



 66. Chicano Consciousness
(1966)*

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the Mexican-American War in 1848, created the first generation of Mexican Americans in the United States in its decree that the 100,000 Mexicans living in territory ceded to the United States were henceforth American citizens (Source 39). For the remainder of the nineteenth century, Mexicans continued to cross the fairly porous border between the two countries, and immigration into the U.S. Southwest increased in the next century, particularly in the era of the Mexican Revolution. Nearly 500,000 Mexican Americans were then forcibly repatriated to Mexico during the Great Depression. When the United States experienced labor shortages during World War II, the country sought Mexican immigrants, using the *bracero* (guest worker) program to once again encourage agrarian workers to cross the border. Chicanos have formed a core element of the agrarian workforce in the U.S. Southwest ever since. They have also played a central role in the U.S. agrarian labor movement since the 1930s, and their period of greatest activism was during the mid-1960s.

*Luis Valdez, "The Tale of La Raza," in *The Chicanos: Mexican American Voices*, eds. Ed Ludwig and James Santibañez (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1971), pp. 95–100.

In his essay "The Tale of La Raza," Luis Valdez reflects on this history and on the story of a famous strike that migrant Mexican grape pickers staged in Delano, California, in 1965–1966. The labor leader César Chávez and the union he helped to found, the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA), coordinated the event, which began with a 250-mile march from Delano to Sacramento and included Chávez's nationally publicized twenty-five-day hunger strike, as well as call for a national grape boycott. Luis Valdez, whose parents were farmworkers, founded El Teatro Campesino, a theater group that performed in the fields and on the backs of flatbed trucks for workers on strike. Valdez is also the author of the Plan de Delano. A prolific writer and director, Valdez is considered one of the fathers of Mexican American theater. In this essay, he assigns history a central role in forming the Chicano character. To what historical episodes or personages does he refer? What interpretations does he give to them? What is it about the United States in the 1960s that can help us understand Valdez's uses of Mexican history?

The Tale of the Raza

The revolt in Delano is more than a labor struggle. Mexican grape pickers did not march 300 miles to Sacramento, carrying the standard of the *Virgin de Guadalupe*, merely to dramatize economic grievances. Beyond unionization, beyond politics, there is the desire of a New World race to reconcile the conflicts of its 500-year-old history. *La Raza* is trying to find its place in the sun it once worshiped as a Supreme Being.

La Raza, the race, is the Mexican people. Sentimental and cynical, fierce and docile, faithful and treacherous, individualistic and herd-following, in love with life and obsessed with death, the personality of the *raza* encompasses all the complexity of our history. The conquest of Mexico was no conquest at all. It shattered our ancient Indian universe, but more of it was left above ground than beans and tortillas. Below the foundations of our Spanish culture, we still sense the ruins of an entirely different civilization.

Most of us know we are not European simply by looking in a mirror—the shape of the eyes, the curve of the nose, the color of skin, the texture of hair; these things belong to another time, another people. Together with a million little stubborn mannerisms, beliefs, myths, superstitions, words, thoughts—things not so easily detected—they fill our Spanish life with Indian contradictions. It is not enough to say we suffer an identity crisis, because that crisis has been our way of life for the last five centuries.

That we Mexicans speak of ourselves as a "race" is the biggest contradiction of them all. The *conquistadores*, of course, mated with their Indian women with customary abandon, creating a nation of bewildered half-breeds in countless shapes, colors, and sizes. Unlike our fathers and mothers, unlike each other, we *mestizos* [people of Spanish and Indian parentage] solved the problem with poetic license and

called ourselves *la raza*. A Mexican's first loyalty—when one of us is threatened by strangers from the outside—is to that race. Either we recognize our total unity on the basis of *raza*, or the ghosts of a 100,000 feuding Indian tribes, bloods, and mores will come back to haunt us.

A little more than 60 years ago the Revolution of 1910 unleashed such a terrible social upheaval that it took 10 years of insane slaughter to calm the ghosts of the past. The Revolution took Mexico from the hands of New World Spaniards (who in turn were selling it to American and British interests) and gave it, for the first time and at the price of a million murders, to the Mexicans.

Any Mexican deeply loves his *mestizo patria*, even those who, like myself, were born in the United States. At best, our cultural schizophrenia has led us to action through the all-encompassing poetry of religion, which is a fancy way of saying blind faith. The Virgin of Guadalupe, the supreme poetic expression of our Mexican desire to be one people, has inspired Mexicans more than once to social revolution. At worst, our two-sidedness has led us to inaction. The last divine Aztec emperor was murdered in the jungles of Guatemala, and his descendants were put to work in the fields. We are still there, in dry, plain American Delano.

It was the triple magnetism of *raza*, *patria*, and the Virgin of Guadalupe which organized Mexican American farmworkers in Delano—that and César Chávez. Chávez was not a traditional bombastic Mexican revolutionary; nor was he a *gavacho*, a gringo, a white social worker type. Both types had tried to organize the *raza* and failed. Here was César, burning with a patient fire, poor like us, dark like us, talking quietly, moving people to talk about their problems, attacking the little problems first, and suggesting, always suggesting—never more than that—solutions that seemed attainable. We didn't know it until we met him, but he was the leader we had been waiting for.

