

# More Spirit in That Little Madera Church

Cesar Chavez and Religious Soundscapes, 1954–1962

**ABSTRACT** This article coalesces historical grassroots developments in the Central Valley: the growth of Mexican Pentecostalism and its production of music, brewing legal tensions regarding voting rights and undocumented immigration, and the fledgling career of Cesar Chavez as a community-organizer-turned-labor-activist. At a time when Pentecostals were believed to be anti-union and apolitical, they joined the Community Service Organization and, through their singing, inspired Cesar Chavez to incorporate singing when he later formed his union/association. This article shows how the social conditions of labor and religion proved to be fertile soil for a productive encounter between Chavez, a Catholic, and a Pentecostal congregation in need of legal assistance. The well-publicized grape strikes and marches of the late 1960s, for example, incorporated religious iconography and music, the latter of which came from an idea Chavez developed from this unusual, productive encounter over a decade earlier with Mexican Pentecostals in 1954. The latter part of the article focuses on the religious overtones of music produced about Chavez and La Causa.

So in that little Madera church, I observed everything going on about me that could be useful in organizing. Although there were no more than twelve men and women, there was more spirit there than when I went to mass where there were two hundred.<sup>1</sup>

—Cesar Chavez

CESAR CHAVEZ LEARNED important lessons as he went to launch a chapter of the Community Service Organization (CSO) in the Central Valley town of Madera in 1954. After a series of meetings and events for the CSO, he circumstantially ended up in a small, spirit-filled Mexican Pentecostal church. He had met with the pastor in order to assist him with his family's immigration troubles, which had been exacerbated in the era of Operation Wetback of 1954. A church service was not on Chavez's agenda. The gathering of about twelve in a living room seemingly projected a larger-than-life phenomenon and deeply impressed Chavez, as he would later relay to his biographer, Jacques Levy. The odd

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combination of clapping hands, prostrated bodies, elevated arms, bowed heads, joyful leaps, isolated dances, and a smattering of tongue talking all contributed to Chavez's fascination. These demonstrative forms of praise matched the wide range of weepy hymns and ebullient *corridos* (ballads), genres familiar to Chavez and the broader Mexican labor diaspora. The Pentecostal proletarians infusing the sacred into the soundscapes of that small living room were in need of Chavez's legal succor, not vice versa. But in this case, they helped Chavez. Pentecostals in that little Madera church unwittingly taught Chavez an integral component of movement solidarity and organizing.

This article provides historical context for this seemingly isolated event recorded by Levy and later extracted as evidence of Chavez's organization and ecumenical genius.<sup>2</sup>

I expand on the epigraph by opening up avenues of historical exploration into the convergence of religious, political, and historical forces at play in Madera in 1954. Jacques Levy's 1975 transcripts envelop two major developments that were taking shape in California: the growth and musical production of the state's oldest autonomous Mexican American denomination and the implementation of xenophobic immigration and voting laws, which galvanized Chavez, prompting him to move to the Fresno-Madera area. Importantly, these developments coalesced in California's Central Valley, the center stage of agribusiness, where in the following decade the NFWA, or National Farm Workers Association (later called United Farm Workers), would launch the grape boycott into the international media.<sup>3</sup> Before Chavez became a civil rights icon—that is, prior to the national headlines that captured Chavez breaking his twenty-five-day fast by taking the Holy Eucharist with Senator Robert Kennedy (figure 1), and even prior to the nationally circulated photographs of 1966 that



**FIGURE 1** Richard Darby, "Fasts, Cesar Chavez, Robert Kennedy, Delano, California, 1968"

Photo #234, United Farm Workers Online Image Gallery, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, <https://reuther.wayne.edu/node/171>, accessed February 14, 2017.



**FIGURE 2** “Marches, Delano to Sacramento, California, 1966”

Photo #251m United Farm Workers Online Image Gallery, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, <http://reuther.wayne.edu/node/189>, accessed February 14, 2017.

captured marchers on the 340-mile pilgrimage from Delano to Sacramento carrying a banner of la Virgen de Guadalupe (Our Lady of Guadalupe) standing over the acronym “NFWA” (figure 2)—Chavez found his inspiration to incorporate music into his meetings at a little Mexican Oneness-Pentecostal (Apostólico) church in Madera affiliated with La Asamblea Apostólica de la Fe en Cristo Jesús (The Apostolic Assembly of Faith in Christ Jesus).<sup>4</sup>

## COMPETING VISIONS IN CALIFORNIA: REORIENTING THE CHICANA/O MOVEMENT AND PENTECOSTAL HISTORY

In order to understand this seemingly unlikely, yet productive, encounter between a so-called “communist” organizer and a heterodox Pentecostal group, it is important to first pull back a few layers of received historical paradigms that have oriented the scholarship in ways that de-emphasize the role of religion in the Chicana/o movement and the centrality of California

in the Pentecostal movement beyond the Azusa Street Revival of Los Angeles. This reorientation of the historiographical paradigms will help us understand how California's Central Valley in fact became fertile ground for the ostensibly unusual instance of a Marxist labor organizer receiving inspiration in the living room of a Pentecostal pastor.

Until recently, the terrain of religion in the Chicana/o movement lay fallow, with the roots of potential scholarship preemptively deracinated by claims that religious agency was hardly existent in the movement. It has taken many revisions of Chicana/o history in order to till the scholarship to better reflect the seeds of piety deeply planted into the movement. Scholars at the turn of the twenty-first century produced an interdisciplinary religious historiography of Chicana/o activism. Gaston Espinosa, Virgilio Elizondo, and Jesse Miranda, editors of the 2005 anthology *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States*, attribute the lack of attention to Cesar Chavez's religious dimensions to the prominence of Marxist teachings among Mexican American scholars, which consequently led many to believe that religion (the "opiate of society") had no role in the real-life issues of labor, land, and citizenship. Furthermore, they posit that the Marxist and socialist agendas of radicals in the 1960s and 1970s treated religion as an anti-intellectual avenue of study. And, while the movement produced a critical mass of Chicana/o academics, the focus on the first cohort and the genealogies that they produced suggests the ways that this intellectual frame had more staying power than it otherwise might have. Texts on the Chicana/o movement until 2005 mostly treated religion as a nonessential element. Published just a few years after the marquee Chicana/o protests and during the rise of student activism, Rodolfo Acuña's *Occupied America* (now in its eighth edition) stifled productive conversations about religion and Chicana/o activism.<sup>5</sup> Because foundational texts in Chicana/o studies so forthrightly and preemptively elided religious accounts of the movement, Chicana/o scholars seemingly avoided taking up the topics.

