César Chávez: A Lamb in the Midst of Lions? Manhood in the California Farm Workers Movement, 1952-1978

Megan Lange

"God help us to be men!" was the closing line to a speech written by César Chávez to commemorate the breaking of his first public fast in 1968 as a part of the Delano Grape Boycott. "To Be a Man is to Suffer for Others," the title of this speech, accurately captures its essence. During the twenty-five days leading up to this moment, Chávez abstained from all food, drinking only water. His actions were personal but also publicized, inspirational yet controversial. The speech outlined his reasons for taking such drastic action: for justice, for the family-like nature of the United Farm Workers union, for the grief and pain he felt on behalf of farm workers, for nonviolence, and above all, as a "call to sacrifice." He called on men to fully realize themselves by way of complete sacrifice of their lives for others. The fast was of great spiritual and symbolic significance, and Chávez's speech helped to make sense of his hunger strike for those who were watching and praying for him. This included Senator Robert Kennedy, who later called Chávez "one of the heroic figures of our time." But why was manhood a central concern for Chávez after having

completed this ritual? Why did he invoke suffering and manhood together, let alone manhood at all?[1]

Twentieth-century manhood as a cultural construction and topic of historical inquiry has most notably focused on white middle-class men. Few historians have studied working-class men, and when they do it is usually white working-class men that are discussed. As far back as the Civil War period, the ideals of working men who enlisted and served in the War were at odds with the manhood of the more "gentlemanly" officers. Working-class and immigrant men, prescribed to a "rough" manhood – swearing, fighting, and engaging in pursuits deemed ungentlemanly – while their counterparts valued restraint and self-control, in language and comportment, hallmarks of Victorian-era moral manhood.[2]

More sizable literature exists on the history of early twentieth-century white middle-class men who celebrated "civilized" manliness and rejected anything perceived as feminine or non-white. Working-class men meanwhile were expected to be physically strong and able to defend and provide for themselves and their families, at the same time navigate changing political, economic, and cultural demands that were sometimes in conflict with this ideal. Mid-century men still grappled with this tension. As more histories of immigrant and minority groups emerge and constructions of manhood appear to overlap, none of this literature incorporates even a minimal discussion of Latino men and their manhood. [3]

---

[1] Chávez, "To Be a Man is to Suffer for Others," *César Chávez: An Organizer's Tale, Speeches,* ed. Ilan Stavans (New York: Penguin Group, 2008).

[2] Lorien Foote, *The Gentleman and the Roughs: Manhood, Honor, and Violence in the Union Army* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

[3] Holly Allen, *Forgotten Men and Fallen Women: The Cultural Politics of New Deal Narratives* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2015); Matthew L. Basso, *Meet Joe Cooper: Masculinity and Race on Montana's World War II Home Front* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2013); Christina S. Jarvis, *The Male Body at War: American Masculinity During World War II* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2004); Stephen Meyer, *Manhood on the Line: Working-Class Masculinities in the American Heartland* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016); Gail

Histories of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, alternatively known as the Chicana and Chicano Movement, run the gamut of cultural and social histories that were largely sparked by the farm workers' strikes in California and Texas. Despite a large body of work, very little has been written about Chicano or Latino constructions of manhood as a historical subject from this period, instead these works focus on ethnic identity, class solidarity, and political activism. [4]

This article argues that working-class Latino manhood, as constructed by California farm workers (mostly Mexican American) and movement members with César Chávez at the lead, blended Victorian-era moral manhood with rough and tough manhood. Instead of promoting physical strength and violence, Chávez and other men in the Movement advocated more

---

Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States 1880-1917*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1995); Kevin Murphy, *Political Manhood: Red Bloods, Mollycoddles & the Politics of Progressive Era Reform* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008). Kevin Murphy, *Political Manhood: Red Bloods, Mollycoddles & the Politics of Progressive Era Reform* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Daniel A. Clarke, *Creating the College Man: American Mass Magazines & Middle-Class Manhood 1890-1915* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2010); Linda España-Maram, *Creating Masculinity in Los Angeles's Little Manila: Working-Class Filipinos and Popular Culture, 1920s-1950s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Steve Estes, *"I am a Man!": Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Martin Summers, *Manliness and Its Discontents: The Black Middle Class and the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900-1930* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004); *A Question of Manhood: A Reader in U.S. Black Men's History and Masculinity,* edited by Darlene Clark Hine & Earnestine Jenkins, 2 vols, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999 & 2001).

[4] Francisco Arturo Rosales, *Chicano! The History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1996); Juan Gómez-Quiñones and Irene Vázquez, *Making Aztlán: Ideology and Culture of the Chicana and Chicano Movement, 1966-1977* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009); Cynthia Orozco, *No Mexicans, Women, or Dogs Allowed: The Rise of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009).

gentlemanly traits of restraint (nonviolence), and feminine qualities like love and charity, longsuffering (victimization), and above all else, sacrifice. At the same time, Chávez and Movement members encouraged farm workers to fight for their dignity, often times in ways that reflected a rough manhood through the use of force, strong language, and deception. To further the Movement – La Causa—they incorporated characteristics Chávez vociferously eschewed, even while he shrewdly used similar tactics (drawing the line at physical violence).[5] Inside this blur of manly ideals, Chávez maintained patriarchal definitions of manhood, as the final decision-maker, provider, and protector of his family. His leadership was to go unquestioned; however, moral manhood did *not* define wealthy growers, Teamsters, or politicians. Chávez and farmworkers alike understood their cause, and their manhood, as a higher moral ground, which assured their victory through union organizing.[6] While Chávez clearly embraced his Mexican American identity, this article argues that he constructed his manhood from character traits like sacrifice, nonviolence, justice, and dignity, more so than from his ethnicity or race.

