

**The Chicana/o Countryside: A Visual History of California's Central Valley, 1965-1985**

by

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## Table of Contents

List of Figures		ii
Abstract		vi
Introduction		1
Chapter 1	Delano: Chicana/o Activism, Pilgrimage, and Rural Visual Culture	33
Chapter 2	Parlier: Murals and the Chicana/o Vernacular Landscape	102
Chapter 3	Dinuba: Chicana/o Printmaking in the Home of the Raisin Industry	164
Conclusion		207
Bibliography		214

## **List of Figures**

1.1	Map of Stockton, California	1
1.2	Branding the Grape Strike (1966)	5
1.3	The NFWA logo (1965)	7
1.4	Huelga! Poster (1965)	8
1.5	Pies, pies pies (1961)	20
1.6	Cakes (1963)	20
1.7	Dark Reservoir (2014)	23
1.8	The March to Sacramento (1966)	23
1.9	The Rural School (1932)	24
2.1	On the pilgrim trail en route to Sacramento (1966)	33
2.2	NFWA headquarters (1966)	47
2.3	Chavez at the NFWA headquarters (1966)	48
2.4	Wall display at the NFWA headquarters (1966)	48
2.5	Cesar Chavez and Robert Kennedy in Delano (1966)	50
2.6	Departure day at the NFWA headquarters (1966)	52
2.7	The men of the march, looking back on Albany Street (1966)	55
2.8	Where the street becomes a road in Delano (1966)	56
2.9	Challenges along the pilgrim trail (1966)	56
2.10	Pilgrims along Highway 65 (1966)	57
2.11	An impromptu yard installation (1966)	61

2.12	These boots were not made for walking (1966)	63
2.13	Selma to Montgomery March (1965)	68
2.14	March on Washington (1963)	68
2.15	Chavez's Central Valley map	71
2.16	The material culture of agribusiness (1966)	75
2.17	Storage sheds and packing houses (1966)	77
2.18	Grape workers preparing the harvest (1966)	80
2.19	A grape worker and his pruning shears (1966)	81
2.20	The grape trestle (1966)	81
2.21	Staging the cause (1966)	85
2.22	The pilgrims approach Sacramento (1966)	86
2.23	The eagle has taken flight (1966)	90
2.24	The pilgrims assembled in Sacramento (1966)	92
2.25	Prayer and protest at the roadside's edge (1966)	94
3.1	Untitled mural at Del Rey (1968)	102
3.2	Map of Parlier and Del Rey, California	111
3.3	Untitled mural at Parlier (1978)	112
3.4	South Wall from <i>History of Mexico</i> , Palacio Nacional de Mexico (1929-1935)	120
3.5	West Wall from <i>History of Mexico</i> , Palacio Nacional de Mexico (1929-1935)	121
3.6	Inset, final panels, mural at Parlier (1978)	133
3.7	Inset, center panels, mural at Parlier (1978)	135
3.8	<i>Latinoamerica</i> (1974)	138
3.9	The Eckbo designed camp at Tulare	148

3.10	Eckbo's trellis style bench with sandbox	150
3.11	Children in the Eckbo designed sandbox	150
3.12	Inset, lower panel, mural at Parlier (1978)	154
4.1	Sun Mad (1982)	164
4.2	Map of the of Dinuba, California	170
4.3	Eisen Vineyard logo (c.1890)	177
4.4	The Eisen Vineyard (c.1890)	177
4.5	Fruit Vale Estate, The Central California Colony (c.1890)	179
4.6	A Twenty Acre Parcel (c.1890)	179
4.7	Advertising the small acreage parcel (c. 1890)	180
4.8	Promoting the small acreage parcel (c. 1890)	180
4.9	Map of Kearney's holdings at Central California Colony (c. 1890)	181
4.10	The proposed buildings and grounds at Central California Colony (c. 1890)	181
4.11	141 South P Street in Dinuba, California (2014)	182
4.12	Ester Hernandez at her childhood home in Dinuba, California (c.1952)	184
4.13	The Hernandez family home altar (c. 1970)	186
4.14	Grandmother Tomasa and mother Luz (Aguascalientes, Mexico, c.1912)	188
4.15	Grandmother Tomasa, mother Luz, and uncle Hilario (El Paso, Texas, c.1916)	188
4.16	<i>Mis Madres</i> (1986)	189
4.17	<i>Cosmic Cruise</i> (1990)	189
4.18	<i>La Ofrenda</i> (1988)	189
4.19	A family of dancers in Selma, California	191
4.20	A family of dancers in Selma, California	191

4.21	Immigrant Woman’s Dress by Ester Hernandez (1997)	192
4.22	Immigrant Woman’s Dress revisions mock up (2016)	192
4.23	<i>La Catrina Calavera</i> by Jose Guadalupe Posada (c. 1910)	193
4.24	<i>El Jarabe</i> by Jose Guadalupe Posada (c. 1910)	193
4.25	Ester Hernandez at her childhood home in Dinuba (c. 1950)	194
4.26	<i>California Special</i> (1988) by Ester Hernandez	194
4.27	Sun Maid raisins logo (1970)	195
4.28	The original Sun Maid model (1915)	197
4.29	The original Sun Maid logo (1915)	197
5.1	A roadside memorial, Del Rey, California (2016)	207

## Abstract

Rural Chicana/o art, a style of politicized Mexican heritage visual culture produced in the United States since the mid-twentieth century, has yet to receive substantial critical attention despite the prominence of agrarian issues in Chicana/o visual culture. This study argues that between 1965 and 1985, Chicana/o cultural producers in the Central Valley created a set of visual material that expressed their fraught—and often invisible—relation to the industrialized agricultural economy taking shape around them, and, in the process, helped establish the farm worker as a primary figure in Chicana/o visual culture. The Fresno scene has made particularly significant contributions to this body of work due to its long-standing position as the economic, cultural, and political center of the grape industry. This dissertation explores how three works—the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA)-led March to Sacramento (1965), *Mujeres Muralistas del Valle*'s mural at the Parlier Labor Center (1978), and Ester Hernandez's *Sun Mad* (1982)—developed by cultural producers in Fresno and its adjoining circuit of culturally rich farm worker towns and cities provide insight into how Chicana/os experienced and represented their place in the civil rights-era agricultural industry. I argue that this triad of visual material, and the wider set of murals, poster art, performances, and domestic and roadside installations from which it grew, demonstrate a form of aesthetic resistance on the part of these artists, an important strategy they utilized to offer alternative historical narratives, register political dissent, and promote rural cultural practices. Ultimately, I argue that the environment has played a major role in shaping the visual culture of the Chicana/o Central Valley—whether it was the use of grape workers highly specialized environmental knowledge in NFWA bargaining strategies, the

direct experience of grape harvesting by artists such as Hernandez, or the more indirect influences members of the Mujeres Muralistas del Valle gained through their proximity to the vineyards. This research aims to provide an initial map of how these place-based interventions took shape over time in this particularly fertile Fresno area cultural corridor known as “the grape belt.”

## Introduction



Figure 1.1. Map of Stockton, California.

Early one Saturday morning in 1968, Edison High School freshman Carlos Perez arrived at the Stockton Community Center and parked his bicycle against the wall of the gymnasium. He removed his gloves—tucking them into his plaid flannel jacket—and walked to the center of the room to join the other students. Dressed in t-shirts, blue jeans, and athletic shoes or light work boots, with hair neatly parted to one side, these young men were ready to begin a printmaking workshop organized by local artists and teachers from across the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta region of California’s Great Central Valley.<sup>1</sup>

Perez had been interested in drawing and painting since his early childhood in Mexico, influenced by the streetscapes of his birthplace in Mexico City and the small village in Jalisco where he was raised by his aunt and grandmother. Perez joined his mother in Stockton at eight years old, arriving by bus at the Greyhound station on North Center Street and growing up in a small three-room house nearby (Figure 1.1). Although he had participated in arts and culture events at the Stockton Community Center before, and knew many of the students assembled in



the gymnasium that spring morning, Perez was relieved to see his friend, Franklin High School student Carlos Lopez, arrive as the workshop began. After brief introductions by the artists, teachers, and center staff, the young men from local high schools were assigned to small groups at printing stations set up across the gym. With approximately fifty students on hand, the large room was filled with a sense of excitement and urgency as they began the process of creating posters for a local event.

Perez worked together with his friend and a few other students at one of the print making stations, learning how to use the equipment that would allow them to quickly reproduce the poster of the day, a relatively simple three color graphic image with succinct text. The modest silkscreen boxes they used were constructed from wood and set with mesh pulled taut across the frame. Made from silk, the mesh was strong enough to withstand the repetition of sweeping paint across the “screen,” yet fine enough to leave only a smooth thin layer of paint across the surface exposed in the stencil. But as strong as the fine threads of intricately woven silk are, wood warps and expands when wet, especially when saturated in acrylic paint in a hot gymnasium all day, so maintaining the tension was a challenge for Perez as he learned the mechanics of printmaking. In his first run of prints, he learned to apply bright red paint to the mesh screen, and experimented to find the right amount of pressure needed when he ran the rubber squeegee across the length of the frame to cover the entire cardboard canvas. Once dry, he learned to apply a second, smaller circle to the prints, a bright white focal point for the image and text stencil that he would overlay next in black acrylic paint. At the end of the day, the tall stacks of signs were trimmed into large circles and set, with staples, to narrow wooden stakes.

The signs Perez and his fellow students were making that day in 1968 were for the United Farm Workers (UFW), a group that was on the move in American labor politics through their

organization of a large (and largely unorganized) body of agricultural laborers. These farm workers, who until recently had been federal guest workers through the Bracero Program (1942-1965), were seeking labor contracts that would improve wages, workplace and housing conditions, and provide greater and more affordable access to health care and social services.<sup>2</sup> California's Central Valley became the epicenter of this post-Bracero Program organizing through the efforts of Mexican and Filipina/o heritage workers, many of whom had roots in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta region.<sup>3</sup> The city of Stockton, and where Perez lived specifically—downtown, in the shadow of Interstate 5 and Highway 4—served as an important link between the UFW's key supporters in Sacramento, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, and the dusty rural chain of farm worker towns that line the state's rural interior.

By 1968, the long, wide zone of farms, fields, orchards, and vineyards that stretches between the state's urban centers had long been recognized as an important site in rural American culture. Work by John Steinbeck, Dorothea Lange, Maynard Dixon, and Frank Norris established the Central Valley as a foundational rural American landscape, filled with all the promise and disappointment that comes from a dream as big, as bright—and as fraught—as the one planted in California's rural cultural landscape. When Perez and the other young men assembled in the gymnasium on that spring day to print signs for a UFW rally, they became part of this body of work, contributing to a new visual culture that was in the process of making Mexican heritage experiences in the Central Valley visible to a wide audience. Just two years earlier, the coalition of farm workers that would soon grow into the UFW captured international attention during a twenty-five day March to Sacramento (1966) in an effort to gain traction, via increased media exposure, for the Grape Strike they had initiated the previous year. Drawing on the evocative images of other Civil Rights era marches, including the explosive coverage of the March on

Washington (1963) and the Marches from Selma to Montgomery (1965), these farm workers in California walked over three hundred miles from their modest headquarters in Delano to the Capitol in Sacramento during the Lenten period of 1966.<sup>4</sup> Framed intentionally as a pilgrimage, the farm workers travelled the rural corridor of California, visiting fifty-three farm worker cities and towns along the way, en route to negotiating their first union contract. They connected those older religious rituals with the imagery of the Civil Rights movement, but did so in a new way, producing the first tropes in a visual language that shaped and represented what would become the Chicano/a movement.