In recent years, scholars have introduced the guild with revisions of Chavez's faith by highlighting his upbringing in a devout Catholic home, training in Catholic social doctrine under Father Donald McDonnell (early 1950s), involvement in the Cursillo movement (late 1950s and early 1960s), successful deployment of religious iconography in the years of the grape boycott (1965–1970), and subsequent efforts to found a new community based on the principles of Chuck Dederich's emerging cultish community Synanon (late 1970s).<sup>6</sup> In tandem with the corrected record on the religiosity of Chicano leaders has come a new wave of historical monographs on Latina/o Pentecostalism that are significant to California history in this period.<sup>7</sup> In *Migrating Faith*, Daniel Ramírez not only noted the growth of the Apostólico movement in rural areas of the Southwest and borderlands, but he also challenged historians to utilize alternative methods (particularly sonic methods) for the study of subaltern religious populations that did not produce an extensive written record.<sup>8</sup> By opening our ears to the larger borderlands, soundscapes can enable us to hear the undertones of a memory Chavez relayed to his biographer in 1975.

The epigraph opening this article highlights an episode in Chavez's early career that proved to be more than a mere encounter; it informed Chavez at a moment when he was learning the bare bones of community organizing in a site where he had not previously lived. Chavez, in his notably autodidactic manner, had already steeped himself in Catholic social doctrine by the time he arrived in Madera, yet he never noted the influence of Catholic music in his union. In ethnic American parishes, vernacular expressions of Catholic music and

liturgy were severely limited until the reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). Soon after the deliberations of Vatican II, American Catholic churches witnessed a swift abandonment of the Catholic Church’s traditional musical heritage.<sup>9</sup> The circumstances under which Chavez found himself in a Mexican Pentecostal church (and home) certainly seemed precarious for the host family, but were common in Chavez’s usual work. Sacred music written in secular genres and performed in a church is what seemed unusual. The fact that the music so memorably affected Chavez that nearly two decades later he recalled hearing it for the first time as a formative moment in his organizational tactics is understandable given the nature of Mexican Pentecostal music. The aurality of—and bodily accompaniment to—Mexican Pentecostal corridos would have starkly contrasted with the staid, formulaic Catholic soundscapes with which Chavez was most familiar in the pre-Vatican II era.

Through the same lens used to examine a people’s history and an epistemological perspective “from below,” let us consider the quotidian context of farmworkers, laboring in industrial farms by day and rejoicing in tabernacles and temples by night. The events of Chavez’s work in Madera transpired in the context of xenophobic immigration laws at the federal level and discriminatory voting laws at the state level. The abuse of state policies placed Chavez in the Fresno-Madera area in the summer of 1954.

## IN A HOUSE IN MADERA, 1954 MUSIC OF THE APOSTÓLICO MOVEMENT

The political and legal battles waged in California’s fields were hardly fought in isolation. By the 1950s, large networks of strikers had developed, but the seemingly endless supply of bracero laborers (beginning in 1942) blunted their immediate impact. The 1952 Walter-McCarran Act, which made it a felony to import or harbor undocumented workers, opened another front in the incipient (long) Chicana/o movement; the act also made it illegal to require persons over the age of fifty who had been in the United States for over twenty years to take reading, writing, or speaking examinations in English in order to obtain citizenship. CSO neophyte Cesar Chavez entered the fray over voting discrimination in San Jose in this zeitgeist of the second Red Scare’s xenophobia and red-baiting. He took up the case of voter discrimination with Attorney General Edmund Brown. Lamenting the outcome of the “Get Out to Vote” drive in San Jose, Chavez described in a November 1952 letter addressed to the attorney general how American citizens of Mexican descent were the only ethnic group there to be subjected to literacy tests.<sup>10</sup> In his tactical response, Brown cited California State Constitution Elections Code sections 5620 and 5626. The former accorded any voter the power on some grounds to orally challenge any person attempting to vote; one of the grounds for such a challenge was suspicion that the person attempting to vote could not read; the latter required that the person under question be made to read any one-hundred-word section of the state constitution in English as selected by the precinct election board.<sup>11</sup> Chavez’s early role in the CSO mostly revolved around voting reform. In 1954, a violation of the second provision of the Walter-McCarran Act in the Fresno-Madera area caught the attention of CSO and Industrial Areas Foundation leader Fred Ross, who sent Chavez to investigate.<sup>12</sup> In Fresno, Chavez found other violations of the Walter-McCarran Act, and his work subsequently expanded to new legal fronts. More specifically, when he took the “Get Out to Vote”

drive to Fresno, Chavez faced a larger set of problems concerning citizenship. This proved to be the beginning of a much larger project to be carried out in the Fresno-Madera area.

