quote me on this one: “Politics is like water. If you don’t have enough you die of thirst; you have too much, you drown. You have to learn how to swim.” This is what you must learn to do with the political system. This is a political country. We can’t ignore it.

**Q:** Is there any other strategy that you utilized to help make your organizing successful?

**Dolores:** The people. We have farm workers who we trained and are now attorneys. We trained an awful lot of people who are very active in the movement—there’s just a lot of people who were trained in the UFW. It’s like the UFW was the beginning of the Chicano movement. We were like the impetus, you know? It led the way.

**Mark:** Cesar believed in the inevitability of his cause because of the growing number of Chicanos/Mexicanos.

**Q:** When I spoke with Dolores, she told me that there might be another boycott coming up, this time with Coca-Cola. Could you elaborate?

**Rita:** It hasn’t really started. We’re going to all the establishments that are selling Coca-Cola, restaurants, service stations, grocery stores, whatever. We are telling them now that we’re in the process of doing a boycott if Coca-Cola doesn’t negotiate with the UFW on a contract they have with Minute Maid in Florida. So if they don’t negotiate, if they don’t get something going, then we’re going to boycott.
Q: Why the boycott with Coca-Cola—what are they doing wrong?

Rita: Coca-Cola sold the Minute Maid contract that the union had for twenty-one years. The farm workers are out of a job, out of all the benefits. [In the old contract,] they had vision, they had medical, they had paid vacations, they had unemployment, all these benefits. Now that Coca-Cola sold the contract to the other company—well, they are non-union. They might not want to contract through the UFW. That’s why we might boycott Coca-Cola: because they shouldn’t have sold it. So if they don’t negotiate a new contract, then we’ll boycott.

Q: Will you boycott just in California?

Rita: All over the United States, Canada, Mexico, Europe. The first grape boycott in '68 went all over Europe and everywhere. We’ll send our supporters over there. This new boycott we have with the grapes, we’ve been going to Hong Kong and Spain and all those places. Cesar went to Hong Kong and Barcelona before he passed away.

Q: Anything else coming up with the UFW that we should know about?

Rita: There will be the dedication of the Plaza de Cesar Chavez Park here in San Jose, complete with the new sign and all on the 27th of March [1994]. There will be a pilgrimage from Delano to Sacramento to celebrate Cesar’s life. It will start the 31st of March [the date of Cesar’s birth] in Delano and we intend to finish in Sacramento on the 23rd of April [the date of his death].

Conclusion

Although Cesar Chavez did not recognize one set master plan for organizing, various key strategies obviously affected the success of the union. Non-violence achieved public respect and support for the UFW. It was a means of achieving their goal through patience and perseverance that gave them strength, and often exasperated their enemies into violence. Volunteerism helped gain the trust and consolidation of the farm workers into a working brotherhood, thus creating a stronger union. The co-dependence, dedication and trust this selflessness created within the union was often the strongest inspiration for having the farm workers join in their own cause. The ideology set up by Chavez, of public action taking precedent over public policy, was essential to creating an atmosphere in which ways were promoted for the union to act as one in public. The boycott fit in beautifully. It was a non-violent way of gaining mass public participation for the farm workers’ cause. Boycotts have created an arena for involvement for a public that would otherwise not be able
to participate. Chavez believed that his strategy of coordinating a mass, non-violent public protest with thousands of volunteers would work.

In remembering Chavez a year after his death, one must recognize the spontaneous, often inspired-by-the-situation tactics he used for organizing. His appeal to people’s humanity can be seen as one of his greatest organizing strategies. Even so, his skill at bringing together such an ideologically as well as physically distant group as the migrant farm workers of the San Joaquin Valley gained him international attention.

Notes

1 Under the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) of 1935, collective bargaining between labor and management and the emergence of union leaders is protected except specifically for farm workers (Matthiessen 5).

2 In an interview with Pat Hoffman, Chavez explained the connection between subsistence and community.

Works Cited


People remember when Kennedy died... it's like that for us.
We had to be here. —Ruben Chavez

When people speak about John F. Kennedy's assassination, they invariably ask where we were when we first heard the news of his killing. Most of us remember where we were, what we were doing, and the immense feelings of sadness and emotional turmoil we experienced upon hearing the news. If someone were to ask me where I was when I heard the news of César Chávez's death, I would recall vividly a drive over the Santa Cruz Mountains. I was going to San José to do another interview for the life history of one of the subjects for my research on Chicana/Latino leadership formation. I switched the radio from one station to another, hoping that what I was hearing had not happened. Yet, the news came over the airwaves again and again: "César Chávez is dead."

Who was César Chávez? What did he represent? How was he perceived? How did Chávez influence the leadership and activism of those he inspired to work toward social change? If one is to measure César Chávez's leadership, it can best be done through the reflections of other organizers, activists, and leaders who knew or worked with him. The following is a series of such reflections.

The Chávez Interviews

As I asked those who were involved in the Chicano Movement or who have supported the farm workers' struggle about their loss, most expressed a sense of disbelief. This seems to be the common thread in responding to the loss. Some recalled where they were. Others spoke of
experiencing a void, an emptiness and loss of direction upon hearing the news. Some expressed regret at not having been more recently active in the struggle and emphatically professed a recommitment to the struggle for social justice. César no a muerto porque su espíritu continua en la lucha, emerges as a mantra for dealing with our loss.

Jenny Alejandrez, a UFW supporter and anti-violence activist, spoke of that day. She remembered being at home. “I felt a great loss. I felt saddened. I cried because we had lost a great leader. He was a great man, and he was somebody we could look up to, who showed us direction.” Immediately after having voiced these thoughts, almost as if to make her loss more palpable, she reminisced about the honor she felt upon meeting Chávez at a conference in Fresno.

Like Jenny, Celia Organista, director of Proyecto Adelante, spoke of feeling a sense of loss when she heard the news. However, she also identified her loss as different from that which she felt as a young idealist who worked in the 1960s Kennedy campaign. For her, JFK’s death was more personal because it came with the loss of her idealism. She remembered hearing of Chávez’s death in her Santa Cruz County office: “I felt more sad for the community than for myself personally. Losing César was different because I felt more sadness for the people who were going to be directly impacted by his loss than for myself.”

Sofía Mendoza, an activist and community organizer, recalled being at home where she got a call from one of Chávez’s family members in San José. When I asked her how she had felt, she said that she had felt an emotional void: “He was one of my mentors.” For Sofía, Chávez’s loss meant losing the reinforcement she got from her interactions with him and the other organizers who had recently left her life. She recalled being told by Chávez “With us organizers it’s just different. It’s like all our feelings come into play, when we do our work.” As she reflected, Chávez’s death was a great personal loss because other people who were touched by her connection to him were also going to feel the loss. Because of prior experience with farm labor struggles—her father was an organizer during the Lemon Grove Strike in Filmore—her affiliation with the UFW was the natural and unending organizing relationship that Sofía had maintained.

The unifying theme in these comments is loss. The sense of loss experienced at John Kennedy’s death was imbued with the idealism of the 1960s and is etched in the national consciousness. Chávez’s loss, despite his thirty years of tenacious involvement in the labor movement, has yet to be appreciated. However, Chávez’s influence on the leaders he inspired, mentored, and motivated is embedded in their ideals and actions.

Who Was César Chávez?

After losing their family ranch, the Chávez family survived as migrant farmworkers in the stream of field work “usually landing in San
José for the fall and winter harvests," finally settling in San José in the early 1940s. Chávez established a special relationship with San José residents, activists, organizers, and leaders. In their recollection of Chávez, they remember him as a complex individual. Chávez began his march toward prominence in San José as an organizer for the Community Services Organization (CSO) from 1952 to 1962. In a Mercury News interview, Chávez recalled:

I was working in apricot orchards near town and living with my family in the rough East San Jose Barrio called Sal Si Puedes (Get Out If You Can) . . . . What followed was a frenetic 40 days and nights as we registered 4,000 new voters—the first such drive in Sal Si Puedes.5

When reflecting on their leadership interactions with Chávez, leaders speak about the community organizer who understood the meaning of mobilizing from the bottom up, and the migrant urban Chicano who selflessly returned to the fields to organize farmworkers.