Looking at César Chávez and the men involved in the California Farm Workers' Movement as well as those who became members of the United Farm Workers (UFW) union helps to fill the gap in the literature on Latino manhood. Although Chávez wrote sparingly about himself, he left a very large "paper" trail through interviews and speaking engagements, as he toured the Southwest and Midwest to garner support for union organizing and the different boycotts and strikes that grew out of this activism. This article carefully considers selected speeches, both formal and impromptu, as well as interview transcripts, primarily Chávez's unofficial biography, *César Chávez: Autobiography of La Causa*. Reporter Jaques E. Levy was granted unprecedented access to Chávez, his family, and the union in 1969, the summer of 1970 and again in the summer of 1973. Levy recorded hours

---

[5] Dick Meister, "'La Huelga' Becomes 'La Causa,'" *New York Times*, 1 7 November, 1968.

[6] The International Brotherhood of Teamsters were targeted as opponents of the UFW because they made a secret deal with lettuce growers, beat and intimidated strikers and pickets, and two UFW members died in fights with Teamster thugs.

of "conversation" with Chávez (and others), where Chávez recalled his childhood and youth, including his introduction to Fred Ross and community outreach through the growing pains of the UFW.

Chávez created the Farm Worker Press and publication, *El Malcriado,* which ran from 1965-1976 and again from 1984-1989. This current analysis utilizes the earlier period when Chávez and Bill Esher were editors. *El Malcriado* was paid for by union membership dues and delivered to members, as well as available in local stores throughout the Central Valley. At first it was intended to be apart from the union, allowing writers and editors to critique growers without compromising organizing efforts.[7] Eventually however, *El Malcriado* became the official mouthpiece of the UFW, first marketing to farm workers in Spanish and in later years marketed to English-speaking supporters.

In addition to *El Malcriado* articles and Chávez's own ideas about manhood, this article looks at selected plays from *El Teatro Campesino* (1971), the theater created by and for farm workers and the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) members. The characters help to tease out the construction of manhood and manliness for working-class farm workers. The *Actos* of *El Teatro*, which feature archetypes who "symbolize the desired unity and group identity through Chicano heroes and heroines, were created and directed by Luis Valdez, and explicitly approved by Chávez. One character can thus represent the entire *Raza* (Chicano race)" and gender is easily recognizable in this format.[8] Valdez wrote the *actos* to be performed most often on the flatbed of a pickup truck stationed in the field, with minimal props or set, in order to appeal to the sensibilities of the workers. When gender is represented, a large group of working-class men can easily identify it and farm workers recognized themselves in the stories presented in the *actos*. Tales of abuse by growers, contractors, and the government also educated the farm workers of their rights and often reiterated the message of the Movement outlined in *El Malcriado* articles.

---

[7] Doug Adair, "El Malcriado 1964-1970 Analysis," July 16, 2009.

[8] Luis Valdez, "The Actos", *Actos y El Teatro Campesino* (San Juan Bautista, CA: Menyah Productions, 1971).

These sources reveal how Chávez, farm workers, and members of the Movement portrayed themselves and their cause. *El Malcriado's* emphasis is on Chávez's quest for justice, his pacifist demeanor, and commentary on his unassuming stature, coupled with his own words, all paint a carefully crafted picture for readers; Chávez was distinct from the growers and contractors.[9] The *actos* arguably reached a larger and more diverse audience of farmworkers, students, and supporters outside of the Central Valley, and helped to spread a consistent message as each play was repeated and viewed. Even Levy's heavy editorializing in *Autobiography of La Causa*, which included a great deal of commentary instead of just recounting Chávez's and other's actions, reflected his views as a Movement activist.

The NFWA grew quickly through the relentless efforts of Chávez, Vice Presidents Dolores Huerta and Gilbert Padilla, and by 1965 boasted a membership of approximately 1,200 workers. Then in September, the union joined the strike against table and wine grape growers started by the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (comprised of mostly Filipino farmworkers), and rebranded the union as the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFWOC). This same year Chávez started *El Malcriado* to reach the growing union membership and Luis Valdez founded *El Teatro Campesino* on the Delano picket lines. On 17 March 1966, Chávez began a three-hundred-mile march from Delano to Sacramento - what he called a pilgrimage or *peregrinación* - and he together with the Movement launched onto a national stage. Thousands of union members joined the strike, college students volunteered by the hundreds, and thousands of shoppers boycotted grapes to show support. The Farm Workers Movement, spread nationally, and in 1967 the union signed its first contract. Shortly after getting workers back to the grapevines, the UFWOC called a strike for lettuce workers, and the boycotts continued.