In June 1954, Fred Ross assigned Chavez to Fresno in order to investigate a case of discrimination against elderly Mexicans seeking naturalization. A naturalization examiner reportedly refused to examine qualifying applicants in Spanish, in violation of code 312 of the Walter-McCarran Act. A subsequent report concerning the mismanagement of Spanish speakers' voter registrations compounded Ross's troubles.<sup>13</sup> These discriminatory practices caught the attention of the CSO board in Fresno, Fred Ross in San Bernardino, and Cesar Chavez in San Jose. Immediately north of Fresno, in Madera, farmworkers struggled with filling out federal immigration documents. Voting and immigration issues in Fresno and Madera drew Chavez out of his hometown of San Jose, and the scale of these issues compelled him to take up residency in Madera on July 6.<sup>14</sup>

A mixed group of Protestants and Catholics readily welcomed Chavez into their homes and churches. The solution to complications over citizenship extended beyond the ken of local clergy. Similar intimidation tactics faced by Spanish-speaking constituents in San Jose beleaguered their counterparts in Fresno and Madera. In all of these places, Chavez relied on religious leaders to amass Mexican voters, who already occupied the pews in their temples. The tactic seemed simple: go where unified Mexicans already routinely congregated. In San Jose he worked with Father McDonnell and in Madera with Father Dominic Albertelli. But unlike in San Jose and Fresno, Chavez's organizing in Madera found great resonance among Protestant groups as well. Although they comprised a minority in Madera, they made up the majority of the CSO chapter members and executive board leaders. When they decided to elect only farmworkers to the board, the result was an all-Protestant board.<sup>15</sup> This is likely due to the warm welcome Chavez received in his first week in Madera, during which he held three house meetings with different Protestant groups. His success among non-Catholics drew the ire of Father Albertelli, who "complained that there were too many Protestants."

Chavez recalled something peculiar about the house meetings hosted by one of the Protestant groups. In the living room of an Apostólico, he remembered:

I didn't know it then, but I was in for a special education in Madera. One of the first cases I had was a Pentacostal [*sic*] Preacher who was having trouble getting his papers in order. He'd paid a lot of money to many people who handle paperwork for a fee, coyotes we call them, to get his green card from the Immigration Service. He still didn't have it. Both he and his wife needed the green card, which gives them permanent residence status, before they could become citizens. They also had a daughter who was born here but was stuck in Mexico. Immigration wouldn't let her return because she couldn't prove her birth here.<sup>16</sup>

At the time, at least two ministers of the Apostolic Assembly resided in Madera. The earliest date that "founders" set up a preaching post in Madera is unknown, but the first commissioned evangelist arrived in 1935 and was followed by two others until 1942, when Mariano Marin took the helm as the first pastor. His pastorate spanned over a decade that witnessed the onset of the bracero laborers, the passing of the Walter-McCarran Act of 1952, and the implementation of Operation Wetback. Marin partially handed over the reins in that same year to his protégé Sabino Robles. Robles and Marin led their immigrant congregation during the throes of heavy immigration raids that culminated in the passing of Operation Wetback in

1954.<sup>17</sup> Marin remained in Madera until his death in 1959. So when Chavez arrived in Madera, he would have encountered a tag team of Marin and Robles, with the latter as a mentee of the former.<sup>18</sup> Marin held services in his home since the denomination did not have its own proper temple in Madera until sometime between 1959 and 1962.<sup>19</sup>

Chavez found particular success among Apostólicos. This happened at the expense of losing the support of Albertelli, who turned against Chavez and red-baited the budding CSO chapter. In an unusual (and perhaps unprecedented) move, the entire Apostólico congregation of Madera joined the CSO, and the family of Mariano Marin assumed leadership roles.<sup>20</sup> Marin's daughter Sallie Torres (Marin) became the first corresponding secretary of the Madera CSO chapter, and her husband Jerry Torres also served on the executive board.<sup>21</sup> In a letter to Ross, Chavez noted Jerry's enthusiasm: "Jerry Torres here in Madera has helped me a lot. He has attended every house meeting with me. He has lined up about six meetings at his house. . .and he is all out for the C.S.O."<sup>22</sup> Later, Chavez fondly reflected on his work with the Madera CSO chapter: "I radicalized that chapter more than any other chapter, I guess, in that short period of time. They weren't afraid to take on the police or the immigration service. They weren't afraid to fight for their rights."<sup>23</sup> The immediacy with which Chavez and the Marin family successfully organized the CSO chapter may also speak to the "anteroom" preparation that Pentecostals underwent in the form of their religious practices, which readied them for engagement in the public square.<sup>24</sup> Opportunities to speak before congregations, perform ceremonies, lead prayer groups, evangelize to others, teach Bible studies, and direct ministries within the church all served as preparation for public engagement. Formal or seminary training was not mandated in order to perform any of these rituals, as leaders were nurtured within their respective congregations. Leadership from below is given ample opportunities to rise in less rigid hierarchical structures.

In Chavez's description, we receive a rare perspective from an outsider. He captured elements of the borderlands migrant church:

When I went to their [Marin's] home, which was very, very humble, we talked and ate. Then he excused himself to conduct services. "I'll be back in about an hour," he said. "Can you wait for me?" He went into a little room—it hadn't occurred to me that it was a church—I thought it was just a living room.<sup>25</sup>

The "very, very humble" state of the home church stood out in Chavez's mind. Its condition would have stood in stark contrast to the sacred space offered by Father Dominic Albertelli at St. Joachim's Church. Chavez had initially failed to observe the existence of a home church that had been in Madera for almost twenty years. While the *obra* (a general church work) in Madera had been kept on record for nearly twenty years in a denominational ledger in Southern California, it failed to register with demographers of a town with a population just over ten thousand.<sup>26</sup> Such an elision was also the case with many other Spanish-speaking churches, Apostólico and otherwise.<sup>27</sup> What transpired in that meeting proved revolutionary to Chavez's organizational strategies. He remembered:

After they started their service I asked if I could join them. . . . *So in that little Madera church, I observed everything going on about me that could be useful in organizing.* Although there were no more than twelve men and women, there was more spirit there than when I went to mass where there were two hundred. Everybody was happy. They all were singing. These people were really

committed in their beliefs and this made them sing and clap and participate. I liked that. I think that's where I got the idea of singing at the meetings. That was one of the first things we did when I started the Union. And it was hard for me because I couldn't carry a tune.<sup>28</sup>

A Pentecostal expression of Christianity added to Chavez's remarkable charismatic tool kit. It is important to remember that, in such a service, Chavez would have encountered singing from the vast collection of Apostólico hymns, many of which "redeemed the *fiesta* of Mexican and Latino culture."<sup>29</sup> This participatory sonic environment would have contrasted vastly with music services in both mainline Protestant and Catholic churches in San Jose and Madera. In contrast to the visual religious stimuli of Catholicism, Pentecostals wielded the power of the sonic, so that a group of twelve could exhibit "more spirit" than two hundred congregants in mass. A larger set of demonstrative sensory experiences in the services would have come to surface, the same ones that mainline Protestant clergy often denounced. What would have accompanied the singing also would have distinguished it from contemporaneous sacred soundscapes: heavy repetition of choruses, "spirit-led" individual dancing, collective and/or individual shouting, and, more distinctly, glossolalia.<sup>30</sup> The presence or types of instruments remains unknown, but the most likely would have been a guitar, percussion set, and perhaps a smaller piano in the living room home. All this movement and instrumentation would have accompanied the lusty singing of hymns. These Apostólico soundscapes resonated with the working-class Chavez and left deep imprints in his mind.