Remembering the emergence of Chávez as a leader, Eugene García, Professor of Education and Dean of Social Sciences at the University of California, Santa Cruz, presented an understanding of the man as influenced by his social surroundings. García accounted for Chávez attributes, by placing these in a specific historical context. According to García, Chávez rose to the occasion aided by the circumstances that fanned an agricultural movement in California. Along the way, Chávez inspired others in different parts of the United States to organize. According to García

César Chávez was produced by a set of circumstances. Certainly he had a personality and a set of values and fire, and so forth, but clearly, if farm workers weren’t being so badly dealt with, he wouldn’t have been a leader.

Garcia is not devaluing Chávez’s presence and influence in the Chicano Movement, and the farm workers’ struggle in particular; rather he is emphasizing the historical, social and political conditions that contributed to identifying Chávez as a leader.

For those individuals who had an opportunity to work with Chávez directly, like Sofía Mendoza, another story emerged:

[He was] a common everyday person who loved people, regardless of color. He was fearless. He never stopped struggling. He was a person who always gave; he never took. He wore in the fields what he wore everyday — his plaid shirt and work clothes. He was a hard worker.

Her recollections of Chávez reflect an understanding of a working-class person who knew common working individuals, and accepted them
regardless of their class, ethnicity, or politics. San José Vice Mayor Blanca Alvarado recalled a compassionately committed human being. While voicing her regret for not remaining as strong a supporter of the leader and his movement in their most recent struggles with the boycott of pesticides, Alvarado said:

César Chávez is somebody that I just adored. I mean, I idolized him so much, and I regret that I didn’t do more for him and for his cause. . . . I remember the wonderful, wonderful model of humanity, dignity, and respect that this quiet man epitomized. He was a gentle giant who believed so very strongly in his cause, and, because he believed so strongly in his cause, he was able to get the rest of us, or so many, many more of us, to embrace his cause and to feel passionately about it like he did.

While Alvarado presented a complex image of a quiet, yet intensely committed organizer and leader, Emestina García, a long-time activist, evaluated Chávez’s commitment to others as a source of strength for the movement. For García, Chávez was the reflection of selflessness, emphasizing that concern for himself always came after concern for others. He believed in his cause so much that he would give himself to other causes looking to create unity. As García put it,

*César Chávez siempre miraba por el prójimo; el no estaba mirando por que tanto hay en esto para mi? Nunca se hizo rico. Y si miraba que había injusticia allí te la decía; if he saw that, there, allí te lo decía, “esto está mal y correct it.”*

Chávez’s sense of justice was so great that he consciously made an effort to identify those injustices he witnessed. Then he would bring these issues to the attention of others, expecting them to correct these weaknesses on their own. García continued:

*[El no andaba buscando crédito] y tampoco andaba echándole habladuras o celos a la gente . . . y si había una junta de alguien que no era de él, he would go, pero no iba a instigar o a quebrar la unidad que tenían, el se sentaba y oía; he would support. He would support whatever was going on, and that’s what I call a leader.*

As García pointed out, for Chávez, confrontation was an above-board and open process. According to her, jealousy was not in his vocabulary; Chávez worked for unity. The theme of selflessness, unity, and commitment arose once again as Félix Alvarez, a cultural and community activist, elaborated on César’s commitment to his people:
As a leader] César Chávez was committed to the whole group rather than to himself. Yes, in his life, he demonstrated commitment to fighting for farm workers, fighting for a union, fighting for a religiosity, even. César was multifaceted; he wasn’t just one thing, even though people identified him with farm labor.

Thus, for Felix, César was more than a leader of farm workers; he influenced goals and policies in other arenas. While working with the union [His leadership] touched many other points of the spectrum . . . he went from a leader to a great leader ...

I think César even surpassed being a great leader because he became a leader who went beyond his immediate group. He reached a status of international focus.

From Alvarez’s perspective, Chávez was internationally recognized as a man of peace and a humanist concerned with the welfare of those who work for their sustenance. For Alvarez and other leaders, Chávez was an accurate representation of the farm working person he struggled to defend. For example, Alvarez observed, Chávez did not expend much energy promoting his particular ethnic identification, yet he was able to represent his ethnicity in the ways he carried himself and in his actions with and for his people. Alvarez continued,

his identity as a Chicano, being Mexicano, being Indio, or being part of the ancestry of the people from here was clear, even though he didn’t go around banging that drum. He didn’t have to tell you that he was brown; he was brown. He didn’t have to tell you that he thought in Indian ways because he acted in an Indian way.

Clearly Alvarez did not perceive Chávez as a monotypic leader who professed merely to have the influence and authority of a union president. In Alvarez’s reflections on the man as a leader, Chávez did not autocratically dictate the direction of his movement, but guided it using humility, commitment to change, and investment in the workers whom Chávez considered the most dispossessed of our society. As Alvarez saw it, Chávez directly and indirectly influenced many by his life, his vision, and his actions. García agreed with this perception of Chávez because for him Chávez “was a model, a prototype for all of us, somebody who met all criteria of leadership—a wonderful leader.”
What Did He Represent?

Your myth shall grow upward, like the tree of life
and you shall give light and shade to all of humanity.
For you shall always lead us, my brother.
—Luis Valdez

For many people, including me, Chávez was a figure of mythic proportions. Chávez embodied hope because he engendered in us—the idealists of the late 60s and early 70s—a sense of power, by inspiring us with his call to resist all that is unjust and unfair. From Chávez, I learned to struggle for justice and to allow myself to evolve into someone who is committed to social change and who non-violently pursues equality and fairness for the dispossessed of our society.

Many of those I interviewed remembered Chávez as a humble person who actively refused to pursue material goods for himself. Mendoza spoke of him as a person of humble beginnings with the will to struggle for his beliefs:

When you think back to your own culture and think back to your original roots, I just think of César as a warrior who wasn’t tainted by anything. He did things because he had to do them. He never lived in fancy homes. He never had fancy things. He was with the people. He was extremely intelligent.

In Mendoza’s view, Chávez acted out his values and beliefs, even when not in public view. For example, Mendoza recalled being there with him in one of his many fasts. “I remember going to see him. He was in a little building even without a bed, just a mattress on the floor. He would tell us ‘Don’t give up.’” Working with César was one of Mendoza’s greatest satisfactions in life, because she was part of the movement from the beginning.

According to Mendoza, Chávez had no more and maybe even less than the workers he so avidly supported. Hermelinda Sapien, a well-respected and active deputy director of a vocational training center, spoke of mourning César’s passing; she recalled a sense of loss that she can not get over and reflected that “César was in a class by himself.” She said, “I cannot get over it! Seeing his coffin taken away was probably the saddest moment that I’ve ever lived.”

Ernestina García said that Chávez epitomized someone with genuine qualities of leadership:

... leaders are como Cesar Chavez; and he’s still our leader, and he’ll be the only leader that I would recognize, I guess, in my life. Leader es Diosito; primero Dios, y luego mi padre y madre—those are leaders, and Cesar Chavez.
Once again, García lauded Chávez’s humanity and revered him for what he represented. She made a connection to his humble beginning as a farmworker, and expressed an appreciation for his leadership in improving conditions for all who worked in the field.

César Chávez and I come from the roots of working in the fields, *antes que hubiera any unión de César Chávez se sufría mucho en los files, y el fue el que took the role, took the stand *y se quedo en el fil, took the stand and stuck with it, stuck with it *pa’ que se hicieran unos cambios.*

Chávez’s perseverance and tenacity are implicitly embedded in García’s description of his commitment to farm workers. She feels a reverence for him beyond that of any other leader who struggled for the rights of Mexican and Chicano workers. But, to the community activists and leaders in my study, Chávez’s example and call to leadership was not limited to the agricultural fields. According to González, García, and Álvarez, in the urban setting where Chicanos began to fend off race and class oppression, Chávez also inspired students and other activists to pursue the struggle for justice and equality. He showed them and many of their contemporaries that you can stand up against injustice, regardless of your station in life. Robinson, an organizer and activist, recalled a Chávez whose “crusade embodied humility, [and who] didn’t kowtow to anybody.” In her statement, she emphasized the strength of his convictions and commitment to what he believed, which was an inspiration and a call to struggle. Josie Romero, long-time supporter of the UFW and a political activist, spoke of Latinos’ beliefs that only educated or professional people can engage in social change and advocacy, beliefs that she felt were prevalent before Chávez rose to prominence. She contended that

César Chávez has shown us that you don’t need to be professionally educated to be a leader. He also showed us that you don’t have to have millions of dollars to create change.