This strategic move to build support for their cause through visual images, means and materials proved critical in increasing their support among two key groups: the farm workers they sought to organize and the political allies they would need beyond the Central Valley to make the Grape Strike (1965-1970) a success. Passing through towns like Stockton, the farm workers offered a daily set of programming, including mass, rallies, theatre productions, and musical performances, all meant to resonate with a wide audience. An astute selection of performances and material culture allowed organizers to present culturally resonant forms and images for the farm workers in attendance at the rallies, while those same forms also remained legible to allies—the priests, teachers, and homemakers that followed the March as it moved through the pages of the San Francisco Chronicle, Washington Post, and numerous student, farm worker, religious, and labor oriented newsletters during the spring of 1966.



Figure 1.2. Branding the Grape Strike (1966). Photograph by Paul Fusco.

Perhaps most importantly, this visual culture resonated deeply with a third audience: local Mexican heritage youth such as Carlos Perez, who would come of age in the Central Valley during this formative period of farm worker and student organizing. This activity would lead to what was in the process of becoming known as *el movimiento*, or, the Chicana/o Movement, a nation-wide surge of political thought and cultural production, particularly visual culture.<sup>5</sup> Extensive scholarship has rightly been devoted to the urban roots of the movement. Less understood are its rural influences, visible through the prolific production of overtly political writing, organizing activities, and other cultural production—particularly the visual material that resonated so deeply with young artists and activists, and which had consequences that extended through and beyond the movement itself.<sup>6</sup>

The iconic symbol of the farm workers, the black eagle, quickly became the centerpiece of the UFW's visual program, offering a crisp and accessible piece of imagery that expressed the aspirations, goals, and cultural touchstones of these workers. Richard Chavez, the man on the far right edge of the frame, and the brother of UFW co-founder Cesar Chavez (shown in the foreground, just ahead of him), conceptualized the image in 1962 just after the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) formed to represent the Mexican heritage workers that were left without labor contracts when the Bracero Program was phased out. Eager to grow into a powerful union that would represent their cause, the Chavez brothers and other leaders in the

organization knew that developing a compelling logo would play an important role in communicating the agenda of the new organization to its diverse audience—an audience who, they hoped, would become supporters.

The configuration, depicting an eagle rising from the "nest" of an inverted Aztec pyramid was deceptively simple in form, quickly became an important sign for the farm worker movement in the Central Valley, a kind of visual text that carried a set of complex meanings that were open to interpretation based on the long and rich set of associations with the eagle in Mexican visual traditions.<sup>7</sup> The image of the powerful bird, wings fully outstretched, also served to neatly consolidate meanings as a symbol, an efficient communication of strength and resistance. And, as an icon, the wings tell a story: the rise of the farm worker to his or her vaulted place in Mexican American culture happens step by step. In other words, these aesthetics—a dearly held image that worked along multiple registers, found a new home with these migrant laborers in the Central Valley in just a few short years, making it not only immediately recognizable and deeply resonant, but perhaps just as important: relatively easy to reproduce in printmaking workshops or along picket lines.

The swift ascent of the farm workers' eagle as a major symbol of *la causa*, the farm workers' cause, or what has been understood as the rural side of the Chicana/o Movement, also rested on the resonance of two other elements found in the sign's composition. When Perez and the other students ran prints of the sign in 1968, bold text was included directly below the eagle, tall compact block letters identifying the NFWA. While the largely Mexican heritage workers that founded the NFWA in 1962 had already joined with the Filipina/os to form the UFW by this time, the ongoing use of NFWA imagery during the Grape Strike (1965-1970) serves as a subtle visual cue that the union's message, particularly its visual narrative, was driven by the Mexican

heritage organizers. These organizers, including Cesar and Richard Chavez, sought to establish a visual program centered on a core image, the eagle, that could be linked to other culturally resonant iconography. Because many of the farm workers had limited educational opportunities, and many were mono-lingual Spanish speakers, the use of Mexican cultural references and accessible Spanish language text became an important tool for the UFW.



Figure 1.3. The NFWA logo (1965). Concept by Richard Chavez, illustrated by Andy Zermeño.

The most utilized phrase during the Grape Strike is found just below the eagle's "nest." *Huelga* (strike) became the rallying call during this period of organizing and was used extensively by union-supported cultural producers including writers, artists, and musicians. Set in thick block letters and spanning the core of the eagle's body and wings, the combined text anchors the image at the ground level. Imagine them in place on the picket lines where the vineyard meets the rural county road: the thin wooden stakes stretch downward towards the rich soil they cultivate, and the broad wings extend upward into the long open sky of the Central Valley. The signs simultaneously rooted the union's message in the lived reality of the farm workers' daily lives and their ability to imagine a more stable position for themselves in American society.



Figure 1.4. Huelga! Poster (1965) by Andy Zermeno

The eagle and its ascendant rallying call were used widely by the NFWA and UFW, forming an important part of their early visual catalog. Eager to develop a logo for the farm worker movement since the Chavez brothers moved to Delano in 1962, Richard initiated the concept of the eagle, embracing its symbolic links to ancient and modern Mexican visual culture. Although the concept held potential in its rough sketches, it was the work of artist and graphic designer Andy Zermeno who brought the image to life. Taking the project on as an effort of in-kind support while working full-time at a design agency, Zermeno helped sharpen the clarity of the figure, improving the shape of the eagle's head, which he set slightly detached from the body and turned to the viewer's right.<sup>8</sup> Strong, thick lines were used to create movement from this line break, creating emphasis on the eagle's broad shoulders and the pointed angles of its brow and beak. The composition then moves the eye along the base of the image, where the eagle's talons form a platform, and climb up a long and sturdy staircase of wings, snapping in loud unison with the wind as it runs sharply across the bright red flag: *the movement is ready to take flight.*

And it did. The eagle images were immediately embraced by the staff and audience of *El Malcriado*—the NFWA publication that would help the organization establish a louder “voice for the farmworker” particularly through its inspired visual program. Zermeno was invited to serve

as Artistic Director for the newspaper. He accepted the offer, while maintaining his "day job" in Los Angeles, creating a productive link between the rural and urban centers of movement activity. As the farm workers movement grew in the Central Valley, alongside the more urban oriented student movement, Zermeño's illustrations formed an important part of the young union's visual program, including an English language version of the newsletter for its growing audience. But through its strong references to Mexican heritage visual culture in the form of drawings, photography, and printmaking, the newspaper was able to maintain its central mission as a communication tool between the leadership and rank and file members, the farm workers.

For social movements and their attendant cultural productions to have far reaching and lasting power, the flow of ideas between producers and consumers must be multidirectional. The early NFWA and UFW organizing thus benefitted tremendously from the accessibility, legibility, and resonance of the visual program led by Zermeño. The *Huelga!* (1965) illustration became a cornerstone of this material, and was used extensively in brochures, pamphlets, rally signs, and run as a low cost poster.<sup>9</sup> Young people like Perez—budding artists, activists, and other cultural producers—thus became helpful not only in the circulation of these images but would also begin to form strong political and cultural identities during this period, which birthed the Chicana/o Civil Rights Movement.

This set of identities would take both dramatic and subtle variations in shape as the movement grew, as regional, generational, class, and gender experiences moved Mexican heritage supporters of the farm workers' cause in multiple directions in their identity formation during this formative phase of political activity. The movement was diverse. The young people to come of age in this historical moment in the Central Valley, however, were deeply touched by the organizing and its visual culture, and many emerged as *Chicana/o* by the end of the decade in



ways that have not been thoroughly examined in Chicana/o political or visual history.<sup>10</sup> Through their proximity to, and often participation in, the agricultural industry, a group of young artists and activists took the message of the farm workers' cause to heart. Over the course of their careers, these artists and writers would produce a body of work that articulated the concerns of rural Mexican heritage life in the second half of the twentieth century in the Central Valley of California.

The formation of these political identities through objects of vernacular culture took place both in circulation of this early set of UFW-sponsored work and in the popular *re-workings* of it. In the early twenty-first century, this reworking would have had the effect of "going viral." Like any good meme or GIF produced in our own historical moment, the early UFW visual material produced in the mid twentieth-century was incisive in its identification of a core value or truth that was well established in popular culture and widely understood across its audience, creating an "entry point" for engagement and repurposing, as we shall see. The eagle, then, was grounded as an icon, able to express its cultural foundations and withstand modification—but flexible enough that it was open to a multitude of popular interpretations.

The effect then, in the pliability of these visual truths, is that the vernacular itself became elevated in such moments: an *idea* takes flight when a farm worker, or a student, or a priest cuts out a drawing from the newsletter, or purchases a poster at rally and hangs it on the wall of their living room, dormitory, or church. And the cultural power of that image deepens when they *live* with it in these intimate everyday settings and become inspired to draw, print, paint, perform, photograph, write, or otherwise retell what they see and feel when they look at that image. In other words, such vernacular visual material becomes an important archive of cultural experience

and knowledge because it allows us to measure the power of a social movement through the quantity and quality of the cultural production it creates and inspires.

Exploring this relationship then, between the visual product, its audience, and its circulation (often through the new sets of products, audiences, and circulations it inspires), allows us to see complex and nuanced processes like identity formation and social-political organization in greater detail: a "thread" like the UFW eagle establishes, and makes visible, a line backwards in time, place, and space to its antecedents in the visual histories etched into pyramid walls and chambers, or use of the eagle and other natural imagery in Mexican Revolution era printmaking, while also extending its stitch forward into contemporary murals, roadside shrines, and yard installations.

And like the silk threads of the printmaking box used by Perez and the other young artists and activists, these representations of rural life and rural subjectivity were pulled taut across the Mexican heritage identities that formed in the 1960s and 1970s in the Central Valley. While the power of farm worker iconography ultimately lost its productive tension by the end of the twentieth-century—through extensive and intensive overuse—even these later representations in the 1980s gained their own dimension and texture, which reflected strength of the Grape Strike (1965-1970) era. In other words, the edges of the eagle's wings may have lost their sharpness over time but the message remains clear into the twenty-first century: the farm workers, and their cause, continue to express the centrality of agrarian experiences in Chicana/o identity formation.

This dissertation aims to explore exactly this issue: the dynamic relation between images, rural culture, political identities, aesthetics and environments that gave shape and dimension to the Chicano/a movement in the Central Valley. How and why did rural heritage come to mean so much to Chicana/os during the second half of the twentieth century? How were its meanings

brought to life by Zermeño, Perez, and other Mexican heritage cultural producers who were themselves in the process of becoming Chicana/o in the Central Valley during the period? An enriched understanding of the movement requires a deeper understanding of the ways such images called meaningfully to audiences both within, and far beyond, this region. How might this relationship between visual culture and audience response echo across earlier representations of rural Mexican cultural landscapes? I intend to examine a number of sites that help us to understand how stylistic evocations of a rural Mexican homeland became dear to artists and viewers, and how their expressions varied across time, place, and space, even as the art and images offered a set of silken threads that bound meaning in a kind of coherence.

Stockton's location, as a crossroads of country and city life in the Central Valley, and gateway to the worlds beyond it, provides a useful entry point for exploring the significance of the rural in Chicana/o identity formation and visual practices. Understanding Stockton as both a location and an idea, or, as a physical *place* and a discursive *space*, situates mid-twentieth century Chicana/o identity formation and visual culture within a set of discourses as rich and knotty as the cultural landscape itself. To make better sense of this rich cultural landscape and the role it played in shaping Chicana/o experiences, we would do well to turn to the historiography of the environmental humanities.