Apostólico soundscapes provided a sonic stimuli of sacred music in genres familiar to him. *Himnos de Cosolacion* (mid-1930s) and *Himnos de Suprema Alabanze* (1941) contained unscored hymns composed by working-class Apostólico migrants. Tropes of pilgrimage, rain, agriculture, and the natural and built environment resonated with borderlands migrants. In lieu of a strong formulaic liturgical tradition, they sang songs at baptisms, communion services, and funerals, as well as at rituals less religious in nature, such as birthdays. The music could be sung with minimal or no instrumental accompaniment. The hymns drew from genres more closely associated with secular music of the time: polka, *ranchera*, *vals* (waltz), huapango, *marcial*, *canción romántica*, bolero, and corrido.<sup>31</sup> The last of these genres found resonance in the NFWA's early repertoire. Following his experience in the Apostólico church, over the course of the next decade, Chavez moved beyond community service work to full-scale labor organizing, never forgetting the experience in Madera.

## IN A HOUSE IN MADERA, 1962: MUSIC OF THE FARMWORKERS MOVEMENT

When Chavez finally incorporated music in the movement, what did it sound like? We turn to Madera yet again, but this time to hear the NFWA's first song. In 1962 Chavez parted ways with the CSO in order to launch his own association/union, the NFWA, dedicated to the improvement of the lives and working conditions of farmworkers. Now that Chavez was at the helm of his own movement, he quickly incorporated music into his meetings. In the same rural town where he was inspired to incorporate music into his movement, the first song of the NFWA was written in a genre he would have heard in the sacred soundscapes of Marin's

home church; again, the people of a rural Central Valley town at the margins of society proved to be central to the development of Chavez's solidarity tactics.

By his own admission, Chavez couldn't carry a tune. But members of the burgeoning NFWA compensated by producing their own corridos. Beyond the chants of *huelga* ("strike"), farmworkers tapped into a musical tradition. Chavez later recalled two verses of the NFWA's first song, *El Campesino*, in English:

In the year 62  
With effort and uncertainty  
There begun a campaign  
For the *campesino*.

Cesar Chavez started it  
He became a volunteer  
And went forth as a pilgrim  
To fulfill his destiny.<sup>32</sup>

The full rendition of the original song offers us clues about the religious and cultural environment in which the song was composed and the ways in which it would have resonated more strongly with farmworkers. During a house meeting on September 25, 1962, Rosa Gloria penned the lyrics of "El Campesino" to follow the melody of a popular Mexican folk ballad titled "El Corrido de Cananea" (The ballad of Cananea), also popularly known as "La Carcel de Cananea" (The Cananea jail). This *ranchera*, written in three-four time, was music of the common folk (a cultural equivalent to American country music).<sup>33</sup> The corrido harks back to the twilight of Porfirio Diaz's regime, when Mexican workers in the copper mines of Cananea in Sonora, Mexico, launched a strike over the higher wages paid to American workers for the same work. The ensuing strike resulted in casualties on both sides, but the massacre stood as a protest of the working class and as a harbinger of the impending Mexican Revolution. The myth of the strike was immortalized in the 1917 song "La Carcel de Cananea." Gloria's song, written nearly half a decade later in Madera, demonstrates the sorts of music that traveled with farmworkers on their migrant journeys. Gloria penned the lyrics of "El Campesino" in the tune of a corrido that invoked a legacy of American injustice and the oppression of working-class Mexicans. Gloria's rendition, embedded in the religious and cultural milieu of the Central Valley, struck a powerful, yet religiously modulated, chord. The full transcription of the lyrics merits attention here:<sup>34</sup>

1. *En el nombre sea de Dios*  
*Que con acierto y atino*  
*Pueda probar yo unos versos*  
*Al pobre del campesino*

1. Be it in the name of God  
With success and precision  
May I attempt some verses  
About the poor farmworker

2. *En el año sesenta dos*  
*Con esfuerzo y desatino*  
*Se principió una campaña*  
*En favor del campesino*

2. In the year sixty-two  
With effort and uncertainty  
There begun a campaign  
For the farmworker

3. Cesar Chavez la emprendió  
Y voluntario se dio  
//Y anda como peregrino//  
Para cumplir su destino//
4. Enviaremos peticiones  
Al jefe del mandatario  
Que suplique por favor  
Al congreso y senado  
Que aumente a los campesinos  
La petición del salario
5. Mis queridos compatriotas  
Aunque se de raza hermanos  
//Tengan fe en esta nación  
Y únanse a la asociación//
6. California es muy bonito  
Y también muy habitado  
Porque viene el contratado  
El mojado y el alambriista  
Hacer poco más rico  
Al mañoso del contratista
7. El pobre del campesino  
Sufre mucho en el invierno  
A unos les cierran el agua  
El gas y la electricidad  
Dejando los pobrecitos  
En una fea obscuridad
8. Ya esta aquí el mal temporal  
Ya se mira muy feo  
//Y al pobre del campesino  
No le pagan desempleo//
9. Y con esta me despido  
De esta buena asociación  
Y no pierdo la esperanza  
De un gran realización  
Que le pagen mejor sueldo  
Al pobre del trabajador
10. Pido perdón yo señores  
Si ofendo yo en mi expresión  
//Perdonen mi atrevimiento  
Por falta de educación//
3. Cesar Chavez started it  
He became a volunteer  
//And went forth as a pilgrim  
To fulfill his destiny//
4. We will send petitions  
To the head of state  
That ask  
The Congress and the Senate  
To increase the farmworkers'  
request for salary
5. My beloved compatriots  
Although of the race brethren  
//Have faith in this nation  
And join the association//
6. California is very beautiful  
And also very inhabited  
Because there comes the hired worker  
The wetback and the border crosser  
To make slightly richer  
The crafty contractor
7. The poor farmworker  
Suffers much in the winter  
For some they shut off the water  
The gas and electricity  
Leaving the unfortunate  
In an ugly darkness
8. The bad season is already here  
It already looks hideous  
//And to the poor farmworker  
They won't pay him unemployment//
9. And with this I will leave you  
With this good association  
And I don't lose hope  
Of a great realization  
That they pay better wages  
To the poor worker
10. I apologize, sirs  
If I offend you in my expression  
//Pardon my daring  
For my lack of education//