Notions of leadership and who could be leaders in our communities were reshaped by Chávez and his followers. Chávez inspired many to take on the struggle to improve the rights of those who work to harvest the food that ends up on our tables. He supported women in leadership by recognizing and bringing them into the fold of the UFW; he included those who were economically better off; he recruited leaders of national stature like Bobby Kennedy and other Kennedy family members; and he enveloped other racial and cultural minorities in the movement for farm workers’ rights. Ernestina García recalled

César worked with all kinds of people—*de todos colores. El no distinguía que porque tu eres negro, que tu eres chino, o tu eres gringo, o lo que sea. El lo*
García reflected on Chávez’s ability to attract people from many walks of life. In her leadership interactions, she saw Chávez forming coalitions with people who had never before been able to work in unity for the same objective. Women became a strong part of the movement. Also Filipinos, Jews, and liberal whites answered his call for justice in the fields. García noted that before coalitional politics were in fashion, Chávez amassed a multiethnic, multi-classed, and two-gendered coalition to work toward a common objective. For García, Chávez—the simple man, the humble man, the pacifist, and the farm worker—was able to inspire action on the part of many who prior to this call had remained content with the status quo. As Eugene García put it:

I don’t think many of us will achieve the kinds of ability or respect or appreciation that César Chávez received. There’s only a few people who can rise to that. We need Césars but we need a lot more Genes and Josies who are just out there doing their work; and I’m not expecting anyone to remember us.

While García’s statement underscores Chávez’s contributions and his greatness, there are more general principles implicit here. For one, leaders and activists in the Latino community must continue to work for the betterment of the people, not to achieve the greatness of Chávez, but to advance a better quality of life. For another, work must be done because it is the “right thing to do.” Like Chávez, we must do the work because we have to, without the expectation of fame, or a place in history. Whether we get the credit or the recognition is not the point. The point is that there is much work to be done; the one lesson we all learned from César was to get the work done regardless of the cost. As Alvarado insightfully noted, “had this gentle giant been part of the upper crust, the revolution inspired by Chávez would have called for the writing of many volumes to document the brilliant strategist and tactician that he was.” Many doubt whether we will ever again see a leader of Chávez’s stature, but all those I interviewed shared the knowledge that he inspired many to begin as well as to continue the struggle for Chicana and Latino rights.

**How Was He Perceived?**

The testimonials of those leaders who worked with Chávez or for his struggle reflect a man of much humanity, who embodied goodness and possessed a generous heart. Without exception, all perceived Chávez as the spark of the *movimiento* and a leader without equal. From their perspective, Chávez was not simply a farm worker who rose to the rank of union president—he was a brilliant strategist, with the moral character and
leadership qualities to move nation and government to recognize the rights of farm workers. In their eyes, while he is recognized as a champion of peace in the international world, the nation of his birth has yet to recognize fully the greatness of the man who died while waging a war against corporate greed and the inhumanity of multi-national corporations which strip Mexican workers of their dignity, then perceive them as unworthy of a decent living wage.

Without exception, organizers, activists, and leaders who knew and worked with Chávez, or supported his struggle, saw him as a leader. Kathy Chávez Napoli, a local businesswoman and supporter of the UFW union, stated that, “There are leaders that I feel are true leaders: people like César Chávez, people who really lead people into more benefits or more action.”

To explain how Chávez reached this pinnacle of greatness, Alvarado suggested that

Some people are born to be great musicians, some people are born to be great teachers, some people are born like César Chávez to lead a movement, and I don’t know what it is about the personality. I don’t know if it is something that is genetic, I don’t know if it is something that is intuitive. I think that we are called for different things.

Though she attempted to explain Chávez’s leadership in a variety of ways, Alvarado was forced to conclude only that all of us are called for a specific purpose in life.

How Did He Influence Leadership and Activism?

In one way or another, Chávez inspired many people to take on the struggle for farm-worker rights. He inspired their activism and directly and indirectly influenced their involvement in defense or promotion of Raza rights. Sofia Mendoza, who engaged in many door-to-door campaigns in Santa Clara County, recalled one direct lesson she learned from Chávez.

I remember César used to tell me, “You gotta dress like the people. You gotta talk with the people. Don’t even drive a car. Don’t take a lunch. Let the people feed you.” I learned a lot because he taught me that you have to be where the people are and start organizing where they’re at.

Implicit in Chavez’s directions are several leadership lessons. First, to organize people you have to understand how they experience the social world you are attempting to change. Second, the one way to do that is to be in the same social surroundings, to be one of the people, and to work on an agenda that is based on the people’s understanding of social reality. Jorge González, President of Raza Si!, noted that “César Chávez has been an inspiration. I really didn’t work with him. I worked with his
organization. He’s been an inspiration.” González speaks to the experiences of those who were involved in the secondary boycotts, who participated in the marches, and supported his cadre of organizers to bring about changes in the field. From these experiences, many of us learned different tactics and strategies for organizing in and outside the United Farm Workers’ movement. For example, Hermelinda Sapien noted the many urban problems of poor working people, Mexicanos and Chicanos in particular, and reflected that we can

do anything [to create change] . . . if we can all agree on one issue and focus on that, really fight for that, like César Chávez did with the farm workers—it was one issue—that’s why he was so identifiable, we will be better equipped to make a difference.

From Chávez, Ernestina García recalled learning qualities of leadership that have been useful in the struggles she wages. She said “I learned that you have to humble yourself to what other people want. I also learned paciencia, respeto, y humildad. I think que César siempre se humilfo no a un modo de que ‘I’m nobody.’ Se unio humbly, sin mandar, sin violencia to bring about change.”

The level of commitment and willingness to sacrifice all that you have for something you believe is a lesson that Alvarez also spoke about. He recalled that

César said that “You have to be willing to give up your life for others.” [It] doesn’t mean to literally die in that sense. It means to dedicate your life to it, put your whole life into it. [To do this] takes . . . more conscientización for people to begin to understand what that’s about.

Alvarez’s perception is that an effective leader is willing to give up everything for a cause. Such a leader acts out of belief, not to become famous, or to reap personal rewards.

The inspiration and the leadership lessons that these people learned from Chávez cut across the usual divisions in the activist community. For many, Chávez began with the labor movement and moved on to inspire those in the cities to struggle for educational rights, employment opportunities, and much more. Mike García, for example, President of SEIU Local 1877, spoke of Chávez’s involvement as a labor leader:

the community must try to understand the labor movement . . . some community people didn’t even understand why labor was involved [in the march] . . . [but] he is a labor leader. They didn’t even recognize César as a labor leader, which he was first and foremost. He was a labor leader, you know.
Once again, Garcia pointed out that Chávez’s contributions are clearly marked in our oral tradition, in labor history, and in the history of the Chicano Movement. Overall, these activists hoped that Chávez’s death—the death of a humble man, a great leader, and an activist who was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1968—would reignite the quest for social change. Some believed that, as a result, more young activists and leaders are involving themselves in a myriad of activities to foster social change.

**Conclusion**

*When history writes its final chapter, he will be remembered as a man who lived by his principles and who wasn’t afraid of taking uncomfortable positions.* — Paul Chávez.

As they examined their feelings, and their interactions with César Chávez, all leaders with whom I spoke agreed that Chávez was a man of principles and a man of honor. They saw him as an inspiring leader who did not lose his humanity in the process of reaching the prominence he achieved. In their view, Chávez maintained connections with those neighbors, leaders, organizers, and activists who chose to continue working in their own communities, because he knew they were staunch supporters of the struggle for farm workers’ rights. As they reflected on Chávez’s historical contributions, these leaders spoke of his great sense of justice, his belief in the dignity of workers, and his commitment to those who supported the struggle in and out of the fields. What they most admired about Chávez was his ability to disregard and disentangle barriers of race, class, and gender while building an organization of coalitions that will not easily be replicated again.