As Chávez started his second public fast in 1972, the UFWOC became the United Farm Workers-AFL-CIO or UFW

---

[9] Jorge Mariscal, "Negotiating César: César Chávez in the Chicano Movement," *Aztlán* 29 (2004), 21-56; Mariscal argues that Chávez was unlike the visible militancy of other male figures in the Chicana and Chicano Movement.

within a year. Four busy years later in 1977, after continued harassment by Teamsters (including beatings and the deaths of two pickets) the UFW became the sole union representing all California farm workers. By 1978 most of the general boycotts were lifted and César Chávez's name became synonymous with the UFW, the Farm Workers Movement, and La Causa. He led thousands of marchers, walked hundreds of miles, and fasted publicly on multiple occasions to bring attention to the plight of farm workers, and was jailed for disobeying a picket injunction. Throughout it all, he promoted the ideology of nonviolence, sacrifice, and the dignity of workers.

César Chávez understood himself as a man in moral terms. His manhood was defined by his fight for a righteous cause in the manner of St. Thomas Aquinas, Jesus Christ, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr.[10] He aligned his union organizing goals under a banner of a "distinctly Mexican American civil religion," one of "dynamic human sacrifice" which permeated the UFW and the Movement. A spiritual Christian with Catholic influences, he professed that the truest way to prove oneself as a man was through sacrifice, not by being tough or physically imposing.[11] He also emphasized other moral characteristics such as love, dignity, honesty, and nonviolence as markers of manhood. Characteristics like suffering and sacrifice were more often associated with femininity, such as in the image and icon of the Virgin of Guadalupe, while the others evoked traits of gentlemanly Victorian-era men, contrasting with working-class immigrant rough manhood. Feminine characteristics typically interpreted as signs of weakness became badges of manhood. Moral manhood encompassed all of these characteristics and Chávez knew that in order to claim victory in the fields, he and farm workers alike had to espouse this ideal. Just as Mahatma Gandhi and later Martin Luther King Jr. preached, social justice

---

[10] Jacques E. Levy, *César Chávez: Autobiography of La Causa* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Miriam Pawal, *The Crusades of César Chávez: A Biography* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2014).

[11] Luis D. León, "César Chávez in American Religious Politics: Mapping the New Global Spiritual Line," *American Quarterly*, 59 (September 2007), 857-881.

could only be achieved through moral and spiritual strength, not physical strength.[12]

Colleagues and those who saw him speak described Chávez in very feminine terms, and he himself used characteristically feminine language when he spoke publicly about The Movement. This surprised some, as he was such a force to be reckoned with from the growers' and farm workers' perspective. For example, he was described as "small of stature, quiet, self-effacing, soft-spoken" by his biographer, Jacques Levy.[13] Dolores Huerta recalled thinking he was "soft-spoken" with a "gentle way," likening him to a lamb "in the midst of a bunch of lions."[14] She found him "quiet" and "unassuming," while Fred Ross Jr. called him "unpretentious and candid," full of "warmth, sincerity, and gentleness."[15] Even his physical traits were seen as less than masculine by the farm workers who met him. To Eliseo Media, he was "this little guy… very soft spoken." Medina, who would later become the Vice President of the Service Employees International Union after joining the Delano grape strike, went on to say that he "wasn't very impressed" initially by what he saw.[16] Multiple individuals described him as having "unusually small" hands, and commented on his slight appearance. One observer, initially unimpressed, had imagined Chávez to be a "giant of a man" and was surprised by his small stature.[17]

Yet if Chávez's physical appearance and demeanor projected a less than manly image, his language did little to dispel

---

[12] Sean Chabot, *Transnational Roots of the Civil Rights Movement: African American Explorations of the Gandhian Repertoire* (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2012).

[13] Jacques E. Levy, *César Chávez: Autobiography of La Causa* (Minneapolis: First University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 1.

[14] Dolores Huerta quoted in Levy, *César Chávez*, 127, 125.

[15] Fred Ross Jr., foreward to *César Chávez: Autobiography of La Causa* by Jacques E. Levy, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), xxi.

[16] Eliseo Medina, interview November 18, 1995 quoted in Francisco Rosales, *Chicano! The History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement*, (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1996), 130.

[17] Ross Jr., foreward to *César Chávez: Autobiography of La Causa*, xii, xxi.

this impression. On many occasions he spoke to listeners about love, saying that "love is the most important ingredient in non-violent work - love the opponent."[18] He had earlier said in a speech in Austin to cabinetry workers on the topic of boycotts that they were so powerful because they were an "extension of love from one individual to the other," mixing the rhetoric of compassion with that of the union.[19] Years later when he spoke about the dangers of pesticides for farm workers and consumers alike, he declared that "I see us as one family" and often referred to the union as one big family, a common metaphor in Chicana and Chicano movements and politics.[20] When he spoke about his first public fast, he described his actions as a result of his heart being "filled with grief and pain" on behalf of farm workers and their struggle, conjuring emotion usually associated with motherhood and the Virgin Mary.[21] While certainly not limited to women, these phrases of love and family evoked a feminine sensibility that aligned with Chávez's physical appearance. He capitalized on his femininity and disarmed people of their expectations for a fighter, incorporating it into his manly persona.