From the outset, the song places the farmworkers' struggle under divine orchestration. While the opening line may appear to be a perfunctory invocation of the name of God, it is noteworthy to point out the contrasts between this rendition and that of the original, more secularized "Corrido de Cananea." "El Campesino" is replete with religious typologies. In the ten-verse ballad we find strong resonance with biblical tropes: Chavez embodies the voluntary savior, the messiah in whose group (association) his followers place hope; the supplications of the oppressed go unheard; the insurmountable hegemon exacts cruel measures of control; the exile followed by enslavement to a system seems inescapable except by some divine succor; and hope of improvement is made possible by Chavez and his association—the association that eventually became United Farm Workers. What Chavez relayed to his biographer may well have been the popularized ditty of the longer ten-verse song.

The shorter two-verse rendition recalled by Chavez encapsulates the drama of farmworker struggle, hope, and Chavez's messianic role. (Bear in mind that 1962 marks the genesis of the union and thus predates the national attention and major strike victories). Even in these two verses, we find a parallel to biblical narratives that would have resonated with the farmworkers of California, a majority of whom came from religious backgrounds. Consider the two verses in the following climatic progression: a genesis ("the year 1962"); the fall articulated as need/lack ("with uncertainty there begun a campaign," rendered in the passive voice) met by raw volition ("with effort there begun a campaign," also in the passive voice); and an identification of the redeemable vulnerable people ("for the *campesinos*"). The next verse switches from passive voice to active voice, backed by action verbs and exploits. It begins with a new genesis and messiah ("Chavez started it"), which sets up his self-sacrifice ("he became a volunteer") and enfleshment as a *campesino*, which echoes the Pauline passage of Christ "humbling himself and taking on the form of a servant." In this act of deigning himself to walk and talk with his fellow brothers and sisters in the fields, Chavez became a pilgrim ("went forth as a pilgrim"). As a pilgrim, he supplicated and journeyed in a manner similar to Jesus (this especially became evident in the 1966 pilgrimage from Delano to Sacramento). The imagery of a pilgrimage akin to Jesus's portrays Chavez as a messiah. Latino theology and hymns emphasize the role of Jesus as a divine companion (*el divino compañero*) in friendship with fellow pilgrims.<sup>35</sup> In September 1962, the goals of the United Farm Workers still had not materialized, nor had they been articulated unequivocally.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, "to fulfill his destiny" counted as the final act of the redemption of the *campesinos* and functioned as a rhetorical device to echo the destiny of Christ. The longer song specifically identifies increased wages as the destiny, but the isolated repetition of the two verses allowed for polysemous interpretations among *campesinos*, which at the time could have included pressing matters like citizenship, voting, permanent housing, and better working conditions.

Gloria penned the lyrics of "El Campesino" at a transitional moment in Chavez's career: just before he and the NFWA would capture the national spotlight illuminated by strikes and artistic productions. In 1962, Chavez left the CSO to form the NFWA, a labor union dedicated exclusively to advocating for the rights of farmworkers. The larger social movement that emerged from this came to be known as La Causa. Union members and movement advocates would soon need to brace for battles larger than they anticipated. From the days of the NFWA to the later boycotts of the more recognized United Farm Workers, a central element in the new union would be the binding and charismatic power of music that members

practiced and nurtured. Chavez took what he had learned about music in Madera as a community organizer in 1954 and transposed those ideas into the soundscapes that identified the movement largely comprised of Mexican migrant workers. Not all those who joined La Causa were Catholic farmworkers, nor were they necessarily religious or from the working class. As the movement grew, so too did the emerging musical compositions written about Chavez and sung in the strikes. While one could hear Bob Dylan's emblem of protest "The Times They Are A-Changing" at one rally, in another site one might still listen in on the UFW's anthem "De Colores," the theme song of the Cursillo movement.<sup>37</sup>

By the time of the famous pilgrimage from Delano to Sacramento, Mexican Catholicism and nationalism had coalesced in artistic productions and formed a discursive alliance in the performance of music, one more powerful than that found in Pentecostal discourse. Nevertheless, we can note that Chavez deftly incorporated jubilant music, like that he had heard in a Pentecostal church. Historian Alan Watt noted that "every night an upbeat program, a fiesta, rejuvenated the spirits of the weary marchers. It often resembled a religious revival, the techniques of which Chavez had witnessed years before at a Pentecostal rally."<sup>38</sup> The music and performances that accompanied the sacred cross and the flag of la Virgen de Guadalupe (see figure 2) symbolized the culmination of Chavez's genius incorporation of fine arts into the movement, and the final product was, not surprisingly, overwhelmingly Catholic, as reflected the religious background of most farmworkers (including Filipinos) in the pilgrimage.