For those leaders who were inspired and initiated into the movement with the grape boycott, for those of us who mastered the secondary boycott as we stood in front of multi-national corporations to protest greed and inhumanity, and for those who participated in countless marches, Chávez represented an ideal of leadership. For all those I interviewed, and for myself, Chávez was the spark that motivated us to reach for the sky, while inspiring us to keep connected to our respective communities and maintain our activism. From Chávez, all learned that leadership is embedded in relationships, because they experienced his ability to foster and cultivate his relationships, never forgetting who he was and where he came from. As Elisa Gónzalez, a cultural activist and social workers, stated, with “César Chávez’s death, we have a responsibility to pick up his bandera [flag] and keep it marching.” If there is one lesson to garner from these recollections of Chávez, it is the reawakening of an individual’s social and moral responsibility to create change.
Notes

1 Quoted in "In San Jose, Diversity of Mourners Provides a Measure of the Man," San Jose Mercury News 29 Apr. 1993: 2,4A. I wish to thank Dr. Patricia Zavella, Dr. Herman Gray, and Dr. John Brown Childs and the Race and Ethnicity Research Council for their unending support, as well as Dr. Candace West for her editorial support. To those activists, organizers, and leaders who shared their reflections about César, I give my deepest and heartfelt thanks.

2 "César hasn't died; his spirit lives in the struggle."

3 Quotations are extracted from conversations with Chicana/Latino leaders in Santa Clara and Santa Cruz counties.

4 "Farm Organizer Chavez Dies at 66," San Jose Mercury News 23 Apr. 1993: 1A.

5 Mercury News 23 Apr. 1993: 1A.

6 "César Chávez always looked out for the welfare of his neighbor; he wasn't looking for what was in it for him. He never became wealthy. And if he saw injustice he would tell you it right there; he would tell you, "That's not right and correct it." (Translations mine.) I have left this and the following quotation in the original language in which they were spoken. Mrs. Garcia has been struggling against language oppression and for the right to speak in the language with which she is most comfortable, in order to exercise her self-determination in social and political interactions.

7 "[He wasn't looking to get credit] and he didn't talk about people or expressed jealousy toward people... and if there were meetings of others, even if they weren't his, he would go, but he wouldn't go to instigate or to break the unity; he would sit and listen."

8 "Canto a César Chávez," San Jose Mercury News 2 May 1993:1P.

9 "... and before there was a César Chávez union we suffered much in the fields, and he was the one that took the role, took the stand and he stayed in the fields took the stand and stuck with it, stuck with it so that there would be changes."

10 "... of all colors. He didn't make a distinction because you were black, or Chinese, or white, or whatever you are. What he did he did it for humanity because he could work at different levels. César's vision always was for humanity."

11 An integral part of his organizing strategy was door-to-door campaigns. Rudy Acuña says that "he built his union by going door-to-door in the barrios where the farm workers lived" (269).

12 "I also learned patience, respect, and humility. I think that César always humbled himself and not in a sense that 'I'm nobody.' He united humbly, without commanding, without violence, to bring about change."


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—¿Quién será?
—Sabrá Dios. Pero mire cómo lo dejaron.
—Alguien sabe cómo se llama.

Librao y yo nos aventuramos pacá porque no nos quedaba otra, ¿sabe? Porque eso sí, nosotros nunca trabajamos pa' gente ajena allá en nuestro pueblillo. No teníamos mucho, pero tampoco nos faltaba que comer. Como toda la gente uno nomás quería una casita y un pedacito de tierra pa' sembrar su maíz. Pero algunos se empezaron a lanzar pa’ este lado, ¿sabe?, y con el tiempo estos alborotaron a casi todo el pueblo. La cosa fue que, pues, uno nomás sacaba pa' comer de la cosecha y estaba bien jodido pa' poder comprar algo, ya fuera su ropita o alguna cosa pa’ la casa, usted sabe. Pero eso sí, uno veía que llegaban los del norte con su ropa nueva y coches hasta del añó y también se

Alvaro Ramírez

—I wonder who he is?
—God only knows. But see how they left him.
—Does anyone know his name?

Librao and I ventured over to this side because we had no other choice, you know? Because for one thing, we never worked for other people over there in our village. We didn’t have much, but we didn’t lack anything to eat either. Like everyone else all we wanted was a small house and a small piece of land to sow the corn. Then some men began to head over to this side, you know, and after a while they had the whole town just itching to leave. The problem was that, well, all we ever got out of the harvest was something to eat and it was pretty damn hard when you tried to buy something, whether it was your clothes or something for the house, you know? But it was easy to see that those who went to el Norte used to come back with new clothes and even the latest car model, and also the homes they built were made of bricks. It seemed like
hacían sus casas de tabique. Se miraba que les iba rete bien y uno nomás apenitas llegando de cosecha a cosecha. Y yo le dije a Librao, sabes que, nos vamos también con la chusma. Y que nos vamos.

—Déjelo así señora.
—Nomás quiero limpiarlo.
—Le digo que lo deje o se va a meter en problemas también. Ve, que le dije, ya se enmugró su vestido.
—Ai bien el helicóptero.

Vinimos a dar aquí con unos parientes que viven en la Roscran. Ellos habían sido de los primeros de nuestro pueblo que habían pasado pacá y pues ya hasta tenían una casita que era de ellos. Pero Librao y yo no nos pensamos quedan aquí por tanto tiempo, sabe? Porque mi jefita no quería que nos vinieramos pacá, pero le dijimos que nomás queríamos alivianarnos un poquito y que pronto nos regresaríamos. Le dijimos que le íbamos a mandar dinero pa’ que hiciera una casita nueva y hasta pa’ comprar algunos puercos pa’ engordar. De todos modos, que le iba a hacer la pobrecita si ya se no nos había metido en la cabeza tirarnos pal norte. Ya lo único que dijo fue que le cuidara mucho a Librao y que no nos fuéramos a dejar engañar de alguna mujer de por acá como les había pasado a varios cuates del pueblo. Yo le dije, no se apure amá. Yo con mi esposa me casé everything was going quite well with them and meanwhile we just barely made it from one harvest to the next. So I told Librao, you know what, we’re leaving with that horde of people too. And so we left.

—Leave him be señora.
—I just want to clean him up.
—I’m telling you to leave him alone or you’re going to find yourself in a big mess too. See, what did I tell you, you got your dress dirty already.
—Here comes the helicopter.

We ended up here with some relatives that live on Roscran. They were among the first from our town who had crossed over, so they even had a small house that was all their own. But Librao and me, we’re not thinking of staying here very long, you know? Because mi jefita didn’t want us to come over here, but we told her that we only wanted to better ourselves a little bit and that we would return quickly. We told her we would send her money to build a new house and even to buy some pigs so she could raise them. Anyway, there was nothing she could do because the idea of heading for el Norte had already been ingrained in our brain. The only thing she said was to take care of Librao and not to let ourselves be fooled by the women over here like it had happened to some friends from our town. I told her, Don’t worry mom. I married my wife forever. I give you my word on that with God as
pa' siempre. Eso se lo juro por Diosito. Y así fue.

—Tiene una herida en el pecho, otra en la pierna. Pobrecita criatura, sabrá Dios quién será. Mire y acababa de lavar este vestido.
—Sí, parece como que le dieron en el merito corazón.
—Me da pesar con sólo pensar que podría ser un hijo mío. Entonces sí, cómo me dolería esta sangre. La virgen lo socorra.
—En ese caso si se podía meter señora, pero es mejor esperar que llegue la policía. Ahórita pa' no echarse un problema encima, usted nomás digales que no sabe nada. Más le vale.

Cuando llegamos le haciamos de tocho morocho, ¿sabe? Lo que cayera porque la cosa era normas trabajar. Nosotros jalamos limpiando yardas, en la construcción, haciendo zanjas pa' meter pipa, descargando troques en la Central, bueno pácabab pronto, de todo, ¿sabe? Eran trabajitos que sólo duraban varios días. Pero como dice uno en el pueblo, lo poco que nos paguen ya es carga, ¿no? Así le sufrimos por un tiempecito hasta que un primo nos metió en una tintorería donde el tiene palancas. Los dueños son unos japoneses tacaños hasta la madre. Nomás nos pagan el sueldo mínimo, pero nos hacen trabajar como si nos pagaran puro oro, ¿sabe? Mire, no le digo que sean

my witness. And that’s how it was.

—He has a wound on the chest, another on the leg. Poor thing, God only knows who he is. Look at this, I had just washed this dress.
—Yes, it seems he was hit right on the heart.
—I feel so much grief when I think that he could be my son. If he were, then this blood would cause me so much sorrow.
—If that were the case you could get involved in this señora, but it’s better to wait for the police to arrive. Right now to avoid problems, just tell them that you don’t know anything. You’ll be better off.