Although he sometimes reminds one of Benito Juárez, César is our first real Mexican-American leader. Used to hybrid forms, the *raza* includes all Mexicans, even hyphenated Mexican-Americans; but divergent histories are slowly making the *raza* in the United States different from the *raza* in Mexico. We who were born here missed out on the chief legacy of the Revolution: the chance to forge a nation true to all the forces that have molded us, to be one people. Now we must seek our own destiny, and Delano is only the beginning of our active search. For the last hundred years our revolutionary progress has not only been frustrated, it has been totally suppressed. This is a society largely hostile to our cultural values. There is no poetry about the United States. No depth, no faith, no allowance for human contrariness. No soul, no mariachi, no chili sauce, no pulque, no mysticism, no *chingaderas* [screw-ups]. . . .

The pilgrimage to Sacramento was no mere publicity trick. The *raza* has a tradition of migrations, starting from the legend of the founding of Mexico. Nezahualcoyotl, a great Indian leader, advised his primitive *Chichimecas*, forerunners of the Aztecs, to begin a march to the south. In that march, he prophesied, the children would age and the old would die, but their grandchildren would come to a great lake. In that lake they would find an eagle devouring a serpent, and on that spot,

they would begin to build a great nation. The nation was Aztec Mexico, and the eagle and the serpent are the symbols of the *patria*. They are emblazoned on the Mexican flag, which the marchers took to Sacramento with pride. . . .

Huelga means strike. With the poetic instinct of the *raza*, the Delano grape strikers have made it mean a dozen other things. It is a declaration, a challenge, a greeting, a feeling, a movement. We cried *Huelga!* to the scabs, *Huelga!* to the labor contractors, to the growers, to Governor Brown. With the Schenley and DiGiorgio boycotts, it was *Huelga!* to the whole country. It is the most significant word in our entire Mexican-American history. If the *raza* of Mexico believes in *La Patria*, we believe in *La Huelga*. . . .

The Virgin of Guadalupe was the first hint to farmworkers that the pilgrimage implied social revolution. During the Mexican Revolution, the peasant armies of Emiliano Zapata carried her standard, not only because they sought her divine protection, but because she symbolized the Mexico of the poor and humble. It was a simple Mexican Indian, Juan Diego, who first saw her in a vision at Guadalupe. Beautifully dark and Indian in feature, she was the New World version of the Mother of Christ. Even though some of her worshippers in Mexico still identify her with Tonatzin, an Aztec goddess, she is a Catholic saint of Indian creation—a Mexican. The people's response was immediate and reverent. They joined the march by the thousands, falling in line behind her standard. To the Catholic hypocrites against the pilgrimage and strike the Virgin said *Huelga!*

The struggle for better wages and better working conditions in Delano is but the first, realistic articulation of our need for unity. To emerge from the mire of our past in the United States, to leave behind the divisive, deadening influence of poverty, we must have bargaining power. We must have unions. To the farmworkers who joined the pilgrimage, this cultural pride was revolutionary. There were old symbols—Zapata lapel buttons—and new symbols standing for new social protest and revolt; the red thunderbird flags of the NFWA, picket signs, armbands. . . .

The NFWA is a radical union because it started, and continues to grow, as a community organization. Its store, cafeteria, clinic, garage, newspaper, and weekly meeting have established a sense of community the Delano farmworkers will not relinquish. After years of isolation in the barrios of Great Valley slum towns like Delano, after years of living in labor camps and ranches at the mercy and caprice of growers and contractors, the Mexican-American farmworker is developing his own ideas about living in the United States. He wants to be equal with all the working men of the nation, and he does not mean by the standard middle-class route. We are repelled by the human disintegration of peoples and cultures as they fall apart in this Great Gringo Melting Pot, and determined that this will not happen to us. But there will always be a *raza* in this country. There are millions more where we came from, across the thousand miles of common border between Mexico and the United States. For millions of farmworkers, from the Mexicans and Filipinos of the West to the Afro-Americans of the South, the United States has come to a social, political, and cultural impasse. Listen to these people, and you will hear the first murmurings of revolution.

Central Themes

The northern frontier, land and labor, religion, race and ethnicity

Suggested Reading

- Acuña, Rodolfo F. *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*. New York: Pearson Longman, 2007.
- Meier, Matt S., and Feliciano Rivera. *Mexican Americans/American Mexicans: From Conquistadors to Chicanos*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1993.
- Mexican Migration Project (oral histories of Mexican migrants). Available at: <http://mmp.opr.princeton.edu/expressions/stories-en.aspx>.
- Vargas, Zaragoza. *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights: Mexican American Workers in Twentieth-Century America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005.

Related Sources

53. Revolution in Morelos (1911)
65. Official History (1951)
67. Rubén Jaramillo and the Struggle for *Campesino* Rights in Postrevolutionary Morelos (1967)
71. The 1985 Earthquake (1985, 1995)
75. Maquila Workers Organize (2006)