If Chávez appeared feminine to some, he wasn't outwardly bothered by it. His appearance was not how he defined manliness, but by alternative notions that again, some considered effeminate but ultimately expressed Latino masculinity. His constant references to sacrifice throughout his speeches and conversations were a trait typically viewed as feminine. He promoted the belief that the Movement came together based on a

---

[18] Chávez quoted in Levy, *César Chávez,* 196.

[19] Chávez, "Chávez at Austin, Texas, Feb 6, 1971," transcript & trans. by Robert Tice, *The Words of César Chávez*, eds. Richard J Jensen & John C. Hammerback (Texas A&M University Press, 2002), 56.

[20] Chávez, "Wrath of Grapes Boycott Speech, 1986," *The Words of César Chávez*, eds. Richard J Jensen & John C. Hammerback (Texas A&M University Press, 2002), 132; Maylei Blackwell, *¡Chicana Power!: Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).

[21] Chávez, "Speech Ending Fast, March 10, 1968," quoted in *The Words of César Chávez*,134; Suzanne Bost, "Gloria Anzaldúa's Mestiza Pain: Mexican Sacrifice, Chicana Embodiment, and Feminist Politics," *Aztlán* 30 (November 2004), 5-34.

shared willingness to forgo certain necessities.[22] Chávez believed in the creation of a farm workers union so profoundly that nothing came first but the efforts to make it a reality. He preached hard work and passion too.[23] He strongly believed that in order for his union organizing to be successful, he and others involved would have to give much of themselves and continue giving, redolent of the Gandhian repertoire that taught resisters to challenge the status quo through "courageous deeds and deliberate self-sacrifice."[24] Sacrifice peppered his speeches and writings and was the backbone of the Movement, of the union, and of Chávez as a leader, all aspiring to a noble and just purpose. He framed his choice to give of himself and his physical body, to the extent that he did through fasting and peregrination, as sacrificing himself unto the will of the Movement and in support of farm workers' rights.



Figure 1: César Chávez washing dishes, *El Malcriado*, No. 51, 1966.

At the same time, Chávez believed in sacrifice as a duty, as a rite of passage, and as a testament to manhood. In a speech he

[22] "Editorial: Enough People with One Idea," *El Malcriado,* No 19, 1965, 2.
[23] Levy, *César Chávez*, 148, 160.
[24] Chabot, *Transnational Roots*, 21.

wrote, but was read by the Reverend James Drake at the end of his first fast, he concluded with his belief that "only by giving our lives do we find life." He was "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!"[25] Chávez, in no uncertain terms, equated manhood with the level of sacrifice one was willing to reach, up to giving of one's very life. In other speeches, he said very similar things: "…being fully man and fully woman means to give one's life to the liberation of the brother who suffers."[26] At a eulogy for Martin Luther King Jr., he praised the minister for his ultimate offering, saying, "few men or women ever have the opportunity to know the true satisfaction that comes with giving one's life totally in the non-violent struggle for justice."[27] Chávez expressed that one's willingness to relinquish both material possessions and one's life was how to reach a full expression of humanity and manhood.

Playwright Luis Valdez understood Chávez's message of sacrifice and manhood, and rearticulated it in "Vietnam Campesino." The character Butt Anglo, a stand-in for the growers of the Central Valley, speaks to General Defense about recruiting Mexican Americans to the U.S. army to fight in Vietnam and banters with the General about the need for a Mexican-American leader, "One who will unite all Mexicans, instill them with a fighting spirit, send them marching down the road to freedom, have them willing to fight and die for the American ideals." [28] Chávez did inspire many to sacrifice, yet not in the name of war but of dignity. Historians across a spectrum of topics, writing

---

[25] Chávez, "Speech Ending Fast, March 10, 1968," quoted in *The Words of César Chávez*, eds. Richard J Jensen & John C. Hammerback (Texas A&M University Press, 2002), 167, emphasis added.

[26] Chávez, "At Exposition Park May 2, 1971," *César Chávez: An Organizer's Tale, Speeches,* ed. Ilan Stavans (New York: Penguin Group, 2008), 121.

[27] Chávez, "Martin Luther King, Jr.: He Showed Us the Way April 1978," *The Words of César Chávez*, eds. Richard J Jensen & John C. Hammerback (Texas A&M University Press, 2002), 97.

[28] Luis Valdez, "Vietnam Campesino," *Actos y El Teatro Campesino* (San Juan Bautista, CA: Menyah Productions, 1971).

about Latinos and the sport of boxing or Chicano soldiers during the Vietnam War, highlight the sacrificial component of working-class Latino manhood, either in the form of *aguante*, "the ability to withstand punishment and pain," or in "the willingness to die in defense of '*la patria*' (fatherland)."[29] Sacrifice was required of working-class Latino men regardless of the arena.