When we arrived we did just about anything, you know? Whatever came our way because the main thing was to work always. We worked cleaning yards, in construction, digging ditches for pipes, unloading trucks on Central, well to make it short, a little of everything, you know? They were small jobs that lasted only a couple of days. Still as they say in our town, it may not be much, but it’s something, ain’t it? We put up with that for a little while until one of our cousins got us into a dry cleaner’s where he had some pull. It’s owned by some really stingy Japanese. We only get paid minimum wage, still they work us like we were getting paid in pure gold, you know? Look I’m not saying they’re bad
malas gentes, pero los diantres de japonecitos hasta aprendieron a hablar español, y me cai si no lo hicieron paser a uno trabajar más. Porque así cual pinche interprete, ellos mismos nos dan las órdenes. A mi hermano es al que siempre lo traen pallá y pacá. Ribrao haz esto y Ribrao haz eso. Porque las eles no las pueden decir muy bien, ¿sabe?

—Ask if somebody knows him.
—¿Alguien conoce a este joven?
—No señor, él acababa de llegar a la esquina cuando pasó el coche.
—It’s just a passerby. No one knows him. Retírese detrás de la cinta amarilla, por favor señora.

Ya le digo. Pero mi carnal no se queja, ¿sabe? A cómo es bueno pa’ trabajar ese muchacho. Mire es requete vivo. Bueno nomás tienen que enseñarle una vez cómo hacer algo y se lo aprende de volada. Yo digo que por eso los japonecillos lo trajinean tanto. Es que tiene mucha cabeza, ¿sabe? Si yo siempre le he dicho, Librao tú devistes haber estudiado pa’ algo hombre. El nomás se rie y no dice nada, pero yo sé lo que vale. Tampoco no quiere decir que no nos vaya bien, ¿sabe? Porque aunque nos paguen tan poquito siempre hemos podido mandar nuestros buenos centavitos pal terre. Es que yo y Librao no somos tan malgastaos. Bueno, yo pa’ que miento, ¿verdad?; de vez en cuando yo sí dejo vacía una que otra botella de cerveza. Como quien dice pa’ matarse el gusanito. people, but these damned Japanese even learned to speak Spanish, and I bet they did it in order to make us work more. Because that way you don’t need any damned translator, they give us the orders themselves. My brother is the one that always gets the run around. Ribrao do this and Ribrao do that. Because they can’t pronounce the L too good, you know?

—Ask if somebody knows him?
—Does anyone know this young man?
—No señor, he had just arrived at the corner when the car went by.
—It’s just a passerby. No one knows him. Stay behind the yellow tape, por favor señora.

That’s how it is. Still that doesn’t bother my brother, you know? Well, he’s quite a worker, that guy. He’s really smart. He only needs to be shown once how to do something and it’s over. I think that’s why these little Japanese work him so much. He has a lot of brains, you know? Why I have always said to him, Librao you should’ve studied some profession. He just laughs and doesn’t say anything, but I know what he’s worth. On the other hand, that doesn’t mean that we’re not doing well, you know? Because even though we get paid so little, we’ve always been able to send some money home. The thing is that me and Librao are not wasteful. Well, I’m not going to lie to you, right, I do like to empty beer bottles now and then. One could say though that it’s just to have a drink. As for my brother, well he doesn’t like to drink, you know?
Pero lo que es a mi hermano, a ese sí no le gusta el chupe, ¿sabe? Una o dos chelas y ya estuvo. Si está con amigos se corta él solo y se va pa’ la casa. Yo, como le dije, yo sí me prendo en seguida. Pero, como quiera, lo que si no falta es que mensualmente a mi jefita le tiene que llegar su chepecito allá en México, ¿sabe?

—No señor, si yo nomás lo quería consolar. De veras, yo no lo conozco. Me llené de sangre porque le quería limpiar la herida.

—Pero no se fijó en el tipo de carro. ¿Era grande? ¿De qué color? Trate de recordar señora.

—Ay señor, si le digo que yo llegué cuando el pobrecito ya estaba tirado. Nomás se oyó algo como, bum, bum, bum. Y muchos jóvenes que estaban por aquí le corrieron por todas partes. A mi dos por poquito me atropellan, fíjese.

—Get anything from her?

—Nah. Doesn’t know him. Didn’t see anything.

—Let her go.

—That’s it, señora. Gracias.

Mire, gracias a Dios, yo sé que con ese dinerito que mandamos pal pueblo, las cosas ya se están arreglando. El otro día hasta recibí una carta donde me dice mi mujer que ya trae un maestro levantando la casa, ¿sabe? No vaser nada grande, no crea. Nomás unos cuartitos con su cocinita, es todo. Pues pa’ que tengan donde dormir los morritos, la esposa y mi jefita. Porque Libráo seguro que se casa

One or two brews and it’s over. If he’s with friends he leaves them of his own accord and goes home. As for me, I told you already, I can get started easily. Whatever happens though, the one thing that can’t fail is that every month mi jefita has to receive her little check over there in Mexico, you know?

—No señor, I was only trying to console him. Honestly, I don’t know him. I got blood on me because I tried to clean his wound.

—But didn’t you notice the model of the car. Was it big? What color was it? Try to remember señora.

—Ay señor, I’m telling you that when I got here the poor boy was already down. All I heard was something like, boom, boom, boom. Then many young men who were around here ran away. Two of them almost knocked me over, you see.

—Get anything from her?

—Nah. Doesn’t know him. Didn’t see anything.

—Let her go.

—That’s it, señora. Gracias.

You see, with God’s help, I know that with the money we send home, things are looking better already. Why just the other day I received a letter from my wife telling me that they already got a bricklayer building the house, you know? It’s not going to be anything big, no. Just some small rooms and a kitchen, that’s all. So that the little kids, the wife and mi jefita have somewhere to sleep. Because I’m
pronto y entonces le hacemos a él la suya, ¿verdad? Es más, hablando bien claro, yo por quien más quiero tener algo es por mi jefita, ¿sabe? A esa pobre mujer sí que le tocó sufrir. Cuando éramos morrillos ella solita se las arreglaba para darnos de comer, porque nosotros nunca tuvimos padre, ¿sabe? Librao no se acuerda, pero yo sí. Mi jefita lavaba y planchaba ajeno, hacía tortillas, cosía servilletas, bueno, pácabar pronto, le hacía de todo. Lo único que teníamos era ese terrenito del ejido que mi abuelo nos dejó, dizque pa’ que por lo menos tuviéramos que comer. Y era verdad porque sólo pa’ eso servía, ¿sabe? Pero esos sufrimientos ya se van acabar. Si ya hasta le mande una carta a mi jefita donde le digo que, si Dios nos da licencia, Librao y yo le vamos a caer por allá muy pronto. Más pronto de lo que ella piensa. Y vamos a llegar como llegan todos los que van de aquí pallá, ¿sabe? Con ropita nueva pa’ ella, mi mujer y los morrillos. Y en la bolsa unos dólares pa’ amueblar la casita. Así merito vaser, porque las cosas están mucho mejor ahora. Hoy mismo le dije a mi carnal, Librao por fin estamos saliendo de nuestro sufrimiento. Gracias a Dios ya nos libramos de la maldita pobreza. Por fin, estamos libres carnal.

apparently, the young man was here, on the corner of Normandie and Slauson, waiting at the bus stop when the incident occurred. The two bullets
dos balas que malograron al joven iban dirigidas a un grupo de pandilleros locales que estaban de pie en frente de aquel edificio. La policía nos informó que la víctima no pertenecía a ninguna pandilla, y que aparentemente se trataba de un joven indocumentado que trabajaba en una tintorería cercana al sitio del homicidio.

that killed the young man were meant for a local group of gang members that were standing in front of the building over there. The police informed us that the victim did not belong to any gang, and that apparently it was a case of an undocumented young man who worked in a dry cleaner’s near the site of the homicide.

(Translated from the Spanish by the author)
The Pickled-Pepper Man

Louise Church

A lifetime spent picking in the fields, yet the pickled-pepper man had carried the weight of his fears, lightly, blindly, like a migrating bird that follows the arc of the sun, by instinct, from row to row, and crop to crop, season after season, only to return again, weary of beginnings and rows without end. Until the seasons and the years in their succession grew as indistinguishable, one from another, as the rows of lettuce and melons and cabbages he had picked. All the years like any other, save one, when grief plowed a row wider than the pickled-pepper man cared to pick.