The use of music in this pilgrimage and in the various strikes inspired a repertoire of songs about Chavez, many of which were titled "El Corrido de Cesar Chavez." In response to rumors of Chavez's assassination, Raul Berraza Beltran wrote the lyrics to one such song. As in *El Campesino*, Beltran's corrido portrays Chavez as the hope of Mexican workers for justice, and it harks back to the humble nature of Mexican heroes:

<i>El nació en un barrio noble</i>	He was born in a noble neighborhood
<i>Y se crió con frijoles y tortillas</i>	And was bred on beans and tortillas
<i>Ahora lucha por los pobres</i>	Today he fights for the poor
<i>Como hicieron los Generales</i>	As did the generals
<i>Zapata y Villa</i>	Zapata and Villa

The song identifies Chavez as voluntarily entering the struggle with everyday people. The honorable nature of the cause is articulated by his placement among a pantheon of Mexican revolutionary war heroes. In the final verse, the Kennedy brothers (read: Catholic politicians), are invoked as to suggest the potential grave ramifications of Chavez's involvement in La Causa and his sacrificial embodiment of the plight of the poor:

<i>Dios quiera y le toque suerte</i>	God willing and may he be blessed
<i>Por ser hombre tan humano</i>	For being such a humane man
<i>Y no encuentre la muerte</i>	May he not encounter death
<i>Como Kennedy y su Hermano</i>	Like Kennedy and his brother

Other songs about Chavez similarly ascribed messianic qualities to him and invoked divine blessings upon him (these are customary in Mexican American religious cultures). But

other songs, such as “Las Huelgista,” did not appeal to divine succor, nor were they even panegyrics of Chavez. Even noted atheist virtuoso and co-founder of El Teatro Campesino, Luis Valdez, penned his share of songs that did not invoke the sacred. Take, for example, the corridos “Huelga en General” and “El Picket Sign.”<sup>39</sup> Valdez’s co-founder, Agustín Lira, composed songs like “Las Huelgistas” that did not draw from religious imagery, but he also wrote songs that did, such as “Le Peregrinación,” that pleaded for Marian intervention.<sup>40</sup> In general, most songs written during this period convey a sense of revolutionary hope in the leader of the *huelgistas*.

The role of music assumed inter-ethnic dimensions and solidarity with other civil causes when those on the pilgrimage began to sing the songs of African American activists, such as “We Shall Not Be Moved” and “We Shall Overcome.”<sup>41</sup> La Causa also adopted popular union anthems, such as “Which Side Are You On?,” written by Florence Reece to the tune of the Baptist hymn “Lay the Lily Low.” Music continued to build solidarity within La Causa and across labor and civil rights movements.

## COMPETING VISIONS AND HEARINGS OF THE CENTRAL VALLEY: CONCLUSION

In an interview with researcher and activist Wendy Goepel in 1963, Chavez honed in on several of the appeals “to pageantry and displays of the signs and symbols” of the association. Before mentioning the movement’s symbol of a thunderbird or the unifying slogan “viva la causa,” he discussed the “song written by Mrs. Rosa Gloria, a member from Madera, which is sung at meetings.”<sup>42</sup> Music and community organizing proved to be an important component of Chavez’s strategies of solidarity for organizing the NFWA in 1962.

In his recollection of the movement, we can clearly see that music and Pentecostal jubilation helped him create a formula for successful organizational tactics and solidary building. In this same 1963 interview, Chavez reflected on key moments in the formation of the NFWA and the moments of inspiration that led him to organize farmworkers, a feat that no union had accomplished until then. Once again we find Chavez associating Pentecostalism with singing, jubilation, and effective gatherings. (Bear in mind that he made similar associations almost a decade later in his autobiography written with Jacques Levy.) After rhetorically asking Goepel, “The spirit of our revolution; what has happened to it?” and “Why do people belong to anything, or get excited about anything; what do they want?; what keeps them going?” he recounted how at age nineteen, he and his brother immediately abandoned their duties of picking cotton in Corcoran (a Central Valley town) in response to a rally call to meet downtown. The ensuing ruckus and mob violence rendered the meeting futile. Chavez moved from this mid-1940s memory to a late 1950s (or early 1960s) account of passing by a Pentecostal church at night:

A couple of years ago, I was driving home from Los Angeles. I passed a Pentecostal church at night and it was full of people and I thought to myself, why do all the people come there so much. It must be because they like to praise God—and to sing.<sup>43</sup>

It may appear striking that Chavez did not reflect on Catholic mass in a similarly appreciative tone, especially given his commitment to the Cursillo movement. Yet, again, if we

consider the sonic difference between the lustily belted out corridos of the Apostólico *avivamientos* (revivals) and the pre-Vatican II masses of Catholic liturgy, it comes as no surprise as to why Chavez again harked back to Pentecostals and the transferability of their enthusiasm into his future movement.

Chavez masterfully appropriated ideas and symbols from religious groups. Starting from his time with the CSO in 1952, he straddled a delicate line between Protestant and Catholic churches, claiming that he was one of the few Catholics in San Jose who would set foot into Protestant churches.<sup>44</sup> Such settings were often ground zero of community organizing. Chavez drew from an eclectic array of vernacular religious symbols and offered a ready-to-sell project by couching the union's protests in religious rhetoric and displaying imagery that resonated strongly with Mexican farmworkers. The later manifestations of musical genius in the movement stemmed from Chavez's experience in the small Madera home church and another church in an undisclosed location on a California night. Likely unbeknownst to Apostólicos, their music and enthusiastic style of worship informed the solidarity tactics of the farmworkers' movement.

The details of Chavez's encounter in Madera services did not appear in any known communiqué between Chavez and Fred Ross. Generally speaking, Chavez's colleagues seemed understanding but lacked a grasp of the on-the-ground ethnic church gatherings of such obscure sectarian groups, which largely lay outside of the purview of California's Migrant Ministry even as late as 1958.<sup>45</sup> Chavez did not use the term "Pentecostal" in any of his 1954 correspondence with Fred Ross, but more generally spoke of Protestants, which in his context generally denoted Christians who were not Catholics. But in the *Autobiography of La Causa* he recognized Pentecostalism as a subcategory of Protestantism. Aside from Jacques Levy's constant misspelling of "Pentecostal" (written as "Pentacostal"), the autobiography captures an accurate account of enthusiastic and seemingly larger-than-life services hosted in Mariano Marin's humble farmworker church/home in the Central Valley. Here, Chavez unwittingly drew from a deep well of Apostólico arts. In a church *obra* that had been planted nearly twenty years before but had not yet come to own its own temple or register with city officials, an idea of one of the NFWA's hallmark theatrical features germinated.