Chávez emphasized nonviolence as another important marker of manhood. He called nonviolent struggle "hard work," not "soft or easy."[30] Men in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s felt the need to reject anything considered weak or soft, and Chávez clearly identified nonviolence in this way, as something hard and difficult and therefore manly.[31] Interestingly, he identified his mother, whom he revered and cherished, as the one who taught him to be a man through the concept of nonviolence. At her eulogy he shared that "she taught her children to reject that part of a culture which too often tells its young men that you're not a man if you don't fight back."[32] He embraced nonviolence as his way, and therefore the Movement's way, "of avoiding the senseless violence that brings no honor to any class or community."[33] On numerous occasions Chávez worked to personally de-escalate heated debates and rising tempers in the union hall and on the picket line to maintain this philosophy. Having studied the writings and tactics of Mahatma Gandhi, he convinced himself and union members that the only way to successfully garner public support for farm workers and their calls for real gains in terms of wages, benefits, and rights, was through the systematic practice of nonviolence, "despite a culture where

---

[29] Fernando Delgado, "Golden But Not Brown: Oscar De La Hoya and the Complications of Culture, Manhood, and Boxing," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 22 (2005), 196-211; Steven Rosales, "Macho Nation? Chicano Soldiering, Sexuality, and Manhood during the Vietnam War Era," *The Oral History Review* 40 (2013), 299-324.

[30] Chávez, "At Exposition Park May 2, 1971," 120.

[31] K.A. Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

[32] Chávez, "Eulogy for Juana Estrada Chávez, San Jose Dec 18, 1991," 172.

[33] Chávez, "Martin Luther King, Jr.: He Showed Us the Way, April 1978," 97.

you're not a man if you don't fight back."[34] He recognized the utility of nonviolence as a form of resistance but also as a philosophy that focused on men's capacities other than their brawn.

He, as well as *El Malcriado* editors, characterized the use of violence as vain attempts to be manly. The message was simple, but difficult in practice. At various points throughout the Movement's history strikers and picketers (or "pickets" as they were referred to) experienced violence at the hands of Teamsters and other hired goons. Chávez asked pickets to turn the other cheek but he could not force them. He reminded pickets in the line to not swing back or appear to incite the use of force to remain blameless against the opposition, who shamed themselves by engaging in threats of and actual violence. When Chávez talked of sacrifice, he in part referred to the difficulty of nonviolent resistance in the face of such threats.

As a way to distinguish himself and the Movement from those with whom they fought and negotiated, Chávez highlighted all of the ways in which growers, Teamsters, contractors, and politicians were not as manly as farm workers. By challenging the manhood of UFW opponents, he cast doubt on their profit motives and challenged their claims of authority and positions of power. While real men (farm workers) forfeited their possessions and their lives for the greater good, the opposition used weapons and violence, deceit, bravado, and affluence to maintain their status, all of which made them lesser men and in the end defeatable.

On multiple occasions Chávez called out manly imposters as those who used weapons and resorted to violence to achieve their goals. At an anti-war speech in Exposition Park in 1971, Chávez pondered the choices of soldiers: "perhaps they have come to believe that in order to be fully men, to gain respect from other men and to have their way in the world, they must take up the gun and use brute force against other men."[35] He went on to list examples of men with guns, including growers, police, and security guards, all of whom presumably called themselves men because they carried a weapon, and for no other reason other than

---

[34] Chávez quoted in Levy, *César Chávez,* 18.

[35] César Chávez, "At Exposition Park 2 May, 1971," 120.

to beat up pickets and to threaten UFW supporters.[36] Chávez negatively portrayed the opposition and questioned their ethics: "I am positive nonviolence is the way, morally and tactically, especially in a society where those in power resort to clubs, tear gas, and guns."[37] He mocked those in power for their reliance on the strength of these tools of force and for not having the strength of character or dignity like farm workers. Not only did growers and their goons threaten farm workers and union supporters, but each other as well: "They were ready to cut each other's throats just to help themselves."[38] The growers had so little shame they couldn't even trust one another, according to Chávez.



Figure 2: César Chávez, Images from the Farmworkers Movement, UCSD Collection.

In addition, farm workers often accused growers of dirty tactics and deception. Chávez objected to secrecy and dishonesty as a lack of principle, which was incompatible with being manly. Likewise, the editors of *El Malcriado* contended that growers and Teamsters employed a campaign of "intimidation, bribery and deception."[39] Chávez himself told biographer Levy that certain companies' tactics were "dirty" and "unprincipled"[40] while Teamsters "operate[d] out of deceit

---

[36] César Chávez, "Speech Ending Fast, 1 0 March, 1968," 167; "Christensen Must Quit Due to Anti-Union Bias," *El Malcriado,* Vol VI, No 14, 13 July, 1973, 3, https://libraries.ucsd.edu/farmworkermovement/ufwarchives/elmalcriado/1973/No.%2014%20July%2013,%201973.pdf.

[37] César Chávez quoted in Levy, *César Chávez,* 5.

[38] Ibid., 309.

[39] Sam Kushner, "César Walks: Teamsters/Growers Deal," *El Malcriadito,* Vol 1 No 5, 23 July, 1975, 1.

[40] César Chávez quoted in Levy, *César Chávez,* 235.

and contempt… coming to the back door and making sweetheart deals with the employers."[41] He had little respect for those he presumed to be liars and even less time, hanging up phone calls or walking out of discussions when he felt he was being deceived. *El Teatro Campesino* picked up the same thread in "Vietnam Campesinos" when the General (the U.S. government) admonishes the grower and his labor contractor: "If you want [farm workers] to be Teamsters, *you just tell them they're Teamsters!* Don't pussy-foot around, Butt! We're fighting a war boy."[42] Chávez repeatedly accused the federal and state governments of preventing secret union elections on different farms and thereby thwarting UFW efforts to represent farm workers in favor of Teamsters, who had historically failed to make real gains for workers in the fields.