Like many of the larger towns and cities that would come to form the metropolitan core of the industrial countryside in the Central Valley during the twentieth century, Stockton is at once urban in its orientation and rural in its context, a city in the country that holds a trove of cultural and environmental history data amid its intricate set of waterways, which weave through and around farm land, shipyards, barrios, islands, highways, and levees. Stockton's qualities

might suggest something to us about Fresno, Sacramento, Delano, Dinuba, Parlier, Del Rey—all towns that will feature in this project. At the meeting point between the natural watershed connecting the Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers and an expansive set of marshes that link to the San Francisco Bay and Pacific Ocean, Stockton's location in the natural environment is powerful and suggestive. The inclination, perhaps, has been to understand how the cultural landscape has changed over time through an evaluation of the structures built into it to manage the flow of water—dams and irrigation canals, and particularly its flagship projects, the federally managed Central Valley Project and the state-run California Water Project.

What if we were to look more deeply into this layering of natural and built environments through small collaborations like the one Perez attended in his high school gymnasium? What might we learn about rural Chicana/o visual culture and identity formation in this setting? How and why does it matter to create a stronger and clearer link between the natural and cultural dimensions of the Chicana/o vernacular landscape?

Several methodological tools in the environmental humanities help navigate this journey, serving as roadmaps or trail guides in the interpretation of the Chicana/o vernacular landscape during the second half of the twentieth-century in the Central Valley. The path cut by environmental historians in the 1980s and 1990s, remains a defining axis line in the interdisciplinary study of nature and culture. We might begin with one of the lists of questions generated by environmental historian William Cronon, who has been among the scholars most explicitly engaged with methodological questions, and among the broadest in his range and interest. In "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," he begins by asking: "What do people care about most in the world they inhabit? How do they use and assign meaning to that world? How does the earth respond to their actions and desires?" Cronon's questions offer a kind

of call to action that climbs in scale to its eventual peak: “And on the grandest scale: what is the mutual fate of humanity and the earth?”<sup>11</sup>

And he sure was right: the stories produced from this place, where nature meets culture, had significant ripple effects across American history and the environmental humanities during the late twentieth century. These questions, posed by Cronon here, and by others in a robust series of monographs, articles, edited volumes, workshops, and public forums, built on previous generations of scholarship that, while often less self-consciously organized as environmental analysis, established important antecedents or now-visible signposts for considering in complex dialogical ways people's place in their natural and built environments. Drawing on an expansive, and often inventive, range of material from geology, ecology, economics, and legal and policy studies, with occasional forays into qualitative data like art and literature, the "new" field aimed to expand the environment as a major player in human stories about the past. This call, to expand the environment from thinly sketched backdrop to fully fleshed actor, was heard widely, and a robust set of work emerged that astutely localized and specified people's local places in a broad, interconnected world. The local was global, the global was local, and it was all read evocatively through tree rings, soil samples, ice barges, and big heaps of used tin cans at mining camps.<sup>12</sup>

The turn to the environment then, relied on extracting cultural information from mostly natural objects, establishing nature as an underutilized historical archive. This move, to read culture in nature, was enhanced by unusual pairings with material culture objects like a pile of cast-off bean cans or an abandoned Alaskan mill. Suddenly, it made sense to think deeply about human pasts *in place*: the debris of mining life in Gold Rush-era Sierra Nevada camps could help, through its materiality, make new sense of such complex and colliding truths as the intense social, political, and economic changes underway in a place and space that was in the process of

becoming the US West. A small silkscreen box, used by young student-activists like Perez in their gritty neighborhood gym offers a glimpse, then, into a world not often seen in the American environmental story, for the signs they were making that day, for a fledging labor group just barely gaining recognition as political subjects—let alone as environmental activists—is a story that is in plain sight if one knows where and how to look.

To find and make visible big new meanings in small, everyday objects, especially those typically out of view or cast aside is tricky and required a second methodological move by environmental historians during this pivotal moment in the formation of the field: the insistence on the value of narrative. Gaining momentum at the very moment of postmodernism's deepest certainty about uncertainty, where everything was nothing and nothing... was nothing still, the determination of environmental historians to let the *story* prevail flowed against the current of cultural studies in the early 1990s. As Cronon notes, the anxiety with narrative was a valid concern expressed in this historical moment because the critical and creative decisions required to build stories necessitate "a unity that neither nature or the past possess so clearly." But, with their stories rooted in place, and told through an intricately woven set of natural objects and material culture, environmental historians were standing on solid ground with their insistence on the value of storytelling. While the terrain of narrative, of picking something, someone, and somewhere to speak from, *was* full of fissures, sinkholes, and landmines, it was deemed better to have a flawed or faulted meaning than none at all.

These parallel lines, narrating cultural change in place through evocative data sets, have thus merged, forming an enduring axis of cultural and environmental analysis as we move deeper into the twenty-first century. Inventive and unusual data, we have learned through this work, requires openness to equally creative and uncommon methods. The environmental historian, in

her work as storyteller, holds a commitment not only to a rigorous process of data collection and analysis but a responsibility to the *artistry* required to elevate the story of the data to something with literary qualities. An important legacy of environmental history rests in the analytical and narrative toolkit it has assembled: we aspire to tell meticulously researched and well-told stories because a good story is comforting and enlightening, in the most critical ways. It has recognizable markers and signposts that are balanced with quirky or unexpected material. These threads are then woven together by the historian as she forms a thickly textured plot with a causal sequence, enlarging our knowledge of the cultural landscape through sensory engagement and expanding how we feel about the meanings produced.

The (re)turn to nature in late twentieth century American history, from this new yet familiar place, thus had distinct *cultural* connotations, opening a broad route of inquiry: *What do people care about most in the world they inhabit? How do they use and assign meaning to that world?* By the end of the twentieth century, environmental historians had answered this call to produce place-based cultural narratives, and a proliferation of stories aimed at filling the gaps in the American cultural landscape story had begun. And the stories they told were good. Very good. Individually, these narratives brought attention to the multitude of ways identity categories such as race, class, gender, and sexuality inform environmental experience, and, as a set, they confirmed the importance of diversifying American environmental thought and political activity.

**Keywords: Culture and the Central Valley Vernacular Landscape**

But by the early twenty-first century, the powerful ripples cast by those first stones have begun to fade, and while interest in place-based cultural analysis is stronger than ever, it has become urgent to seek out, and cast, new stones. And if narrating cultural change in place is our primary job, then we could do worse than return to key sites and sources for material. The

evolution of the term “culture,” particularly its dramatic rise and contested usage during the mid-twentieth century, guided Williams’s study. What started as a "preoccupation" with one word, *culture*, grew into an intricately mapped set of definitions, categories, and relationships.<sup>13</sup>

During this process, one complex set of relationships emerged as foundational: *democracy, class, art, industry*. These four concepts are particularly poignant in the Central Valley given the ways that agribusiness would come to shape how the region would look and function through a tiered system of labor that relied on a large pool of migratory workers, often recruited through ethnic labor contractors based on growers’ preferences. Maintaining a surplus of low paid laborers kept wages down. But it had been creating problems for growers and government officials for decades, and these tensions were heightened postwar as the possibility of union organization, successful strikes, and coalition building took hold. Industrial agricultural models created distinct racialized class landscapes. Democracy and art? These proved to be the tools used to challenge the power of state-supported agribusiness. By providing a historical map of how these concepts have changed over time, and how these words are interconnected through place and time, the relationships they form create a "blue-print" of sorts for the architecture of American society in the late twentieth century. Culture, through expressions like art, literature, music, and even exceptional works of philosophy and history, take on abstract and material qualities. They become useful indicators, and even determinates, of a society's values, fears, aspirations, as well as its understanding of its past, present, and future.

While his intent may very well have been to help cultural studies theorize history and historicize theory, the body of work Williams produced certainly has had its share of important ripple effects across the second half of the twentieth century as subsequent scholars have sorted through their own sets of tumultuous cultural encounters. In the field of American studies,



particularly the humanistic modes of inquiry that drive its latest push in ethnic studies, Williams' interrogation of structural phenomena via art and material culture remains relevant. Words matter, and revisiting which ones are the keys to unlocking our contemporary questions remains a defining influence of his work. And with these related fields coming of age during the postwar culture wars, the battle over knowledge was and remains fierce. One does not have to look far to see how the battle over the historical narrative has shaped and reshaped these fields in the decades since Williams' work first appeared, as each generation does its own analytical and interpretive work on what culture is and how it works.

The role of the countryside in shaping the country's sense of self travelled across political boundaries in this era, and became an important precursor to the kinds of questions some of these migrants and many of their children would soon start asking in the lives they would rebuild in the United States. Understanding how nature and culture *work* in the Central Valley, then, shows us how and why this site has become a foundational Mexican/American landscape and, in the process, has produced a vast range of enduring aesthetic images of rural life. Individually, these cultural products speak to the specific experiences of the artist(s) and their audience(s); taken together as a set, murals, photographs, and garden installations speak to the challenges, tensions, and paradoxes present in industrial agriculture, the dominant economic and social force in the region. Additionally, this material speaks to the ways that Mexican heritage artists and vernacular producers articulated an alternative set of environmental aesthetics, place-making, and politics that reshapes the contours of American environmental history and visual culture during the second half of the twentieth century.

The questions Raymond Williams was asking about culture, and its relation to democracy, class, art, and industry in postwar Europe become remarkably poignant when put in

conversation with Chicana/o identity formation during the same period in the Central Valley. While miles and worlds apart from Williams, Chicana/o cultural producers also looked to their rural heritage for answers, understanding, and solace during a time of great turmoil, using culture as an entry point to understand their place amid the political, economic, and social upheavals that so dramatically reshaped the lives of Mexican heritage people who found themselves in the United States in the twentieth century. The urgency to make sense of and build meaning through visual culture was heightened by their location as, or proximity to, the low paid workforce that brought California's agricultural empire to life during this same period.

It is no surprise then that Chicana/o artists in the Central Valley during this period looked back with frequency and longing to rural origins in Mexico. Their lives were lived within often-invisible structures of the cultural landscape, and the work they produced from it serve as powerful expressions of their resistance to a dominant-group structuring of place and space as well as their resilience within it. The turn to nostalgic invocations of rural Mexican heritage can be read as both a move to counter, as well as an effort to make sense of, the overwhelming injustices and environmental risks they faced in and near the factory farms, fields, orchards, and vineyards that surrounded them. Country life took on new meanings in the political moment, exposing otherwise unseen contours to the relation between culture, democracy, class, and art in a part of the American cultural landscape that is widely known but not well understood.

Following his graduation from Edison High School in 1971, Carlos Perez enrolled at Delta Community College and began his formal education in arts and culture. Inspired by his high school art classes and community workshops, Perez was more eager than ever to channel his energy into the study of drawing, painting, and the newly available course offerings in Chicana/o

studies. Under the guidance of esteemed mentor Bill Williams, the chair of the art history and art studio departments, he enjoyed a rigorous curriculum that featured courses taught by robust rotation of artists-in-residence including Ruth Asawa.

Like most of the Central Valley in the early 1970s, the Delta campus was experiencing a major period of expansion, driven by a rising population of racially and economically diverse students seeking higher education. Passage of a major state bond initiative in 1966, as well as a highly successful capital campaign between 1965 and 1968, made an increase in enrollment of these students, and the buildings, courses, and programming to support them possible, and Perez was among the first cohort of students to enroll at the new permanent campus. Exposing students to leaders in American modernism became an important, if unexpected, legacy of this tiny art program nestled along the edge of the Delta, exemplified by Perez's drawing instructor in the spring term of 1971: Wayne Thiebaud.