Now the years, the rows, and the arc of a relentless sun converge against the value of a man weighed in by the carrot, by the cabbage, by the ton. And the pickled-pepper man comes to live out the harvest of his days above the market owned by his eldest, his only surviving child, a son.

It is the nature of convergences, and of the harvest itself, to conspire against the senses of the pickled-pepper man, so that the Greyhound bus which carries him and the weight of his years becomes the staked flatbed of a rusty Ford truck. And it is in the nature of flatbed trucks to carry people and crates of fruit or vegetables or chickens to market as though they all bruise the same. And so it is through the wooden slats of a flatbed truck, and not the windows of the bus, that the pickled-pepper man now views San José at the request of his son.

The market, wrapped casually, serape-style, by a coat of magenta and lime-green paint, crouches at the head of a broken street. Along the twisted spine of asphalt, and fractured sidewalk, squat even rows of stone-faced stucco houses, bleached by the sun, and fortified with iron at the windows and doors. Out front of the houses, in fallow soil, grow weathered palms and dusty magnolias, patches of sun-yellowed grass and weeds, occasionally brightened by the fuschia-pink flowers of oleanders and
bougainvillea vines. In the alleys behind the houses grow large-eyed, bloat-bellied children who run barefoot through the splintered glass of bottles and cars and dreams.

By his side, the pickled-pepper man feels the thorn and flower of his existence tremble. And between the tremble of her, his old-woman wife, and himself, sits the younger, still trembling memory of an infant daughter dead now these too many years.

What can grow here? the pickled-pepper man thinks, but he squeezes tight the hand of his old-woman wife, and he does not begrudge her her thorns.

And although no one will grant the formality until it is too late, the pickled-pepper man answers to Pedro, and he calls his wife Juana, and Carlos is his son, and the memory of his beloved daughter is but a whisper that will not pass his lips, but weighs heavy on his heart and tongue—Elena.

Elena, the pickled-pepper man asks of the air, can this be our Carlos coming to greet us? All puffed up and crowing like a rooster, preening like a brood hen gone plump from not scratching for each grain in the sand? How can this be? From not scratching? “Pedro and Son” in gold letters above the market door?

All the years bent picking by the bushel, by the ton, and no way to stand straight enough. Tall enough. No words to tell a militant and angry young son that the shame lies not in the picking.

Not in the picking, an honest day’s work in the burning sun.

The shame not in the picking, but in the buying of arms and legs and hearts and souls and backs bent picking, bent picking in the noonday sun.

The shame lies not in the picking, but in the buying, my angry young son.

In the buying of the already born and the not-yet born, lined up like chattel in the keenly furrowed rows, the sweat-soaked wet-backs

bent picking
bent picking
in the fields of the free . . .

And the brave, father?
No, my son . . . land owners.
What courage bent picking, father? Stand up and fight, father!
“Viva La Causa!” “Viva Chávez!”

What courage, Elena? To stand with your back to the angel of death and hear the roar of the engine and watch the dark shadow of wings pass low overhead while the poisoned breath falls like rain on the back of your neck, and the neck of your still-young wife and your unborn child bent
picking in the row before you? The fruit of the field unblemished, Elena, but not you. Not you. Too late “La Huelga”—the strike—for you, Elena.

And now no more scratching and pecking and picking like mindless, disorganized chickens.

To this his life comes, he in his old age, his son a proprietor, the proud owner of a market that peddles perfect produce, and from where and by whom he hears the question leave his spittled and trembling lips is this perfect produce picked?

I buy Union, pop. Let me show you your room.

Such a perfect child, such a quiet child, his Elena, and yet now she gives him no peace.

Too perfect, too quiet, and so small and delicate and awkward at two that she still clung like a hollow-boned bird to the back of her mother bent picking in the heat of an August sun.

Carlos, Carlos, remember the birds of the field? How they fell dead like stones from the sky?

Now there is no sleep, only dreams of remembering. No rest in not scratching, not pecking, not picking.

Rest, pop. Take it easy. If pop wants, he can work in the store.

What can grow here? he asks in despair. What shame? What harm? in scratching and planting and pecking and picking in a field of one’s own?

Hush, old pickled-pepper man, my husband all these years. Stop making the nest in my hair.

What can grow here? old-woman, old-flower, old-thorn in my side.

We are here now, old-man. Make your peace, or go siesta with the sparrows in the trees. Stop this tangling of twigs in my hair.

If mom wants, she can work in the store.

No sleep, Elena. See how they come now? Elena, these gringos, for your mother’s cooking, her hand-made flour tortillas, her tamales, her chicken mole, and the white of her teeth against her brown skin, and the white of the flour that clings to the cracks and crevices of her work-worn hands.

Look, how beautiful your mother, Elena, with the flour in the plait of her hair.

They come now, these people, to watch his Juana, his wife, work the flour and water and lard into a pliant dough. Pedro smells their fear. And Pedro watches them watch his wife flatten tortillas in the palms of her robust hands, while the gringos watch also their backs, their children, their purses, and still they eat greedily, watching, of the food prepared by this thorn, this flower, his wife, bent cooking over the stove.
Pedro grows tired from watching and not working.
The sleep of the dead, old-man. Go to the park. Get these worry birds out of my hair.
So it comes to this, then, Elena? Sleeping upright, both eyes open, in the park?

The pickled-pepper man watches the gringas watch him, while the gringas watch also their backs, their children, their purses, all the while the blood on their hands.
There is laughter, and the chatter of sparrows in the trees, and the warmth of the sun on his head.
All the years bent picking no rest only dreams of remembering in the distance in the heat-shimmered fields a young girl with a braid in her hair gathers stones and they tremble like birds in her hands
1. Reflections on the Funeral of César Chávez

The media described almost every aspect of César Chávez’s funeral except the main one. That was the result of sending cub reporters to analyze an historic event with which they had little familiarity—since those reporters had, for the most part, been born into a culture which first assimilated and then ignored the contributions of the struggle led by César Chávez. If you are born blind, it is difficult to know when you finally begin to see right. . . .

The media occupied a platform soaring above the casket and recorded all the singing and dancing and parading; they catalogued the rich and famous as they arrived. That was their idea of covering this event—that, and estimating the size of the crowd. When the cortege assembled, among the loyal supporters, there were bound to be some with shaky credentials wanting to carry the casket. In the meantime, Hollywood groupies were doing their thing, riding on the coattails of the man lying in state. I heard one woman remark to her son, who was running to the dais to get an autograph from one of the celebrities, “Don’t go over there. You can rent a video. We are here to honor a great man.”

That was the gist and the sense of his ceremony. Thousands of humble people from all over America assembled to pay their last respects to a man of great dignity and humility—qualities sorely lacking in public figures today. It is true that César Chávez did much for the raza, the Mexican-Americans, and all hyphenated Americans. But even his most
devoted supporters sometimes overlook the fact that César Chávez did this for all Americans. I am not a Latino, but he made my America a better place in which to live. When the cadence-callers set the tone with "Viva César Chávez," "Viva la huelga," and "Viva la raza," I had to add my "Viva la nación!" A few moments later that cry was added to the others.

But there was something significant that the media overlooked: the power of the family in Mexican life. Mexican-Americans draw on this force throughout their lives, and it sustains them mightily in adverse situations, as it does in happier times. A birth, the christening of a child, the quinceañera that celebrates a girl's coming of age, the betrothal and the ensuing marriage, anniversaries, wonderful picnics and reunions, and finally a funeral: all these rites of passage and intricate interrelationships weave a pattern through life and help tie it together in a profound and joyous manner that few outsiders appreciate. This is real—an investment in family life that enriches all.

Consequently, when I saw the cars driving in from San Diego and the Bay Area, from L.A. and Bakersfield, from near and far—even a caravan from Florida, and all at the last minute and in the middle of the work week, thousands of people calling to pay respect to the nominal head of field workers—I recognized that I was witnessing a modern gathering of the clans. This was the last great re-Union for César Chávez. . . .