In their quotidian religious life, Apostólicos crossed paths with Chavez in the labyrinth of California agriculture over uncertainties concerning leadership. In quotidian practices of "having church," they unwittingly impressed upon Chavez a key to successful organizing for the community and the farmworkers' movement. Mexican farmworkers hoped for the materialization of Chavez's "destiny" (farmworker labor and legal rights). Their racialization and placement as part of the mechanized landscape seemed to keep them trapped in a "colonial labor system."<sup>46</sup> And when they looked around to compare their plight, conditions did not seem any better. By the late 1950s their Okie counterparts had almost entirely left the fields. Federal relief programs, wartime industries, and postwar prosperity that benefited much of the state's white population offered them opportunities to pull themselves up from the dust. Poverty, however, remained the case for Mexican farmworkers, and the continuation of the Bracero Program until 1964 would reinforce their "place" in the fields. Studies on Mexican Americans generally focus on cultural productions (mostly visual) in urban settings (e.g., Los Angeles), but the Central Valley is also ripe for further study. In this article we can see that

the idea of using music, a hallmark feature of La Causa, germinated and grew in the rural reaches of California, a town hardly discussed in biographies of Chavez and the farmworkers' movement (and all-too-often mistaken for its neighboring city, Merced!). In Madera, not only did Chavez realize the binding power of music observing that "everything going on about that could be useful in organizing" during the performance of sacred music that, at the strum of a minor chord, could move congregants from lachrymose petitions to vivacious praise; he also witnessed the composition of the first of many songs that would be written about the farmworkers' movement. Out of the Central Valley, a new borderlands soundscape emerged.

## NOTES

1. Jacques Levy, *Cesar Chavez: Autobiography of La Causa* (1975; repr., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 116.
2. Mario T. Garcia, ed., *The Gospel of Cesar Chavez: My Faith in Action* (Lanham, MD: Sheed and Ward, 2007), 135–136.
3. For a more nuanced treatment of terms such as *agribusiness*, *agrarian*, and *farmworker*, see Todd Holmes, "Farmer's Market: Agribusiness and the Agrarian Imaginary in California and the Far West," *California History* 90, no. 2 (2013), 24–41, 70–74. For a more journalistic midcentury exposé on conditions of farm labor and slippages of such categories, see Carey McWilliams, *California: The Great Exception* (Santa Barbara, CA: Peregrine Smith, 1975), 157.
4. Mexican Oneness Pentecostals have preferred to use the term "Apostolic" instead of "Pentecostal." Most understand the term "Pentecostal" to describe their Anglophone Pentecostal counterparts. I use "Apostólico(s)" in keeping with their own historical signifier.
5. Gaston Espinosa, Virgilio Elizondo, and Jesse Miranda, "Introduction: U.S. Latino Religions and Faith-Based Political, Civic, and Social Action," in *Latino Religions and Civic Activism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3.
6. At the forefront of forging a new religious image of Cesar Chavez are various list of historians, theologians, religious studies scholars, and journalists. For revised historical accounts that investigate Chavez's involvement with Synanon, cf. Matt Garcia, *From the Jaws of Victory: The Triumph and Tragedy of Cesar Chavez and the Farm Workers Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Frank Bardacke, *Trampling Out the Vintage: Cesar Chavez and the Two Souls of the United Farm Workers* (New York: Verso, 2011); Miriam Pawel, *The Union of Their Dreams: Power, Hope, and Struggle in Cesar Chavez's Farm Worker Movement* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009); and Miriam Pawel, *The Crusades of Cesar Chavez: A Biography* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2014). For a theological reading and religious studies reckoning of Chavez's upbringing and social action dealing with the personal faith of Chavez, cf. Frederick John Dalton, *The Moral Vision of Cesar Chavez* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003) and Garcia, *The Gospel of Cesar Chavez*. Interpretations of Chavez as myth and mystic are offered, respectively, in Luis León, *The Political Spirituality of Cesar Chavez: Crossing Religious Borders* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014) and Stephen R. Lloyd-Moffett, "The Mysticism and Social Action of Cesar Chavez," in Espinosa, Elizondo, and Miranda, *Latino Religions and Civic Activism*, 35–52. Alan Watt investigated the role of religious institutions in the UFW in Alan J. Watt, *Farm Workers and the Churches: The Movement in California and Texas* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2010).
7. Arlene M. Sánchez Walsh, *Latino Pentecostal Identity: Evangelical Faith, Self, and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); Gaston Espinosa, *Latino Pentecostals in America: Faith and Politics in Action* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); and Daniel Ramírez, *Migrating Faith: Pentecostalism in the United States and Mexico in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).
8. See chapter 6, "Can the Pentecostal Subaltern Sing?," in Ramírez, *Migrating Faith*.
9. Keith F. Pecklers, "The Evolution of Liturgical Music in the United States of America, 1850–1962," in Paul Collins, ed., *Renewal and Resistance: Catholic Church Music from the 1850s to Vatican II* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 166–170.
10. Cesar Chavez to Edmund Brown, correspondence, 12 November 1952, The United Farmworkers Office of the President Collection (UFOPC), part 1, box 2, folder 2, Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs at Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.
11. Edmund Brown to Chavez, correspondence, 25 November 1952, *Ibid.*
12. Correspondence to Congressman Harlan Hagan, 9 July 1956, UFOPC, part 1, box 2, folder 9; Fred Ross to Cesar Chavez, correspondence, 12 August 1954, UFOPC, part 1, box 2, folder 5.
13. Correspondence to Congressman Harlan Hagan, 9 July 1956, UFOPC, part 1, box 2, folder 9; Fred Ross to Cesar Chavez, correspondence, 12 August 1954, UFOPC, part 1, box 2, folder 5.