Figure 1.5. *Pies, pies, pies* (1961) by Wayne Thiebaud

Figure 1.6. *Cakes* (1963) by Wayne Thiebaud

Fresh from his first major exhibit, held at the Whitney Museum in New York City, Thiebaud was in the process of gaining wide recognition of his work when he arrived at Delta. That work offered a set of drawings and paintings that would transform a ubiquitous object of vernacular culture, like the slice of cafeteria cake or the wedge of diner pie, into an astute marker of mainstream American culture and consumerism. That thick smear of buttercream was more

deliciously complex than audiences ever imagined, and upon close study and instruction, students like Perez learned that all those shadows, and all that light, was derived, not from time spent with desserts, but rather from his exhaustive study of the lines, shapes, forms, and colors along the canals, roads, islands, rivers, streams, fields, and reservoirs of the Delta.<sup>14</sup> The California environment, in other words, could teach one strategies for visual representation.

In Thiebaud's drawing course, Perez learned the mechanics involved in putting pencil to paper to bring objects and subjects to life. Through extensive still life exercises with fresh produce from the surrounding farms, Perez honed his representation of grapes, apples, and pears. In outdoor sessions, Perez learned the *en plein air* tradition, bringing his own observations of the collage of objects in the natural and built environment onto the pages of his sketchbook. Not only was Perez learning how to "see" a landscape dear to him and his experience as a young Chicano artist, he was learning how to see *deeply*, developing an appreciation for the architecture of light and everyday food objects.

This early training would prove invaluable for Perez as he continued his education at San Jose State University, and began a successful career as an illustrator and fine artist. Perez's experience in Stockton also speaks to the curious connections that Chicana/o visual culture in the second half of the twentieth-century held with American modernism. As Perez learned in Thiebaud's studio at Delta Community College, the magic of a good drawing often rests in the shadows, as three-dimensional objects are collapsed into two with the use of only one tool, the pale gray lead of the artist's pencil. Thiebaud's attention to this underappreciated feature in *painting*, where the artist has the arsenal of color and texture in their toolbox, has become one of his most notable contributions to American visual culture, a signature move of sorts that enables the viewer, when standing at the far edge of the canvas, parallel to the wall it is hung on, to

recover the third dimension of the piece. The topography of all those thick, neatly plowed fields becomes visible in what initially just might have seemed like a whole lot of frosting.

The critical and popular reception of Thiebaud's work suggests not only a deep public interest in classic American desserts, but also an appreciation for unanticipated sites of cultural meaning. At first glance, face-to-face, these paintings most likely evoke a sense of whimsy or delight expressed in its surface: childhood treats elevated, plated, and encased in good light. The way we remember them. But, through a closer look into the annals of its surface, we begin to see his exhaustive inquiry into how rural cultural landscapes in the Central Valley *work* through cylinders, boxes, and wedges. In the process of moving a three-dimensional object like a cake, and the Delta shadows and channels that inspire it, into the two dimensional sphere of the canvas, and back again through topographies of thickly structured and layered paint, a picture of the *meanings* of these natural and cultural processes begins to take shape.

Thiebaud's ability to articulate, through technique, a set of forms most typically seen in the natural and built environment produces a different kind of delight for the viewer: who knew so much was happening along the edges and in the shadows of a piecrust? Placing these pieces within his larger set of drawings and paintings, as well as the larger canon of American modernist work related to culture, place, and space exposes other important and curious interests in the Central Valley's cultural landscape. Maynard Dixon, William Keith, Martin Ramirez, Ansel Adams, and Richard Diebenkorn have all found inspiration in the Valley's places, providing an incisive visual map of the region across the twentieth-century.



Figure 1.7. *Dark Reservoir* (2014) by Wayne Thiebaud.  
Figure 1.8. *The March to Sacramento* (1966) by Jon Lewis.

What happens then when you put farmworkers, and the representations of their experiences in the cultural landscapes in the Central Valley, in dialogue? Reading Thiebaud, next to and with, an image like the photograph taken by NFWA staff photographer Jon Lewis as the grape workers and their allies made their journey through this cultural landscape, enhances our understanding of how these landscapes *work* and the layers of meaning that physical and discursive labor produces. Lewis, from a similarly elevated vantage point of the country highway overpass, places the emphasis on people in this cultural landscape. The soil, plant life, and shadows along the edges where nature meets culture become secondary focal points; the viewer's primary focus is along the long line of bodies, gently curved across the center of the composition. Where Thiebaud's landscape drawing hints at the ominous meanings held in the contact points between farm, field, reservoir embankment, and the water it holds, Lewis, through his relative proximity to the farmworkers, gets us even closer. And just as the water is tightly enclosed in Thiebaud's lush drawing, Lewis' emphasis on the farm workers exposes the rigidness of a labor system that produces equally clean, sharp lines. Walking thoughtfully, in unison, the gentle curve of their line now expresses both the modesty and audacity of the pilgrims, for these protesters had to challenge, through a penitent march, the vast and deeply rooted infrastructure of the agricultural empire where they earned their living. They might be a modest people but they held immodest dreams. They could not be contained.

## The Rural School: Chicana/o Visual Culture in the Central Valley

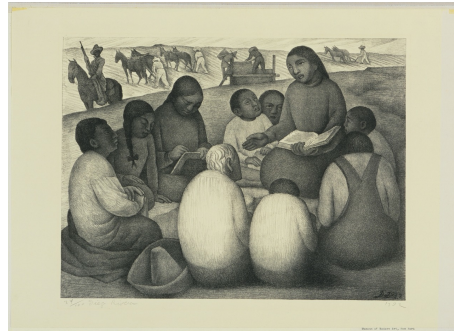


Figure 1.9. The Rural School (1932) by Diego Rivera.

The visual material produced in the Central Valley during this formative period of farm worker organizing in the 1960s can be thought of as the Rural School of Chicana/o art. In deep conversation with the Mexican muralists, and other Revolution-era artists, as well as a wide range of other cultural producers, this body of work helped establish the rural landscape, and rural subjects, as a central experience in Mexican heritage culture and in the United States. The political and aesthetic meanings of the images coming out of the Central Valley during the 1960s resonated far beyond the valley itself, establishing the rural as a major recurring theme in art produced in urban areas as well during this period. This visual iconography was established through material such as early *El Malcriado* publications, drawing a line back from the farm workers to the older land-based struggles that have played a major role in shaping the cultural landscape of ancient and modern Mexico, and forward to the lives they imagined for themselves in the United States.

As this visual iconography stretched across other sites of Chicana/o and Mexican America, its roots in the Central Valley took deeper hold, beginning with Antonio Bernal's mural at *Teatro Campesino's* headquarters in Del Rey, California, and extending through the valley with projects by *Mujeres Muralistas del Valle* in the Fresno area and Royal Chicano Air Force in Sacramento.<sup>15</sup> These early mural projects were widely influential in subsequent decades and

informed a wide range of public art projects in this rural landscape. Rural themes also found their ways to the walls of the urban landscape, in acts of aesthetic inspiration and political solidarity. Previous research has focused on how the leaders of the Grape Strike cultivated a network of supporters in cities to facilitate large-scale political action, pressuring large grocery chains such as Safeway to support the Union through exclusive use of Union certified grapes. This solidarity work also had aesthetic dimensions, however, as cultural producers from the Central Valley were in direct contact with their urban counterparts, enhancing the important support for the farm workers' cause that many students, religious groups, and middle-class consumers had joined.

An art-based political strategy was also mobilized extensively in the Central Valley, led by artists in the Rural School—Rupert Garcia, Malaquias Montoya, Jose Montoya, Ester Hernandez, Ernesto Palomino, John Sierra, Celia Rodriguez, Lorraine Garcia-Nakata, and Esteban Villa—who connected nature and culture in new and compelling ways. With gallery, museum, and public art space difficult to secure in this moment, venues and ventures such as the *El Malcriado* newsletter and community based printmaking workshops became a primary site for the visual culture in the Civil Rights era Central Valley. The newsletter was printed in both English and Spanish language editions and was read widely among farm workers and their supporters. This support stretched far beyond the organizing headquarters in Delano, and the visual program instituted during this period helped the farm workers realize the core goals of the Grape Strike: in short order during the March to Sacramento (1966) they won the right to unionize, they gained national visibility for their cause and they set in motion a series of legislative actions that would establish a pathway for improved working conditions and better pay. But struggling to gain traction on the enforcement of these policy changes, and internal challenges that emerged with a large and complex organization, unrest was brewing. The most



vocal of this internal pressure came from the young men, much like the ones at the printmaking workshop in Stockton on in the Spring of 1968, to follow the charge of the strike leader in Zermeño's *Huelga!* (1965) and assert a more aggressive tone in the Grape Strike.

But as seen with the early UFW visual material, images like Zermeño's eagle contain powerful historical value, and can be brought to life in compelling and accessible ways when they make the move from art to popular culture. This move, into the vernacular, becomes a useful measure of hard-to-define things like identity formation because it provides insight into the ways that everyday people understand their everyday lives. And, for a population such as the farm workers, who are often placed outside of the frame of Mexican/American life in the mid twentieth century, objects such as a modest poster, hung on a modest wall, or printed by high school students in a modest community center's gymnasium on a Saturday afternoon in 1968, become a window into their homes, workplaces, and innermost worlds.

In what follows, I aim to explore the relations between art and visual culture with the politics—democratic and not—that arose out of the industrial agricultural system, which produced environments both rationalized and dangerous, as well as an emergent rural working class consciousness. The influences of the Rural School on both the Central Valley and the urban formations of Chicano/a political identity can be traced through a number of distinct moments and cases. Taken together, these offer critical opportunities to reassess not only the nature of movement politics, but the relation of people, place, and aesthetic cultures.

### **Chapter Overviews**

In chapter one, “Delano: Chicana/o Activism, Pilgrimage, and Rural Visual Culture,” I examine the use of visual culture by the National Farmworkers Association (NFWA) during the March to Sacramento (1966), a twenty-five-day journey that played a major role in helping the

small organization secure its first union contract, the first of its kind in American agricultural labor organizing. I argue that this victory was also significant for aesthetic and cultural reasons. The visual program that was underway during the larger Grape Strike (1965-1970) reached its apex during the three-hundred-mile pilgrimage from their organizing headquarters in Delano to the steps of the state capitol, resulting in a crisp and emotionally resonant archive of photographs, theatre performances, signs, and banners that would come to define this moment of rural Chicana/o identity and visual culture. In this chapter, I investigate how the farm worker, or, more specifically, the grape worker emerged at the center of this story both in real and representational terms. Central to that emergence was the environmental knowledge and technical skill they cultivated during a ten-month commercial growing season. As the most visible image of the farm worker movement in this period of organizing, then, the grape worker was thrust into the national spotlight through the success of the pilgrimage and became, in the process, a symbol of the rural Mexican heritage agrarian struggle in the Central Valley.