For César, and for all who loved him. And they came from all over the earth. Helen Chávez held in her hands a letter from the Pope. President Clinton expressed his regrets. All the campesinos and those who respect hard work and agriculture and decency in the work-place were represented or present. True, there have been larger mass-meetings in Washington, D.C., and New York City, but this was tiny Delano, and the crowd spilled over and out of the town. It was a most wonderful family gathering—filled with the sense of a coming-togetherness. It was a fitting memorial to the
man who had labored so long and so hard to sustain the values of American family life.

2. The Abrazo is a Lot More Than a Handshake

I was always a little skeptical myself, about taking another man in my arms. About giving him a hug, as Russian do. Or a real embrace, as Mexicans do. "Embrace"—that's what abrazo means. I come from the staid Midwest, where a handshake was enough.

Oh, my mother was an Indian, and she kissed everybody on the cheek, and good friends on the mouth. But I thought all the time that that kind of expression was for women only, and I sure didn’t want to create any confusion.

Then, later, when I went to Czechoslovakia with my wife, for a reunion with her family, I ran right into bear hugs in every direction. It was at the height of their pan-Slavism, in the days before the Soviet influence soured on them. Everything Russian was still appropriate and even welcome, especially the greetings. Whenever you walked into a room, you got hugged—and I mean hugged—and then you got kissed on both cheeks. Oh, I did my best to hold back a little; but gradually I gained the assurance that these were real people, and the hugging was o.k. After a week or two, I was doing it myself: greeting everybody with a Russian bear hug, as if I’d done it all my life.

Kissing was a little different. I didn’t have any trouble kissing the ladies. I always liked that part. I kissed women on their cheeks, whether I knew them or not, and after a short time, I felt like I was getting just like
my mother. Nor did I have any trouble hugging the ladies. That came pretty naturally.

But the only time I had ever gotten into a clinch with a man before was when I was boxing, so the concept was disconcerting. And kissing another man was worse. I mean, it can be excruciating. Czechs eat herring. Czech drink a lot of beer. And in those days, Czechs smoked a lot. Even if you didn’t kiss them on the lips, the fragrance had a way of hanging around.

And some of them, you know, had quite a bit of stubble. I didn’t like stubble when I was a barefoot kid in a wheat field, and I don’t like it now. There’s a lot of difference between kissing a woman who takes pride in her smooth, soft skin, and kissing a workman who is equally proud of his rough demeanor and husky character.

One night I came to a party in my honor given by my wife’s cousins, I was a little late getting there, and everybody else had already arrived. I had been looking forward to this party because one of our cousins—from up near the Polish border at Olomouc—had promised to be there, and it would be our first meeting. His advance publicity that told me he was the kind of man I wanted to meet.

Anyway, I walked through the door, a few people turned around, and then I saw a short, burly man over by the balcony. At the same moment, he bellowed out, “Rooobert!” I knew it was Vojtech Gaya, the man from Olomouc. He made his way brusquely through the gathering, reaching out toward me, and I put my arms around him, to give him a hug.

But Vojtech was like a bear himself. His arms went all around me, and he squeezed me. He lifted me off my feet, and he almost broke my ribs. He gave me a real Russian bear hug, and then he set me down again.

But he didn’t let go of me. He held me tight to give me a kiss, and I knew I had to do it. I pursed my lips and gave him a peck on the left cheek. He pushed me back, and holding my arms like a steel vise, he said, “Not on the cheek, Robert. I am your cousin. On the mouth.”

That was the first time I ever kissed another man. But it was an experience that has stuck with me. I’ve even used his line a few times— with the ladies, that is. “Not on the cheek. I am not your cousin. On the mouth.” A little modification, but it has served.

The Mexican approach to an abrazo is quite a different thing. A real abrazo is not jerky or abrupt or brusque. It is not something you do on the spur of the moment, like eating fast food. An abrazo is a real experience, and it takes a bit of doing before you get it right.

I used to wonder why young people never did an abrazo properly. I talked about it with an old friend of mine, from down on the border. “I never could hold another man in my arms,” he told me. “You know, you are brought up in this macho society. And every other young guy is a competitor of sorts—somebody to watch out for, somebody to suspect. You
can’t put your arms around somebody like that. You want to hold them at arm’s length, at best. So I had a tough time with the abrazo.”

I got to thinking about it, and I began to realize that only the middle-aged manage it properly. That’s been confirmed by watching the abrazo unfold before me countless times. It’s a predilection for people in their middle years. When they’re too old, they are fragile and stiff, spiny and unbending. And when they’re too young, they are suspicious and afraid to let go.

I think it has a lot to do with the condition of the heart. You are awfully careful with that heart when you are young, and rightfully so. You are not always sure about who to hug, and for how long. A handshake is enough in a situation like that, or a harmless peck on the cheek. But an embrace is a very different situation. After a maturing period of a few romances, maybe a marriage, a few jobs, and a lot of friends—not just the kind you associate with, but the kind you seek—the heart is capable of expanding, of reaching a little further out. It takes an ample bosom.

When you see two such people moving toward each other, you just know how they are going to merge. The arms are open and welcome; there is a glow in the eyes, a smile that endures. There is the cheerful assurance of a total embrace—an abrazo, where two ample people in the middle of life come together like two ships on the ocean, bowing and dipping as they close the space between them, then mooring and tying it up as they merge, and finally lock it all two-block like a cradled boat, swung between its stanchions.

That kind of freedom and assurance doesn’t exist for the young, and maybe it’s just too exhausting for the very old. But it certainly is a wonderful and reassuring experience for those who appreciate its majesty. There’s no kissing, and it has nothing to do with sex. It can join two women, or two men, or a woman and a man. It is a greeting. But at the same time, it is ever so much more than that—an ultimate greeting, perhaps, a reunion, that goes beyond the uniting of two physical bodies. The glances and the smiles and the relaxed invitation all lead you to realize that it is the reunion of old experiences and shared delights, of reasoned similarities that tie people together like the laces of an old shoe. It is a meeting without any of the cold, worldly tensions, love without any of the entanglements. It makes the world a little lovelier. We all probably deserve a few abrazos.
My sons will never meet César Chávez now, and the few times I met him were brief. I thought there was plenty of time to see him again. Then he was gone.

Almost two years ago, I noticed that César was visiting more frequently in San José, and I began a photographic essay on him. I had a chance to photograph César on a few occasions.

When I showed my sons photographs of César, they expressed a desire to meet him the next time I took pictures. Soon after that, the news reached me that César had passed away. I’d thought there was time.

It was then that I decided to create pictures to honor the memory of César Chávez, blending the faces of my sons and the symbol on the Huelga flag. They will never meet César, but his memory will never leave us.
Loud proclamation of lamentations by the killers of the slain is an important ritual in our society. Only after a culture or species is endangered or extinct does it achieve value. For many in our society, being seen placing an “honorable” wreath upon a glorified tomb of memories is more important than the life of the fallen hero.

So with the passing of César Chávez. While many of the memorials have been sincere testimony to the power that rested in César, within the first year after his passing there has been a rush by various communities of the Southwestern United States to name and rename monuments, bus yards, parks, plazas, garbage dumps, sewer plants, conference rooms, and schools after him. Many claim that this effort is worthy of the energy it consumes because it keeps the memory of César with us. Others argue that years from now, when a small child drinks from the César Chávez Memorial Fountain in the middle of César Chávez Plaza, the child may ask a parent, “Who was César Chávez?” And if this occurs, perhaps the time and effort spent dedicating and renaming will have been worthwhile.

Chávez was a bold, quiet man; he rarely sought superficial recognition for the causes he advanced. But where press coverage of César’s deeds, while was alive, would often be buried in a one-inch box deep in the newspapers, now those same papers run front-page photographs of those dedicating everything but their lives and resources to the causes for which César lived.

Once they hoped that César wouldn’t come to their towns, that he wouldn’t fan the spark of self-empowerment in the great sleeping Chicano
consciousness; now they are climbing over each other to bask in the light of
his shadow. Seeking Hispanic support only for their own advancement, they
create new stages without meaning, new paths without direction.

César was a positive man of deep convictions. He continually sought
new ways to breathe life into the United Farm Workers' Union. If this were
true of those now posturing in César’s name, they would also be working
toward his goals. Instead, they only mouth support for old, dying, and dead
causes, with their hidden agendas, seeking to wear a small piece of César’s
great mantle.