14. Chavez, "Reports of Cesar Chavez," 16 July 1954, Fred Ross Sr. Collection, box 1, folder 2, Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs at Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.
15. Levy, *Autobiography of La Causa*, 116.
16. *Ibid.*, 115.
17. In March 1966, Juan Muro filled out a "Resumen de la historia de la iglesia de Madera, California" (Summary of the history of the church in Madera, California). Martha Vizcarra, a compiler of the documents, reported that very few of the pastors complied with the denomination's request for such summaries. Nevertheless, in 1966, the denomination self-published a hagiographical history. The publication emphasized the roles of founding ministers and mostly highlighted the careers of the assembly's who's who, most of whom hailed from metropolitan cities and the greater Los Angeles area. The founders of the modern congregation were: Bernardo Lerma, Ramon Garcia, Jesus Valdez, Miguel Esqueda, and Cristobal Villegas. Beginning in 1935, the evangelists were: Miguel Esqueda (1935); Bernardo Lerma (1937–1939); and Teofilo Guerrero (1940). The constant change of hands likely reflects the migratory patterns and borderlands flux of both laity and clergy. At least two of the founders later returned as evangelists. Chavez recalled that the church services were held in a house. Within a decade the congregation came under four different pastors: Mariano Marin (1942–1952); Sabino Robles (1953–1957); Francisco Ramirez (1958–1962); and Juan Del Muro (1962 to at least the filling out of the summary). The change in pastorates likely contributed to the inability to secure a proper temple. Until 1962 (the earliest record in available city directories), the church operated as such until it assumed ownership of a former Apostolic Church of Christ at 900 Sonora Street, across the street from the Marin residence/parsonage at 60 Lincoln Avenue. Chavez reported that he organized three meetings with different Protestant groups, but the identities of those groups are unclear. For "Resumen de la historia de la iglesia de Madera, California," see Antonio Nava Collection, Apostolic Assembly of Faith in Christ Jesus Headquarters, Rancho Cucamonga, CA.
18. The timing of his daughter's birth and 1930s census records reveal that Marin had immigrated to the United States sometime prior to 1930 and would have qualified for citizenship under the Walter-McCarran Act. It appears as if he resided in Madera until his death in the late 1950s, which the California Death Index shows as November 27, 1958, while his headstone at Arbor Vita cemetery in Madera reads 1959.
19. The 1958 city directory does not list the Apostolic Assembly of Faith in Christ Jesus congregation as the occupants of their first temple on 900 Sonora Street in 1958, but it does in 1962; the 1959–1961 directories are missing from the collection. See *Madera City Directory* (Madera County Library).
20. Levy, *Autobiography of La Causa*, 116.
21. Sallie Marin to Cesar Chavez, correspondence, undated (ca. 1954 or early 1955), UFOPC, part 1, box 2, folder 6; Madera Executive Board to Cesar Chavez, "Thank You" card, 12 October 1954, UFOPC, part 1, box 2, folder 5.
22. Cesar Chavez to Fred Ross, correspondence, 16 July 1954, Fred Ross Sr. Collection, box 1, folder 2.
23. Levy, *Autobiography of La Causa*, 120.
24. Daniel Ramirez, "Public Lives in American Hispanic Churches: Expanding the Paradigm," in Espinosa, Elizondo, and Miranda, *Latino Religions and Civic Activism*, 178.
25. Levy, *Autobiography of La Causa*, 115.
26. Madera, California Department of Finance Records, Historical Census Populations of Counties and Incorporated Cities in California, 1850–2010.
27. For the congregations in Delano, Sanger, and Bakersfield, I noted their late inclusion into the city directories. This late inclusion was even the case when congregations occupied their proper temple.
28. Levy, *Autobiography of La Causa*, 115–116. (emphasis mine)
29. Ramirez, *Migrating Faith*, 218.
30. *Ibid.*
31. *Ibid.*, 220–221.
32. Levy, *Autobiography of La Causa*, 170.
33. *Ibid.*; Cesar Chavez interview with Wendy Goepel, 1963, <https://libraries.ucsd.edu/farmworkermovement/essays/essays/MillerArchive/004%20Viva%20La%20Causa.pdf>, accessed November 6, 2017. Goepel's later publications list her name as Wendy Goepel Brooks.
34. Rosa Gloria, "El Campesino," 25 September 1962, UFOPC, part 1, box 48, folder 7. The original transcript renders line number two of verse number five exactly as presented above. The word "se" was perhaps a mistake in the original and presents problems for the translation of the song. (translation mine)
35. Sammy Alfaro, *Divino Compañero: Toward a Hispanic-Pentecostal Christology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011).
36. Chavez opposed illegal immigration, citing reserve labor pools as the nemesis of labor organizations.
37. Watt, *Farm Workers and the Church*, 79–80; Bardacke, *Trampling Out the Vintage*, 65.
38. Watt, *Farm Workers and the Churches*, 79. It is unclear as to which incident he is referring, but it is likely that he is referring to the interview with Goepel in 1963. In the end, the pilgrimage's overwhelming Catholic aura proved unpalatable for a significant portion of tongue-talking Pentecostal participants, who, Alan Watt notes, "bolted from the union altogether." Watt, *Farm Workers and the Churches*, 79.

39. Several of Valdez's songs, among many other songs from the farmworkers protest, are available online at [https://libraries.ucsd.edu/farmworkermovement/media/Scott/SONGLYRICSWITHTRANSLATIONS\(COMBINED\).pdf](https://libraries.ucsd.edu/farmworkermovement/media/Scott/SONGLYRICSWITHTRANSLATIONS(COMBINED).pdf), accessed February 2, 2017.
40. Agustín Lira, UFOPC, part I, box 48, folder 7.
41. UFOPC, part I, box 48, folder 7.
42. Chavez interview with Goepel, 4.
43. Ibid., 2.
44. Levy, *Autobiography of La Causa*, 115.
45. Watt, *Farm Workers and the Churches*, 61.
46. Barrera, *Race and Class in the Southwest: A Theory of Racial Inequality* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989).