While the UFW struggle to maintain its membership numbers and its direct influence on American labor politics in the years following the march, the strength of its visual program would retain much of its influence in Chicana/o visual culture, a persistence seen in the proliferation of scenes—particularly in murals—repurposing the signs and symbols of the march for new audiences and causes. Chapter two, “Parlier: Murals and the Chicana/o Vernacular Landscape” focuses on one such project, Mujeres Muralistas de Valle’s 1978 mural at Parlier, which is commonly understood as the first Chicana mural project in the area. I provide a discursive tour of this understudied collective’s relevant aesthetic and political influences, including: Diego Rivera’s large scale piece *The History of Mexico* (1929-1934), Antonio Bernal’s 1968 mural for El Teatro Campesino in nearby Del Rey, and *Latinoamerica* (1974), a

San Francisco mural by “sister” organization Mujeres Muralistas. The visual languages of the UFW movement matter in these close readings. But there are also broader environmental, economic, social and cultural contexts that matter as well. I situate close readings of these murals in the larger sociopolitical context of 1970s Parlier, one of the agricultural communities to appear in the lower San Joaquin Valley during the late nineteenth century. How did a small growers’ town change over time into a farm worker enclave defined by its relation to the labor camps that first appeared during the Farm Security Administration’s rural redevelopment program in the 1930s? What were the relationships between these histories and the later Chicano Movement protests staged along Main Street during the 1970s? Pursuing such questions, the chapter links movement politics, aesthetics, and locality together to make deeper and richer sense of the 1978 mural.

As the *huelga* imagery—and the overtly activist agenda it suggests—took hold in places like Delano, Del Rey, and Parlier, another form of aesthetic resistance emerged in nearby Dinuba. Chapter three, “Dinuba: Chicana/o Printmaking in the Home of the Raisin Industry” expands on the women-centered visual narratives presented by Mujeres Muralistas del Valle by retracing the journey artist Ester Hernandez took in the creation of her widely referenced but little researched print *Sun Mad* (1982). This chapter highlights Hernandez’s experience growing up in Dinuba, a modest farm worker town set amid the vineyards and packing houses in which she worked. Specifically, I explore the ways her rural childhood—days spent playing outside in her mother and grandmother’s well-tended gardens—encouraged her creativity and an appreciation for the domestic cultural production that filled her family’s home. Hernandez swam in a world of rural visibility that included embroidery, dress-making, yard installations, and ornamental trees, shrubs, and cacti. More broadly, I place her experience within the larger rise of

the raisin industry in Dinuba and surrounding towns. Dinuba saw a series of changes to the natural and built environments during the twentieth century that maps onto the chronology of her family's journey to the United States during the Mexican Revolution. Finally, I return to *Sun Mad* (1982) and a related set of prints and installations to show that, while these works are relatively humble in their production, they serve as remarkable records of how Mexican heritage women in in this era contributed to the cultural life of "Raisinland, U.S.A"

### **Conclusion**

Today, in the Central Valley, the plight of the farm workers—and the environment—is as dire as ever. For example, according to the Environmental Protection Agency, greater Fresno suffers from the nation's worst air and water pollution, including eight of the ten most polluted sites in California.<sup>16</sup> The effects of this environmental crisis can be seen most acutely in places like East Porterville, an unincorporated farm worker community just off Highway 65 near Delano. When the NFWA walked through this area during the March to Sacramento (1966) they stopped to enjoy *agua fresca* and other refreshments in an impromptu yard installation set up by a farm worker family. The scene that day, in the spring of 1966, was somber but hopeful. Although the farm workers and their supporters knew they were working against major forces in the public and private sectors that did not want to see changes made in the farm labor system, the photographs taken by Jon Lewis in front of the large punch bowl expressed a quiet sense of dignity and determination: surely, somehow, *something* could be done. And they were right: just over two weeks later, the pilgrimage arrive in Sacramento and celebrated the signing of their first union contract, a major milestone for agricultural workers in American labor history.

As the *Fresno Bee* and *Los Angeles Times* have reported on extensively, however, East Porterville, and many nearby rural communities continue to suffer from an acute water table

problem that has become even more widespread than Ester Hernandez's family faced in Dinuba. With private and city wells dry or heavily polluted, the East Porterville water problem has required a major multi-year federal and state intervention to provide bottled water to many of the city's 7,300 residents, approximately 75% of whom are Latino. Although an extensive team of researchers, city officials, and non-profit organizations have stepped in to provide a series of temporary solutions—often in the form of massive temporary water holding structures installed on residents' front lawns—the long term effects of the grape industry are in plain sight: the farm worker has been charged with enduring the most environmental risk while receiving the least amount of benefits from the highly profitable agricultural industry.

This story, then, of how the farm worker came to occupy a vaulted—and even treasured—place and space in the visual culture of the Chicana/o Central Valley makes sense given the high costs of this work. It makes sense, as well, that these modest descriptions of the mundane experiences of a mostly migratory population would remain in the shadows of Chicana/o art criticism, given how far removed these rural circuits are from the main channels of scholarship. One bridge between the Valley and the critics, then, as I explore in this dissertation, can be found in the relatively more established Chicana/o cultural producers such as Chavez, Valdez, Hernandez, and members of the Mujeres Muralistas del Valle collective. Though not elite in their personal backgrounds by any means, they are united in their access to forms of higher education to hone their artistic and political skills and forums, or venues, such as the mural wall, the pilgrim trail, and printed poster. As a set of arts-based resistances, the work of Fresno's Rural School shows neither a unified stylistic or political agenda, instead a looser and more personalized investment in addressing the fraught—and often invisible—relation their communities held with the industrialized agricultural economy taking shape around them, and

most likely through their labor. As an initial map of these arts-based political interventions, this dissertation aims to identify some of the most compelling work to emerge from the greater Fresno scene and draw strong connections to the cultural and natural histories from which it emerges, a kind of visual Chicana/o environmental history narrated along this important cultural corridor known as “the grape belt.”

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<sup>1</sup> See: Carlos Perez (artist) interview with the author, May 21, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> For more on how these bi-national guest worker programs shaped Mexican migrants to the United States during the first half of the twentieth century, see: Ana Elizabeth Rosas, *Abrazando el Espiritu: Bracero Families Confront the US-Mexico Border* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2014); Barbara Driscoll de Alvarado, *The Tracks North: The Railroad Bracero Program of World War II* (Austin, Tex: CMAS Books, Center for Mexican American Studies, University of Texas at Austin); Don Mitchell, *They Saved the Crops: Labor, Landscape, and the Struggle Over Industrial Farming in Bracero-Era California* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2012); Alicia R. Schmidt Camacho, *Migrant Imaginaries: Latino Cultural Politics in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (New York: New York University Press, 2008). Maria Herrera-Sobek, *The Bracero Experience: Eliteloire Versus Folklore* (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Latin American Center Publications, University of California, Los Angeles, 1987); Eugene Nelson, *Bracero* (Culver City, CA: Peace Press, 1975).

<sup>3</sup> For more on Filipino Stockton, particularly its rich history of farm worker organizing, see: Dawn Bohulano Mabalon, *Little Manila is in the Heart: The Making of the Filipina/o American Community in Stockton, California* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013); Lilia Villanueva, *Philip Vera Cruz: A Personal History of Filipino Immigrants and the Farmworkers Movement* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> *El Malcriado* (Delano, CA: Farm Worker Press), March 1966.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example: Cynthia Orozco, *No Mexicans, Women, or Dogs Allowed: The Rise of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> For an excellent overview of this important era of labor organizing, see: Zaragosa Vargas, *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights: Mexican American Workers in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> For the origins of La Virgen’s image and its complex networks of circulation, see: D. A. Brading, *Mexican Phoenix: Our Lady of Guadalupe: Image and Tradition across Five Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); David Carrasco, *To Change Place: Aztec Ceremonial Landscapes* (Niwt, CO: University Press of Colorado, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> See: “Decade of Dissent: Andy Zermeño” Center for the Study of Political Graphics Interview. February 12, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Andy Zermeño, *Sotaco: Cartoons from the Delano Strike = Caricaturas de la huelga de Delano* (Delano, CA: Farm Worker Press, 1966).

<sup>10</sup> The most extensive research produced to date on Central Valley Chicana/o visual culture centers on Sacramento based collective Royal Chicano Air Force. See, for example: Ella Maria Diaz, *Flying Under the Radar with the Royal Chicano Air Force: Mapping a Chicano/a Art History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017); Stephanie Sauer, *The Accidental Archives of the Royal Chicano Air Force* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> William Cronon, “A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative,” *The Journal of American History* 78:4(1992), 1347.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example: William Cronon, *Changes in the Land Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983); William Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997); Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: London, 1987).

<sup>13</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

<sup>14</sup> See: Wayne Thiebaud, *Wayne Thiebaud: Riverscapes* (San Francisco: Paul Thiebaud Gallery, 2002); Wayne Thiebaud, Steven A. Nash, and Adam Gopnik, *Wayne Thiebaud: A Paintings Retrospective* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2008).

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<sup>15</sup> José Montoya and Terecita Romo, *El profe José Montoya: Chicano Arte, 1964-1996* (Sacramento: Sacramento State University Department of Art, 1996); Richard Montoya, Selene Preciado, and José Montoya, *José Montoya's Abundant Harvest: Works on Paper/Works on Life* (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum of Art, UCLA, 2016); Terecita Romo, *Malaquias Montoya* (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> For more on the environmental justice concerns in contemporary Fresno, see: Cushing, Lara, John Faust, Laura Meehan August, Rose Cendak, Walker Wieland, and George Alexeeff. "Racial/Ethnic Disparities in Cumulative Environmental Health Impacts in California: Evidence from a Statewide Environmental Justice Screening Tool (CalEnviroScreen 1.1)." *American Journal of Public Health* 105, no. 11 (11, 2015): 2341-2348. Diana Marcum, "THE POISON ZONE; Fresno Neighborhood Ranks no. 1 on Pollution List." *Los Angeles Times*, Apr 24, 2014.

**Chapter 1**  
**Delano: Chicana/o Activism, Pilgrimage, and Visual Culture**



Figure 2.1. On the pilgrim trail en route to Sacramento. Photograph by Jon Lewis (1966).

A ditch cuts a narrow line through the rural landscape (Figure 2.1)<sup>1</sup>. Along the left edge, the soil is pushed into an upside bank, creating an elevated plain for the paved road and field. Along the right edge, the wall is left "natural." Unreinforced, the thick layers of soil are exposed and sturdy wooden posts are set within its surface. In times of heavy rain, the ditch channels water away from the highway and surrounding farmland and directs it into a network of canals and streams that lead to the San Joaquin River. This unassuming feature of the rural landscape serves as a key element in the regional watershed management plan by ensuring the efficient flow of traffic between the road and the field.<sup>2</sup>



The viewer's eye is then drawn to the left side of the frame, along the photograph's second major axis. Initially, the eye rests on a large white banner, held at chest level by a young man. The eye is then guided back, along the procession, which sweeps full across the rural landscape and into the horizon line. A stoic older man stands in the foreground, wearing a straw cowboy hat, a fitted canvas work coat, and neatly cut dark trousers with boots. He holds an American flag, set softly against his right hip, and his head is bowed, as he focuses on the immediate steps ahead. Just behind him walks a younger man holding a Mexican flag, dressed more casually in an oversized jacket and jeans. A white man appears behind him, standing tall and holding a National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) flag. Two women and a second man holding a NFWA flag follow him. Out of view, a man and a young boy carry a large wooden cross.<sup>3</sup> All are supporters of the fledgling NFWA, and they are marching from their organizing headquarters in Delano, California to the state capitol in Sacramento, Civil Rights era political pilgrims on a path that they hope will lead to social, political, economic, and environmental justice.<sup>4</sup>

The horizontal and vertical axes are both a little askew in this composition, creating a fan shape of people, material culture, and the natural and built environment stretching out from the horizon line. This crescent shape of the ditch, and the inverted lines fanning out above it, gesture to the geologic composition of the Central Valley. To understand what these people were doing, walking through this landscape, with these flags and these banners during the spring of 1966, we can begin by trying to make sense of the land itself.