These wannabes are scrambling to fill his shoes without taking the
careful steps he quietly and painfully trod to moral greatness. They are
clamoring after the rewards he earned, but without paying their dues. They
are dreaming of leading as César led, but without sacrificing as he
sacrificed. They give themselves César’s posthumous blessings, and create
new causes, new titles, new power for themselves.

These new “leaders,” with greed’s sword in one hand and ambition’s
club in the other, have forgotten or ignored the meaning of César’s words.
They fail to mention these facts: that only two percent of all farm workers
are unionized; that union farm jobs are flying by the gross to foreign fields
ravaged by environmental destruction; that ninety-eight percent of the
people for whom César fought still have no health coverage; that many
children are dying of diseases brought on by pesticide poisoning; and that
the life-span of a farm worker has dropped to forty-one years while the
national average has climbed to seventy-three.

Hispanic males have a sixty-eight percent high school dropout rate,
an even larger percentage of farm workers’ children never enroll in high
school, and the largest growers in the richest state of the richest country in
the world still treat their workers as an expendable commodity and an
inexhaustible resource. A César Chávez is not born every day. His quiet,
committed leadership will not be recreated in a shameless scramble for his
fallen mantle. Such greatness is neither inherited nor seized.

These false leaders only besmirch his memory, yet César lives. His
mortal remains are buried, but he lives on, whenever we remember his goals
and honor him, and ourselves, by pursuing them. The effort expended
renaming cement and brick and stone should be used to prevent the
pesticide poisoning of the raza that labors to feed our nation.

For years, the growers tried to kill César. Their weapons were
ignorance, hatred, prejudice, and racism. After each assault, he renewed his
forthright demands again and again. Like all great leaders, he kept his
message focused and his position simple. His personal life bore witness to
his beliefs. How could we do otherwise but love and respect him?

And who will fight for his memory, as he fought for the farm
workers? Others are killing César again and again. They step forward to tell
us what César would have done, had he lived. But we need no help to
understand the words of César Chávez. Like his mission, his words are clear.

Cruel and clever leaders love to give us a dead hero, so that we can waste time naming plazas and bus yards for him, while these leaders harvest the product of our labor for more seasons, and poison our children for more generations. Cement and bricks and stone bearing his name cannot honor the memory and continue the work of César Chávez; only justice for the farm workers will do that.
José A. Carrasco, Professor and Chair of Mexican American Studies at San José State, received a B.A. and M.U.P. at SJSU, before going on to earn a second Master's and his Ph.D. at Stanford. Nationally and internationally recognized in the field of community organization, he worked with farm workers in the early period of the Huelga. He has published essays and textbooks in the fields of education, literature, and urban planning, as well as a volume of poetry entitled Thoughts Wander Through (1989).

Louise Church grew up in Mountain View, California. Although she now resides in the Pacific Northwest with her husband and children, she still feels her writing roots buried deep in the ghost orchards of the Santa Clara Valley, and finds that both regions share the common bond of borrowed cultures and discarded people. She has completed the Fiction Writers' Certificate Program at the University of Washington Extension. “The Pickled-Pepper Man” is her first published fiction.

Bob Freimark, Professor Emeritus, San José State University, instituted the first classes in Mexican, Mexican American, and Chicano culture at what was then San José State College in 1968—perhaps the first such classes in the entire California State University system. He taught Chicano culture for fifteen years, and continues to keep in close contact with his former students. In 1985, the students of SJSU made him an “Honorary Chicano” and presented him with a plaque now permanently installed in the Chicano Resource Center at San José State.


Richard Griswold del Castillo is a professor of Mexican American Studies at San Diego State University and the author of The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo: A Legacy of Conflict (1990), La Familia: Chicano Families in the Urban Southwest, 1848 to the present (1984), and The Los Angeles Barrio, 1850-1890: A Social History (1990). He is also the co-editor, with Manuel Hidalgo, of Chicano Social and Political History in the Nineteenth Century (1992), and the co-author, with Richard Garcia, of Cesar Chavez: The Triumph of Spirit (forthcoming), and, with
Richard Garcia, of *Cesar Chavez: The Triumph of Spirit* (forthcoming), and, with Arnoldo De León, of *North to Aztlan: Mexican Americans in United States History* (forthcoming). He is currently working on a Chicano history of San Diego.

**Jose Angel Gutiérrez** is director of the Center for Mexican American Studies and an associate professor of Political Science at the University of Texas at Arlington. He earned his Ph.D. from the University of Texas at Austin, and his J.D. from the University of Houston Law Center in Houston. He also serves as President of a social impact litigation and community development foundation, The Greater Dallas Foundation. His publications include numerous articles and books, among them "Chicanos and Mexicans Under Surveillance: 1940-1980" in the *Renato Rosaldo Lecture Series*, University of Arizona (1986); *El Político: A Study of the Mexican American Elected Official in Texas* (1968); *A Gringo Manual on How to Handle Mexicans* (1974); and, with Richard Jensen and John Hammerback, *A War of Words* (1984).

**John C. Hammerback**, who received his Ph.D. from Indiana University, is an associate dean of the School of Arts, Letters, and Social Sciences, and a professor of Speech Communication, CSU-Hayward. He is co-author of *War of Words: Chicano Protest of the 1960s and 1970s* (1985); co-editor of *In Search of Justice: The Indiana Tradition in Speech Communication* (1987); and has contributed twenty-five articles and chapters to scholarly journals and books. He is currently revising a co-authored book-length study of Cesar Chavez's discourse and serving on the editorial boards of the *Western Journal of Communication* and the *International and Intercultural Communication Annual: Political Communication Across Cultures*. He is a past president of the Western Communication Association.

**Randall C. Jiménez**, an associate professor of Mexican American Studies at San José State University, taught in public and parochial schools and colleges, and directed several community-based agencies, before coming to SJSU. Among his publications is *El Alma Chicana*, a series of readings and short stories.

**Josephine Méndez-Negrete** is completing her Ph.D. in sociology with a dissertation on Chicana/Latino leadership formation. She has received an M.S.W. from San José State University, and an M.A. from the University of California, Santa Cruz, and has taught at San José State.

**Kamala Platt** is completing her doctorate at the University of Texas at Austin. Her dissertation, from which the current essay is adapted, is entitled "Cultural Poetics in Environmental Justice Movements: Organization, Theory, and Resistance in India and Greater Mexico."
Alvaro Ramírez was born in Copándaro, Michoacán, in México. One of eight children raised by campesino parents who moved to Youngstown, Ohio when he was eleven years old, he graduated high school there before first returning to Michoacán, and then living in California where he supported himself by working in the fields near Modesto. He received his B.A. from Youngstown State University, and his M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Southern California. He has taught Spanish language and Latin American and Spanish Golden Age literatures as well as Chicano studies at USC, CSU-Long Beach, and Occidental College, and has also taught at foreign language institutes in Cuernavaca, Morelia, and Jalapa, México. He is currently an assistant professor at Saint Mary’s College of California.

John Gilberto Rodriguez graduated from the Brooks Institute of Photography. As an exhibiting photographer, he has received the Man Ray Experimental Photo Award. Most recently, his work has been featured at La Oferta Gallery, Casa Street Gallery, Arte Latino, Galeria El Andar, and the Daniel Rosenzweig Exhibits.

Rosa Maria Rodriguez received her B.A. in English from the University of California at Berkeley. She is currently pursuing a teaching career as a bi-lingual instructor in Los Angeles, and has worked as an editor and writer for Chispas, La Voz, and Chusma House.

Ted Sahl has been a freelance photojournalist covering the Bay Area for twenty years. Most importantly, he has covered the anti-nuclear movement, including the attempt to stop the opening of Diablo Nuclear Power Plant, the attempt to close Lawrence Livermore Radiation Laboratory, and the campaign to stop the first-strike missile program at Vandenberg Air Force Base. He is especially proud of his work documenting the struggle for human and civil rights in the Bay Area, and his essays and photographs have been widely published in books and newspapers, and used in documentary films.

Arturo Villarreal is a writer and editor for Chusma House Publications, and he is also a professor of sociology and anthropology at Evergreen College. His work has appeared previously in San José Studies, as well as in the San Jose Mercury News.
San José Studies, a journal sponsored by San José State University since 1975, is published three times each year—winter, spring, and fall. The contents include critical and creative prose, as well as poetry, interviews, and photographs, directed to the educated reader but providing resources for the scholar.

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