Chávez promoted moral manhood as aspirational and criticized UFW opponents for their lack of ethics and moral fortitude. At the same time he unabashedly promoted less-than-straightforward tactics and proudly espoused rougher traits of manliness. In part a product of his childhood, he used these tactics as a way to relate to those for whom he fought in the union. Despite clear similarities to their opponents, Chávez and *El Malcriado* always characterized these rougher elements positively; the ends of justice and fairness justified the means to a certain extent. Chávez and *El Malcriado* alike regularly admonished the poor, the oppressed, the farm workers, to "fight back" against injustice and unfair business practices, despite what he learned from his mother about turning the other cheek. Militant nonviolence is not passive resistance. In part Chávez and others justified fighting back based on legal grounds; as U.S. citizens, farm workers had constitutional rights that were abused. Chávez encouraged them to fight for their rights so that justice could be served. In addition, fighting back created solidarity amongst workers based on ethnic, racial, and class commonalities.

The dignity of the farm workers could be supported through higher wages, paid time off, and other benefits that Chávez and others worked tirelessly to obtain through union

---

[41] Ibid., 246.

[42] Valdez, "Vietnam Campesino," *Actos,* emphasis added.

contracts. He and *El Malcriado* as well as *El Teatro Campesino* heavily promoted the concept that men had to fight back, fight the growers and the Teamsters for these benefits, and not just accept their "fate." While renouncing physical violence, they employed other means in the fight. Nonviolence required creativity and strategy, cleverness in the form of "moral jiu-jitsu,"[43] and while principles were intractable, tactics could be shaped or bent to optimize outcomes of union goals. Aggression was acceptable in varying degrees because Chávez and farm workers alike had a manly obligation to fight their circumstances.[44] *El Malcriado* informed readers that dignity showed itself in many ways, and "sometimes it is shown by the man who will fight when he is insulted."[45] The paper presented Don Sotaco as the archetype of the downtrodden and abused peasant/farm worker, and the story of his invitation to the University of California, Davis School of Agriculture. The university was trying to "grow" the perfect farm worker and Don Sotaco's response to the whole thing was, "Viva La Causa" before he turned to the professor and spit in his face.[46] The same issue's editorial, most likely written by Chávez himself, exhorted readers by saying, "This year and in the years to come, [dignity] will be shown by the man who will fight back when he is insulted."[47] Years later Fred Ross Jr. wrote that he "had learned from César to be direct, forceful, and confrontational when necessary."[48] In the context of the farm workers Movement, activists stretched nonviolence to include acts that mirrored physical violence, up to a point.

---

[43] Fred Ross Jr., foreward to *César Chávez*, xiii.
[44] "Christensen Must Quit Due to Anti-Union Bias," 3.
[45] "Editorial: Dignity of the Farm Worker," 2.
[46] "Don Sotaco Story: Science Marches On," *El Malcriado,* No 18, 1965, 6.
[47] "Editorial: Dignity of the Farm Worker," 2.
[48] Fred Ross Jr., foreward to *César Chávez,* xvii.

El Teatro Campesino, likewise reproduced the message of dignified nonviolence to audiences of farm workers and donors alike, but also highlighted the ongoing struggle and tension between members of the Movement who were not all convinced of the efficacy of nonviolence as a tactic. In "The Militants," two Chicanos argue about the best way to overcome the oppression and starvation faced in their *barrios*, Chicano #1 pointing out that "non-violence works, sure, but to a limit" and later demanding, "we need guns." Chicano #2 replies back, "But… guns ain't the only thing that's going to make a Revolucion!" implying that in addition to guns, they had to be balsy or manly to fight back. Chicano #1 accuses Chicano #2 of "misleading the people" by thinking weapons were the solution, but in the end they kill one another while the white Gavacho (the American white guy) "laughs uproariously." [49] Like young African American men during the Civil Rights Movement, young Latinos held competing notions of how best to defend themselves and their notions of manhood, not excluding retaliatory violence. Because nonviolence was seen as passive and submissive, for some it connoted more feminine behavior.[50] Chicano #1 and Chicano #2 show this same contradiction of thought expressed between Movement members and its leaders. Ultimately however, the tale emphasizes the futility of violence, leaving both Chicanos dead at the end despite their shared racial and class status and common enemy.



Chávez himself grew up in an environment where manhood required roughness. His family's neighborhood in San Jose, Sal Si Puedes (literally translated "get out if you can"), was

[49] Valdez, "The Militants", *Actos*.