One hundred and fifty million years ago, the floor of the Pacific Ocean began to sink. Initially, the eastern edge sank into what is known as the Sierran trench, a long and narrow meeting point between continental plates. As one plate rose and the other fell, this rough edge

grew over time—and in the process—underwent a series of gradual weathering events that, in historical time, might seem mundane and go unnoticed. But the effects of years and years of melting glacial ice along such long, thick sheets of granite are hard not to see, or feel, when standing 14,000 feet below them as naturalist John Muir did on one of his many journeys into the Sierra Nevada mountains.<sup>5</sup> Tall, wide, and filled with tiny, sparkling particles of mica and quartz, it is no surprise that he referred to these mountains, and their sharply cut peaks and canyons, as the “range of light.”<sup>6</sup>

The western edge of the Central Valley grew out of the ocean floor a little later and far less dramatically. But what might have been lost in manifest strength in this mountain building was more than recovered in subtle elegance when the land along this edge of the Pacific Ocean dropped to form the Franciscan trench. A softer and more intricately woven set of rocks, including water-based serpentine, muddy sandstones, and coarse basalt lava flows pushed to the surface, and created the low, rolling hills of the Coast Range. What emerged at the center of this geologic picture, then, in between these two grand undersea trenches, was a third trench: the Great Central Valley, one of the most productive agricultural settings in the world and the place through which the pilgrims journeyed.<sup>7</sup>

The path they took, along the thin and gritty pavement of rural highways and county roads, is one of many vivid stories written into this landscape. With each step north from Delano, the pilgrims crossed 50 million years of discarded debris that had gathered below their feet during the Jurassic Period, a moment in earth’s history that was soon followed by a set of massive crystalline rocks that were pushed into the eastern sea during the Cretaceous Period. These older geologic journeys, deep beneath the pilgrim trail, left their mark through layers of sedimentary rock and soil known as strata. Filled with trace amounts of organic debris such as

shells, marine life, and plants, these slender sheets of stone are now found stacked in dense layers, fused together over time, and provide geologists with a material record to measure how and why this part of the earth's surface has changed over time.

In the Central Valley, this archive of events in earth's history chronicles the rich deposits of sea material that continued into the Cenozoic Period, marking a rare moment of mountain building that was broad and flat: when all these deep layers of ocean debris moved up, they also moved out, creating a long valley floor. What happened next, then, as these ocean and valley floors collided, elevated, and elongated over millions and millions of years has provided the foundation, in historical time, for the rich natural resources that have made its agricultural projects possible. An interruption of erosion and deposits during the Eocene Epoch, coupled with the folding of the western edge, defined a spare yet ecologically and culturally significant crease along the Coast Range. Shortly thereafter, around 13 million years ago, the movement across the eastern edge of the valley accelerated and the Sierra Nevada rose high from the plate boundaries. Movement deep below the earth's surface continued and by the Pleistocene 2 million years ago, the Great Central Valley of California had emerged, a lush watershed full of fresh water lakes, rivers, and aquifers. Run-off water, first from the melting glaciers, then from the Sierra Nevada snowmelt, carved hills, canyons, and alluvial fans down the foothills and into the valley floor. Later uplift made this web of terraces and alluvial fans larger.<sup>8</sup>

This succession of events in earth's distant past is now in plain sight. The Central Valley Sequence, and its adjacent Cenozoic Period fill, stretches for over 400 miles across the rural interior of the Golden State and is defined by the Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers, and the elaborate network of natural and human-made dams, canals, and streams they support. The east side of the valley, then, fed by the waters running down from the high Sierra, would be wetter

and become home to the chain of rural towns that would grow into cities over the course of the twentieth century as the agricultural industry grew from the rich soil below. And the west side, with minimal access to the annual snowmelt from the Sierra and the irrigation canals that would be built to hydrate this arid landscape, would remain dry, resulting in relatively less extensive farming and population growth.

The quirks of this ecosystem's folds, edges, creases, and layers has thus come to have a dramatic impact on the cultural life of the region. The subtle complexity of the Central Valley geologic story is particularly compelling at places like Tulare Lake, one of the seasonal wetlands that formed an earlier set of migration circuits. As the anchor of the Tulare Basin ecosystem, Tulare Lake sits atop a gigantic aquifer that has supported a diverse set of human, plant, and animal communities for thousands of years. Because most of the rain that would naturally hit the basin in a rain storm is caught by the Coast Range to the west—a process known a “rain shadow”—the dry basin relies on the rain runoff and snowmelt from the Sierra Nevada, brought down its western slope and across the valley floor by the Kern, Tule, Kings, and Kaweah Rivers.<sup>9</sup> This helped grow Tulare Lake into one of the original great Western lakes, and the largest freshwater lake west of the Mississippi River. Historically, the lake supported a large network of Yokut villages and was a key stopover point on the Pacific Flyway, a major avian migration route in the Americas. But diversion of water for agricultural and municipal use during the nineteenth century quickly drained it: in 1879 it measured nearly 700 square miles and by 1899 the lake was dry outside of spring rain and snowmelt. As a result, the region moved away from its wetlands-based identity during this period and by the early twentieth century had developed a more pastoral sense of place.

The reshaped watershed, archived directly in the twentieth century landscape though

features as subtle as a roadside ditch, is not the only major transformation that can be seen in the photograph. As the viewer continues their journey around the focal points of the image, the eye is drawn to a second major change in the natural and built environments from this period: the barbed wire fence that extends across the far right edge of the frame. A major recurring object in the vernacular landscape, or the everyday natural and built environment, this fence might go unnoticed by many viewers because it is replicated with such frequency. But it is precisely what landscape geographer John Brinckerhoff Jackson calls its *sameness*, or its similarity to other rural fences, that imbues it with cultural and environmental significance.<sup>10</sup> Given the importance of Spanish and Mexican era-cattle grazing in California, these everyday objects of the rural landscape become, in the image, deeply layered structures of historical memory.<sup>11</sup>

They are also emblems of the world of the marchers, a world bounded by property markers and divisions of land by economic use and utility. In 1874, the first coil of barbed wire was sold, and, in just over twenty-five years its small metal barbs were stretched across much of rural America.<sup>12</sup> With the Homestead Act of 1862 as their impetus and guide, these rural communities in the US West were initially carved into individual 160-acre parcels intended for small scale agricultural settlement. Fierce land speculation—often driven by the railroad industry—quickly made the dream of owning a small family farm or ranch unrealistic, as wealthy investors seized control of large sets of adjoining parcels in many areas.<sup>13</sup> The resulting consolidation of land, and the attendant investment in crops and livestock required to make it profitable, established a troubling precedent in the region: big properties, backed by big capital investments, that necessitated ever bigger security measures to protect the *growing* assets.<sup>14</sup> This inexpensive fencing material, then, became invaluable to ranchers and farmers in the US West by

the early twentieth century as the land in the paths of trading routes, rivers, wagon trails, and railroad tracks became more densely populated.

The large-scale repetition of barbed wire along the boundary lines of the rural American landscape speaks to its effectiveness as both a material deterrent to cattle hoping to pass from range to pasture, and, as a symbol of modern land use. These slender, tough, and efficient strands of wire are able to cut through the skin, muscle, and minds of potential trespassers with swift and coarse precision. Through its simply expressed real and aesthetic force, you only needed to get tangled in it once, or *imagine* getting tangled in it, to develop a healthy respect for its authority.

Or, so was the case when it was initially installed along the edges of these ranches, farms, and fields. As the agricultural industry evolved in the twentieth century, the need to fence in a herd of cattle, or fence out a few cattle rustlers, became a secondary concern. By mid-century, large scale fields, orchards, and vineyards had become so profitable—and labor conditions and wages so deplorable—that growers, ranchers, and law enforcement had a much bigger problem on their hands: how do you contain an increasingly racialized labor force that was so determined to gain economic, political, and social recognition that they were willing to cross lines as perilous as the one between the field and the road to make their cause visible?

To answer this, we can look even more closely at the fence itself. The uneven shape of the fence posts signals that they were handmade, and in following regional custom, were probably locally sourced. But because the Central Valley is mostly home to live oak—which lack the uniformity for even these posts—the size and weathering of this suggest that they were sourced from Giant Sequoia, ponderosa pine, or white fir trees that make up the mixed-conifer forests that stretch across the nearby foothills of the Sierra Nevada. Known for their strength and durability as building materials, these softwoods were used widely across the eastern edge of the

valley and serve—as fence posts in the photograph—as subtle markers of the long-standing link between the region’s natural resources and built environment.

Perhaps the most significant clue to understanding the relation between nature and culture in the mid-twentieth century Chicana/o vernacular landscape is the design of the fence, particularly the horizontal arrangement of wire. Set in approximately one-foot rows, the fence’s spare lines dotted with jagged tendrils falls in line with the standard cattle ranch boundary marking of the period. The presence of the procession of farm workers heightens its symbolic value though, making visible a new set of meanings in *this time* and *this place*. The barbed wire fence pictured here initially appears to meet the pilgrims at the horizon line, forming two of the major sections fanning out from this focal point, a seemingly simple move to emphasize variety and movement in the composition. But a closer look at the image reveals that the pilgrims’ path continues to the right, extending past the fence and beyond the edge of the frame. This move by the photographer to capture the arc of the pilgrim trail extends the primary horizontal axis into a soft L shape and calls a quiet attention to the depth and length of this journey towards justice. There are more pilgrims present than it at first seemed, and they appear to continue off into a kind of eternity.

The pilgrim trail, now extended, is then bisected by the primary vertical axis of the photograph: the light cast on the ditch. The capture of that moment, where the relative smoothness of the ditch becomes luminous in the mid-afternoon sun, highlights the ephemeral qualities of the farm worker movement at this moment in its history. In the March to Sacramento, farm workers were advocating for their first union contract in an effort to secure better working conditions and pay. Given the politically charged climate of the Civil Rights era, and their own precarious economic, legal, and social positioning, their movement also required a significant

amount of internal and external network building. The March was not only protest; it was also a moment of social and cultural formation for the group.

The texture along the shoulder of the highway, extending down into the ditch, emphasizes the pilgrims' centrality in this environment by bringing attention to their elevated position. While the highway might be designed to efficiently move produce from farm to table, their labor remains at the center of this vast system, a fact that they knew well. And, in the photograph, it is precisely that intersection between environment and culture that sits at the horizon line. As the intersection of the photograph's primary horizontal and vertical axes, the focal point created at the horizon line becomes the visual anchor of the image. Here, the sky, fields, pilgrims, fence, ditch, highway, gravel shoulder, shadows, and sunlight all meet to produce a rich layering of converging images, a compression of time and place.