[50] Simon Wendt, "'They Finally Found Out That We Really Are Men': Violence, Non-Violence and Black Manhood in the Civil Rights Era," *Gender and History* 19 (November 2007), 544.

a tough working-class area, and he witnessed violence at an early age.[51] His own father employed physical force to discipline his sons; violence learned in the family setting unwittingly repeats and spreads later by family members in other social settings. [52] As a community organizer, registering voters in San Jose, Chávez described going to a home of "some rough characters" he knew. "They started kidding me," he said, "but I could communicate with them."[53] He could speak the language of tough guys when necessary, with "good-natured roughhousing," arguments, and beer drinking.[54] In part, Chávez appealed to farm workers because he never lost touch with his tough upbringing and could bridge the gap between the physically violent manhood of his youth and the moral manhood he promoted as a union organizer.

Chávez also openly admitted to dishonest tactics to get his way and reach his goals, which were presumably those of the union as well. Chávez told a story of how he wanted to go with a certain Father Salandini but was impeded by another priest. His staff secretly went to another location and telephoned for the interfering priest, allowing Chávez to make his getaway with Salandini as he had originally intended. [55] Perhaps the moral rightness of the union cause justified covert or deceptive practices, especially as benign as this incident cited here, but it was still dishonest. In another setting, after Chávez was accused of being a Communist and union officials were debating what to do about it in the union hall without Chávez present, he arrived and "accused the officers of selling out for money, which was not true." "But," he said, "it was my ploy" to get them to drop the Communist issue.[56] Chávez openly admitted that his accusations were false, but under the circumstances he justified his deception as necessary to the continued operations of the union with him at the lead.

Chávez's rougher side came through in other ways as

---

[51] Chávez quoted in Levy, *César Chávez,* 50.

[52] Ibid., 29; John Mack Faragher, *Eternity Street: Violence and Justice in Frontier Los Angeles* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015).

[53] Chávez quoted in Levy, *César Chávez,* 104.

[54] Ibid., 106, 104.

[55] Chávez quoted in Levy, *César Chávez,* 232.

[56] Ibid., 120.

well, and again looked strikingly similar to the tactics of the opposition and for which he accused them of being unmanly. Revenge and loyalty were in this case two sides of the same coin, and Chávez wanted to "even the score a little for the workers…" as well as "settle a personal score" by organizing farm workers, his own family included.[57] The town of Oxnard of his childhood was a particularly bad memory for Chávez, and when he started organizing there he "thought that going back would be a little revenge." He just wanted to "go back and fight."[58] While he clearly referred to fighting as a fight for better working conditions and union contracts, the language when viewed out of context could easily be construed differently. *El Malcriado* reprinted numerous times the definition of a scab, in one breath creating a brotherhood out of the union family while threatening those who would "sabotage" strikers and pickets. [59] Threats of violence and intimidation were the very thing Chávez railed against when used by growers and Teamsters. Lionel Steinberg, the largest table-grape grower in the Coachella Valley and semi-friendly with Chávez, accused him and UFW members of "harassment, antagonism, and threats against some of [his] employees" as well as rock throwing and name-calling.[60] Steinberg was not alone in challenging the prevailing narrative that the UFW was nonviolent in practice.[61]

Another aspect of his tougher manhood, Chávez held traditional patriarchal beliefs regarding gender roles, evidenced by how he spoke about his wife and mother and the turbulent relationship he had with union Vice President, Dolores Huerta. Similarly, the ways in which he referred to women in the Movement as well as other family members (brothers, sister, and children) reveal that he felt he was very much in charge and generally prioritized the Movement, not his family. This allowed

---

[57] Chávez, "The Organizer's Tale, July 1966," *César Chávez: A Brief Biography with Documents,"* ed. Richard W. Etulain, (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2002), 35.
[58] Chávez quoted in Levy, *César Chávez,* 126.
[59] "Judas is Among Us," *El Malcriado,* No 18, 1965, 14.
[60] Lionel Steinberg quoted in Levy, *César Chávez*, 297.
[61] Pawal, 333.

him to claim authority as a man who controlled his family and therefore could control the Movement.

Both Chávez's wife and his mother worked in the fields with Chávez, and he held them to much higher standards than others. He revered his mother and admonished others to similarly revere their elders, while he consistently referred to his wife, Helen, as a great support and help-meet. On occasion however, Chávez compared his mother to his wife, showing how Helen came up short of his expectations. In regards to Huerta, Chávez felt she was contentious and spent too much time away from her own family, even while he relied upon her fiery spirit to negotiate better contracts for union members. Women in Chávez's family and in the UFW were essential players to the Movement, but were also strategically relegated to traditionally gendered roles.

Chávez found his wifely ideal embodied in Coretta King, the widow of Martin Luther King Jr. When she came to visit him in the Salinas jail he remembered that, "unlike a lot of the farm worker women who came and cried, she looked at being in jail as part of the struggle."[62] In other words, Chávez felt she understood that what he fought for was bigger than his marriage or family. Perhaps this was because she experienced the sacrifice this type of work required, unlike other women in La Causa or his own wife, even though Helen too had been jailed more than once for her union activism. Much of the time when Chávez spoke about his family, he hinted at the sacrifices he made in order to be with them, or conversely, how he had to forgo time with them to attend to organizing or union matters. Chávez admitted that his kids had to suffer because of the Movement, as he prioritized his work over tending to them.[63] Even at his daughter Eloise's wedding he attended to business and left early, despite Helen's obvious displeasure.[64] In response he told her that "the best thing you can do is to support me and help me out," leaving no room for discussion.[65] It is clear that Chávez was in charge of his wife and family and the time he spent with them, a reflection of his position as the head of the household and the man of the home. The family