The photograph, taken by Jon Lewis as the pilgrims were en route to Sacramento, illustrates how the marchers on this journey were simultaneously located at the margins and center of American culture. Earlier cultural production, including John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and Dorothea Lange's "Migrant Mother" (1936), enjoyed mainstream success in the previous generation and brought the plight of California's multicultural agricultural labor force into wide view. But, the focus of the public—if not Steinbeck and Lange who were well versed in the cultural nuances of the Depression era labor scene—was placed on the Dust Bowl migrants from Oklahoma, Arkansas, and other areas of the Great Plains and Southwest affected by the series of droughts that struck these regions during the 1930s.<sup>15</sup> This privileging of Okies' and Arkies' experiences in the popular imagination would have far reaching consequences as New Deal economic stimulus policies were directed at these more visibly displaced groups. Like Filipina/o,



Japanese, and other marginal workers, Mexican heritage workers were shut out of many of the Roosevelt Administration's rural redevelopment policies, and sometimes even repatriated to Mexico despite holding United States citizenship.<sup>16</sup>

During the twenty-five day march, visual culture became an important tool for the NFWA to write themselves back into this cultural and economic landscape, a shift in the visual narrative that would bring clarity to their experiences and aspirations. Becoming more resonant as a cultural group, political organization, social movement, as well as gaining recognition as a labor union was a big task given the climate of the mid-century Central Valley. Growers had been steadily expanding their influence in the postwar economic boom as major national and international markets for fresh produce took shape. By the 1960s, grapes were big business and the 1965 table grape harvest had been particularly lucrative, creating a sense of optimism within the industry. Not all was well for growers though: the elation they experienced in this record harvest was tempered by historical memory, particularly the turmoil created by price fluctuations and labor strikes that had threatened other major harvests. Well armed with sizeable advertising budgets and the support of local, state, and federal officials, the grape industry, from afar at least, appeared impervious to a successful challenge to their labor structure.<sup>17</sup> Critiques from leftist activist-intellectuals including Carey McWilliams, Jack London, Ernesto Galarza, Carlos Bulosan, and Paul S. Taylor had been well known for decades but the visual narrative that had been established in early twentieth century agricultural advertising maintained its hold on the American public despite the turbulence of the 1930s, allowing the quaint pastoral images of the Central Valley agricultural scene to gain strength in American popular culture.<sup>18</sup> The result, then, despite efforts by these Depression era activists and cultural producers to disrupt this tranquil narrative was clear: by the mid-twentieth century, the Dust Bowl was squarely in the past—a

cautionary tale, no doubt—but consumers had moved on and were eagerly packing their lunches with seemingly fresh and healthy fruit.<sup>19</sup>

Walking along the shoulder of these rural highways gave this nascent organization the foothold it needed in 1966 to challenge this visual narrative, a move that they hoped would serve as their first major step towards union recognition, higher wages, and improved working and living conditions. Through the use of religious ceremonies, political speeches, and musical and theatre performances, the NFWA was able to quickly, and relatively cheaply, produce and circulate its message along these rural corridors, the paths widely used by the farm workers they sought to organize, and the other Mexican heritage workers in the area that were starting to establish themselves in more privileged labor sites in the industry such as packing house workers, truck drivers, and small business owners. Through a daily set of programming held at each stop along the march, as well as the visibility along the pilgrim route itself, the NFWA presented a concise and culturally legible set of images that offered new insight into an old problem: while these pilgrims might be on the economic edge of American society, their humility, work ethic, and moral authority set them squarely in the center of it.

Photography quickly became the primary medium in the visual culture of the march because it allowed the NFWA to document, preserve, and publicize these otherwise ephemeral—and invisible—moments along the back roads of California’s rural interior. This move—to place their cause in wider view—would become a major recruitment tool both within and beyond this rural corridor, especially among the farm workers they sought to organize and the middle-class audiences that would help them put economic and social pressure on the grape industry. And, if the nature of a photograph is to capture a split moment in time that is located somewhere between the actual event and the representation of it, then it is no surprise that this medium found

such a welcome home among these Civil Rights era activists aiming to make the daily injustices of their lives more visible to those outside the frame. Photographers like Jon Lewis used this mutable position to their advantage, amassing an impressive archive of images during the march that brought viewers into contact with the sights and sounds of these otherwise invisible back roads. Sometimes these images focused more on the documentation of life-as-lived along the twenty-five day pilgrimage; at other times they expressed the more symbolic dimensions of their experiences. What links these photographs, and the photographers like Lewis who made them, is their ability to capture the feel and the affect of these experiences. Whether it was a portrait of a pilgrim, a close range image of a banner, or wide-angle landscape shot, these photographs created a kind of emotionally charged aesthetic truth, rooted in the connection between the photographer, the viewer, and the sites and subjects in view.

As aesthetic and historical texts, then, these photographs offer a creative rendering of reality, a mode of presentation that allowed photographers more flexibility in their representation of the harsh—and often overwhelming truth—of farm work. Based in the reality of the lived experiences along the pilgrim trail, and the farmland it cut through, these images were both open in form and unyielding as visual facts, allowing them to communicate complex political and social messages to a diverse audience. In other words, without knowing much about who these agricultural labors were, or where they were going, viewers could immediately—and viscerally—sense the urgency and importance of their journey. Thus, when the farm workers set foot from Delano—with all these people and all this stuff—they quite dramatically raised the visibility of their struggle. After decades of challenges and missteps, their long-fought cause was finally gaining political traction and coming into view.

Creating compelling, or moving images with so much in motion was no small task for Lewis and the other photographers who documented the March to Sacramento. Determining exactly *where* the frame is placed, and *who* and *what* is located inside (and outside) of it, requires an instantaneous set of decisions for the photographer, a sort of manifestation of all the skills and experiences that have informed the photographer up until that moment.<sup>20</sup> The task of capturing a moving image, through a single still one, has imbued the medium with a relative sense of urgency that was used to great effect along the pilgrim trail as farm workers stretched across the rural landscape in long silhouettes that offered widely different views based on the placement of the lens and the position of the sun. Without the luxury of time afforded to many other forms of visual culture, like painting and sculpture, photography conveys an in-the-moment impression to the viewer that helps produce its signature at-the-site feeling. The effect, then, especially on a journey of this scale and ambition, is a sense of *timeliness*: this photograph appears at just the right moment and expresses truths that can only be produced in this time, by this person, in this location. And, to achieve depth and longevity in its resonance, it must also express a sense of *timelessness*: the emotion it expresses can be found anywhere, really, if you know how and where to look. The cultural landscape of these farm workers became appealing to a wide range of photographers during the spring of 1966, who found the site ripe with all the promise and paradoxes that marked mid-twentieth century American life. With each shutter snap along the pilgrim trail by freelancers, art school drop outs, mainstream photojournalists, and anyone else with a camera along the rural routes of the Central Valley, new angles and points-of-view were added to this archive.

And, the initial images that made it out of these back-roads and into the pages of the mainstream and alternative press during the march arrived right on time. Without the financial or

political capital of the agricultural industry behind them, the NFWA's visual strategy rested on the cultural capital that they brought into view during the twenty-five day journey across the Central Valley. One of the primary ways they achieved this was by plugging into the larger archive documenting Civil Rights struggles in the Deep South that were well established by the spring of 1966. Often deceptively simple in composition, these photographs found a home in the pages of the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the NFWA's *El Malcriado*, and SNCC's *The Movement*, places where members of their desired audiences were able to gain a closer look at the long documented injustices Mexican heritage workers faced in California's agricultural industry. The medium of photography became an excellent tool for the NFWA to (re)direct their growing audience's attention on places typically left outside the frame, an overlooked political tactic in this era of Chicana/o Civil Rights organizing that has begun to gain attention in more urban locations of the movement, opening paths for considering how this medium has shaped movement politics and aesthetic trends at rural sites.<sup>21</sup>

How then, in just twenty-five days, did this set of visual material become so *visible*? And, what was it about the photographs in particular that enabled these farm workers to gain the political traction that had eluded them, and other agricultural workers in California, for decades? What might they reveal about how this era of farm worker organizing has shaped Chicana/o visual culture? And what might come into view through a closer look at images by Lewis and others that did not enjoy such a wide or immediate audience?

Delano, California  
March 17, 1966



Figure 2.2. NFWA headquarters. Photograph by Jon Lewis (1966).

Jon Lewis slept lightly the night before the pilgrims departed for Sacramento. Several visiting photographers had arrived at the NFWA headquarters at 102 Albany Street around midnight, and, as he had done so many times before, he greeted the visitors and helped them settle in. Known as the Pink House, the site was home to the organization's administrative offices, a storefront of sorts to welcome supporters and provide a direct link to organizing activity (Figure 2.2). The offices were particularly abuzz as volunteers worked deep into the night to help staff prepare for the morning departure. Filled with anticipation, Lewis walked a few short blocks to the Gray House, another modest two-bedroom structure that served as home to some of the NFWA staff as well as a less conspicuous meeting site for its organizers. Lewis had been living in this diverse working-class enclave of southwest Delano since January when he deferred his graduate photography studies at San Francisco State University to join the fledgling Grape Strike (1965-70). Paid the standard five-dollars-a-week NFWA staff salary, he immediately set up a small studio and twin bed in a washroom closet at the Gray House to begin his work as an organizer-photographer.<sup>22</sup>

While hardly luxurious, this allocation of space was no small investment for a small—and increasingly crowded—organization with very limited resources. Afforded the time and space to spend most of his day on the picket lines with his camera, Lewis created considerable social capital with the farm workers and their supporters as he lived and worked with them in the four months preceding the march. His presence at the Gray House also provided him with direct access to the NFWA’s leading cultural producers, relationships that would play a major role in the development and circulation of his visual images. *El Malcriado* editor Bill Esher and El Teatro Campesino leaders Luis Valdez and Augustin Lira had a strong presence at the Gray House and Lewis’ mindful and unfussy aesthetic and personal style found favor among this often raucous group. Long nights in his makeshift darkroom-bedroom processing the prints might have been lonely work but he was hardly alone in his efforts: down the hallway the kitchen and living room were often filled with farm worker theatre rehearsals, organizing meetings, and volunteer workshops and the nearby bedrooms were home to printmaking and newsletter production.<sup>23</sup>



Figure 2.3. Chavez at the NFWA headquarters. Photograph by Jon Lewis (1966).  
Figure 2.4. Wall display at NFWA the headquarters. Photograph by Jon Lewis (1966).

One outcome from this creative life housed in the NFWA “offices” was the swift ascent of farm worker photography as a leading visual medium of the farm worker’s cause (Figures 2.3-2.4). The material Lewis produced was raw, direct, and full of energy, capturing the everyday experiences of farm workers, organizers, and supporters on the roadside picket lines. Lewis, like

the other cultural producers at 102 Albany Street, was close to the cause and it showed. These photographs formed a large part of the visual material found in the pages of the newsletter, often printed alongside reproductions of rural themed drawings, paintings, and printmaking by Mexican masters such as Diego Rivera and Leopoldo Méndez. The photographs also enjoyed a wide circulation in informal display spaces such as the Pink House lobby (Figures 3 and 4), both as cover images from the newsletter and as larger pieces from the market of posters, prints, and chapbooks that had emerged by 1966. Supporters were responding positively to this material through the purchase of newsletter subscriptions and the ancillary visual products, an effort that helped raise the visual profile of the organization, while also creating an important supplemental income for the photographers whose purchase of film, paper, darkroom supplies often relied heavily on their sale of these materials at rallies and workshops.<sup>24</sup>

This visual material enjoyed a rich circulation among the groups that would become their core constituency—pro-union farm workers, leftist political organizations, progressive student groups, and social justice oriented churches—but, like the strike, it was not reaching the potential that organizers felt it could have to catalyze their movement by the spring of 1966. Organizers sensed, through this small but passionate response that the material had generated since the Grape Strike began in the fall of 1965, that they were just steps away from growing a much larger and more powerful audience. But with such limited resources, an increasingly hostile battle with growers and law enforcement underway, and such a large cultural geography of farm workers to organize in the Central Valley, how could the NFWA put this promising visual material to wide use in the quick and effective manner needed to gain forward progress in the Grape Strike?





Figure 2.5. Cesar Chavez and Robert Kennedy in Delano. Photograph by Jon Lewis (1966).