---

[62] Chávez quoted in Levy, *César Chávez,* 430.
[63] Ibid., 127, 143, 160.
[64] Ibid., 336.
[65] Ibid., 273.

metaphor was consistently used within the Chicano and Chicana Movement to reflect the closeness of the activists on more than just a political level, but in practice this metaphor reinforced traditional patriarchal norms that kept women in subservient roles.[66]

Huerta on the other hand was not married to Chávez, and as the Vice President of the UFW and lead lobbyist, she was not under any perceived moral obligation to obey Chávez. They argued and bickered and Huerta recalled that Chávez would say "something very snotty to let me know he was still mad" or just change the subject altogether.[67] He even admitted to her that he treated her poorly, but she said she understood; she felt the pressure for the union efforts to succeed while still caring for her family just as Chávez did. Complicating matters further, Chávez relied heavily on Huerta to negotiate the best contracts possible for union members but then spoke of her like an animal, as when he told Herb Fleming, a lettuce grower, that if Herb did not want to deal with him, he would "unleash Dolores and tell her, 'Go get him, Dolores! Go get him!'" likening Huerta to a dog.[68] Despite recognizing the importance of Huerta to the union, Chávez undermined her by verbally challenging her or speaking ill of her in front of others, in what appears to be his way of asserting a position of manly authority.[69]

Other references regarding the role of women in the Movement are equally unsettling and reveal clear differences of expectations based on gender. Chávez spoke about losing "good men," "because of their wives." In his opinion, women were critical to the Movement but as supportive wives or in other supportive jobs behind the scenes.[70] "We can't be free ourselves if we don't free our women… We've got to help her overcome [her fear] if she's going to be a servant to the Cause and help her

---

[66] Blackwell, *¡Chicana Power!*

[67] Dolores Huerta quoted in Levy, *César Chávez,* 265; Levy, 397.

[68] Levy, 421.

[69] Pawal, 280, 358, 408-409.

[70] Margaret Rose, "Traditional and Nontraditional Patterns of Female Activism in the United Farm Workers of America, 1962-1980," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies* I (Las Chicanas, 1990), 26-32.

husband to be a servant."[71] Women were to be supportive and subservient to their husbands and by extension the Movement. Women's participation in the UFW was unfairly "invisible" but also clearly gendered; hundreds of women volunteered and worked for the union over the years, including Chávez's own wife Helen, but primarily in capacities like secretarial work, hosting and organizing meetings, picketing, and boycotting and "forgotten" in the narrative of union successes.[72] When the 1966 march to Sacramento was planned Chávez decided to take the men along and leave the women behind on the picket lines, including Huerta. "None of the women liked it, but they stayed," he admitted. [73] His ability to control or maintain power over women was part of his identity as a man: as the man he was in charge of his family and his union and his ability to assert his authority reflected the broader ability of the UFW to achieve success with union contracts against the growers.

Here we return to the question posed at the beginning of this paper: why did Chávez concern himself with manhood when he could have focused on so many other seemingly more relevant issues at the time of his fast? Part of the answer may be found in a brief summary of the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Strike, in which African American sanitation workers called a strike, wearing signs that read, "I Am a Man!" Strikers protested racism and poor working conditions as well as the paternalism evident in their treatment, as Martin Luther King Jr. addressed the "emasculation" of the workers and called for nonviolent action, including a march to Memphis. Chávez certainly would not have missed what this event implied for the Farm Workers Movement. They shared issues of mistreatment by white superiors, lack of living wages, and the need to provide and care for families. The similarities between the sanitation strike and the Farm Workers Movement

---

[71] Ibid., 160.

[72] Rose, "Traditional and Nontraditional Patterns; Margaret Rose, "'Women Power Will Stop Those Grapes': Chicana Organizers and Middle-Class Female Supporters in the Farm Workers' Grape Boycott in Philadelphia, 1969-1970," *Journal of Women's History* 7 (Winter), 6.

[73] Ibid., 207.

cannot be missed, and manhood clearly rose as a central issue within each.[74]

César Chávez was a complicated man, courageous, driven, tenacious, and stubborn, who symbolized a type of manhood for many that was at once soft and gentle while at the same time tough and even mean. He carefully and deliberately defined manhood around concepts of sacrifice, dignity and nonviolence, a moral manhood that encompassed all of these ethical qualities and formed a union and movement in the same mold. Movement activists were similarly motivated, as evidenced by *El Malcriado* and *El Teatro Campesino*. By casting his opponents and those of the farm workers as less than men, he positioned himself and the union as moral underdogs who were destined to overcome their oppressors because of the justness of their cause. Simultaneously he relied on tactics that were in many ways similar to those he decried in the opposition, and maintained a rigid patriarchy within his family and by extension the union. His authority as the man of the family and the leader of the union helped to reinforce the idea that he was an effective leader of a Movement that was destined to succeed, in large part due to his call for a higher moral manhood.

---

[74] Steve Estes, "'I Am a Man!': Race, Masculinity, and the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Strike," *Labor History* 41 (May 2000), 153-170.