Whether it was luck, a well-timed public relations maneuver, or both, the NFWA got precisely the media boost it was looking for the day before departure. As part of a three-day tour, including stops in Sacramento and San Francisco, the United States Senate Subcommittee on Migratory Labor held a hearing on labor conditions in Delano, which aimed to assess the post-Bracero Program cultural landscape in California. Initially planning to stop in Fresno, NFWA leaders persuaded the Subcommittee to focus on Delano, a move that was certain to carry a fair amount of national press coverage. The spotlight grew even brighter when, somewhat unexpectedly, Senator Robert Kennedy arrived and engaged in a series of terse exchanges with growers and law enforcement (Figure 2.5). Senator Kennedy was only vaguely familiar with the farm workers' plight prior to the hearings—he openly questioned the purpose of the Delano visit with his staff during the flight to California—and intended to stay only briefly. The political potential of this fervent group of supporters was on full view, however, when he arrived and the short visit was extremely productive. Kennedy's star was on the rise, and what he saw that day in Delano would prove to be a convergence of two groups that would emerge as some of his strongest supporters: labor rights advocates and Mexican American Democrats—an emerging voting bloc that would prove valuable to him in places like California. The experience was also valuable to the farm workers. This warm reception of the Senator in Delano was noted in the national press coverage, including a brief exchange with Chavez, providing both national

attention for the farm workers' cause and creating a strategic link at the federal level, an angle that would become a point of pride and contention for farm workers and their supporters in the years to come.<sup>25</sup>

Being in the right place at the right time is not only a challenge for political organizers, however, and Lewis's presence along the picket line the two leaders visited together after the Senate hearing, allowing him to capture the brief exchange between them, speaks to the exhaustive, and exhausting, amount of maneuvering required by photographers to capture such fortuitous visual moments. While the conversation between the two men did not last long, Lewis's photograph conveys the symbolic value of the exchange, foreshadowing their short but productive political relationship over the next few years. Positioned below the men, and framed by the material culture of the strike and the national media, the angle also created a subtle sense of grandeur in an otherwise mundane setting. Out of view were the ordinary county road and roadside protest set up alongside it; instead, the message Lewis was able to express when he placed Chavez at the center of the frame and above the microphone, voice recorder, and notebook was that the world was seeing and hearing what was taking place in Delano and taking note.



Figure 2.6. Departure day at the NFWA headquarters. Photograph by Harvey Richards (1966).

Such physical and creative labor has its costs, of course, and it was in a mood of invigorated exasperation that Lewis awoke early the next morning to prepare for departure. And, like countless other mornings, Lewis embarked on the ritual of awakening NFWA volunteers from the couches, floors, patios, closet space, and lawns that served as their beds of the Pink and Gray Houses. After loading his small bag of extra clothing and camera equipment into a station wagon designated for gear and medical supplies, he spent a few minutes photographing the pilgrims who held a Catholic Mass at dawn in the backyard of the Pink House. He was not surprised when he saw fellow photographer Harvey Richards there, as he was one of five photographers that had spent extensive time in Delano documenting, and participating in, organizing activities. However, Richards was much older than Lewis and did not plan to walk to Sacramento. Nor did he live at the site. But his intimacy with the farm workers and their supporters was on view in the early morning of the departure to Sacramento as he photographed their sunrise service (Figure 2.6). Having spent considerable time driving the back roads of the valley to photograph the scenes furthest from view, Richards planned to follow by car during the march. Here, positioned just behind the altar, Richards uses the exterior of the Pink House to

establish a backdrop for the scene recreating his signature wide-angle frame despite his placement at the center of activity.

This move, to use 102 Albany Street as a frame for their departing prayer, speaks to the symbolic significance farm worker homes held in the movement. When Cesar Chavez (pictured to the right of the priest, head bowed in prayer) moved to Delano in 1962 with his wife Helen, he frequently used houses as a site for his early organizing. These sites allowed Chavez to offer a more personal and direct message to his audience, and perhaps even more important, they also provided cover, placing the meetings out of view from the hostile eyes of the growers, law enforcement, and even other farm workers that might be fearful of, or opposed to, union organizing. The “house meeting” became a cornerstone of the early organizing strategy during the first few years of the NFWA, placing emphasis on recruiting farm worker families through intimate events that relied on word-of-mouth credibility.<sup>26</sup>

In the foreground of the image, Richards frames another important object from the farm workers’ vernacular landscape: the outdoor altar made from salvaged crates, set with a thin sheet of wood, and hand-made table cloth. The Virgin of Guadalupe altar piece stands directly between the priest and Cesar Chavez, foreshadowing her significance as a primary visual image in the march. This figurine was typically displayed in the lobby of the Pink House (Figure 3) and her use in NFWA visual material was a source of heated debate among the leading cultural producers such as Luis Valdez. Reluctant to use such a complex and sacred image, a move read by some as an overreliance on Catholic imagery, Chavez and Valdez concluded that it would be helpful to mobilize her as a symbol of peaceful resistance for pilgrims given her long-standing use by Mexican heritage migrants.<sup>27</sup> This impromptu sunrise service, held in the backyard of their headquarters, was in some ways a typical scene in the movement that these photographers

had become accustomed to documenting. The farm workers enjoyed strong support from many churches in the area and they held prominent roles in gatherings such as this one.

But it was no typical day for the NFWA, for it was the day they would embark on the long, dangerous, and uncertain path to Sacramento. Organizers were counting on the handful of supporters in each of the small towns they planned to pass through to extend support when called by taking in pilgrims at night's end and enhance the small amount of food and water they carried in their chuck-wagon. Could this be sustained across the march? Richards captures the answer to this question along the left corner of the frame. Near the front of the altar, and to the right of the priest, stood the men of the NFWA leadership, with rank and file NFWA members extending across the center of the frame and filling most of the yard. To the left of the crowd are the women, most of whom will stay "home," including NFWA co-founder Dolores Huerta who is curiously out of view in this image (as she is out of view in most of the March to Sacramento visual archive). Remaining in the Delano area was no small task, however, given the scope of services offered by the NFWA in 1966. Whether by choice, or in tense solidarity as might be read in their crossed arms and stern looks, these women provided continuity through their work at the health clinic, credit union, food bank, child care center, and general store, which allowed community life to move forward while the pilgrims journeyed to Sacramento



Figure 2.7. The men of the march, looking back on Albany Street. Photograph by Jon Lewis (1966).

When the short service concluded, Lewis joined the pilgrims that had begun to assemble at the front steps of the Pink House, the designated starting point for the march. Based on conversations with Cesar Chavez and other NFWA organizers that week, Lewis was under the impression that the first leg of the route would cut through a maze of small city and county roads to Highway 99, the state highway leading north to Sacramento, and primary path of the pilgrimage (Figure 2.7). But Chavez recognized the potency of the image of a small group of farm workers set against twenty-five members of local law enforcement dressed in riot gear, and instead led the pilgrims straight down Albany Street, through the center of the City of Delano, where they created a stand-off with law enforcement at the edge of Garces Highway, a larger, and more visible route to Highway 99.



Figure 2.8. Where the street becomes a road in Delano. Photograph by Jon Lewis (1966).

Figure 2.9 Challenges along the pilgrim trail. Photograph by Jon Lewis (1966).

Without permit to assemble, in the tense atmosphere of the Grape Strike, and with several additional photographers assembled near the police barricade, it seemed unthinkable to Lewis and many others that such a bold challenge would be offered, initially suggesting the march might end just steps from where it began (Figures 2.8-2.9). But with the Grape Strike stagnant, and morale low among organizers as a result, something (or someone) had to give that spring morning. In what was to become the first of many successful visual-based political maneuvers orchestrated by Chavez and the NFWA organizers, the decision to walk directly through Delano's most prominent paths, a move that issued an unusual provocation to police at the blockade: arrest us, sure, but at the risk of *looking* really bad doing it.

Whether it was in an effort to avoid a public relations scandal, or the result of internal political pressure by city officials as some have suggested, the visual strategy to gain access to Delano's most visible paths was a success. By late morning, the farm workers were granted access to Garces Highway, with a well-documented political victory preserved within the film rolls of each photographer on site that day. Armed with banners, flags, and a ten-foot wooden cross made of inexpensive wooden planks, the visual-based resistance staged by the NFWA that morning at the police blockade expressed poignantly and with simplicity the strategic message of the organization: a humble people on a long journey towards justice.

Perhaps even more important, gaining access to Garces Highway provided much needed encouragement to supporters who had become weary after months of stagnation in organizing efforts. Much confusion existed on the ground about who the organization was and what they could do for the highly mobile group of workers they hoped to organize. This sense of political and social isolation from other farm workers and organizers contributed to the sense of impossibility in organizing a successful strike. Not only were they out of public view, placed in these barrios and back-roads of the Central Valley, but they were often also isolated from each other. Getting out of Delano, by any means possible, in some ways became not just the first political victory, but also a major symbolic one. The NFWA, in other words, was in much need of a win that morning at the crossroads of Albany Street and Garces Highway, and, through the use of some well-placed photographers, and a little pluck, they got one. A good one.



Figure 2.10. Pilgrims along Highway 65. Photograph by Harvey Richards (1966).

But, as is the case with many symbolic paths, taking Garces Highway out to Highway 99 was the most efficient way to their ultimate destination of Sacramento—but not to their immediate destination of Ducor (Figure 2.10). The urgency, and opportunity, to be seen and heard by local and national audiences resulted in a crucial public relations victory but this longer route added precious extra mileage to a long journey that was already experiencing delays and suffering from fatigue. The road sign they would pass on their way out of town signaled the



mood of their first day, and night, on the road. Written in the standard Federal transportation font known as Highway Gothic, it subtly announced that the farm workers were caught in a stretch of the American cultural landscape that was particularly gloomy in form. Walking the long way to Ducor, after such a lengthy journey across their small town, emphasized the sense of loneliness that is expressed through the repeating lines, shapes, and forms seen across the fields, orchards, and vineyards they passed by. Established at the site of an old general store built on the four adjoining properties known as Dutch Corners, the dusty town hadn't grown much since its founding in 1885 despite the addition of a Southern Pacific Railroad station in 1888. Full of dark shadows from a few abandoned barns and grain silos, it did not instill the sense of confidence that organizers were hoping. An advance team was designated to help secure housing for pilgrims along the route, but they too were slow to mobilize, so, arriving late, and to no fanfare, the weary pilgrims set up camp in the city park and set to the task of preparing for the next day's journey.

Porterville, California  
March 18, 1966

Curiously, there is such a thing as a rural photographic tradition in the Central Valley, and it has been defined by a few key genres. Social documentary is the most recognized—and recognizable—made famous by Depression era portraits of sharecroppers, migratory workers, and poor landowners adrift in parched landscapes that echoed their displacement in the modern economic climate. Holding strong ties to an earlier generation of photography—most notably Jacob Riis's work chronicling the effects of industrialization on the lives of factory workers in New York City—these images were often shot over several weeks or months (and sometimes years), and published as sets, either in magazines, pamphlets, or reports, or, as dedicated books,

catalogs, and exhibits, instilling the genre with an aura of long-form storytelling.<sup>28</sup>

This tendency to present the material in a wide-angle narrative format was no accident. Blurring the line between fact and fiction set photography on suspect—or sensational—ground, depending on where one was looking from. By the early twentieth century, major questions still framed debates about where to place this relatively young form of visual culture. As a new technology, could it mature, over time, and become something along the lines of a classically trained fine art? Or, would it remain relegated to hobby or craft status, something for and by the people, and not the museum wall?

While these questions would play out in dramatic fashion across the first half of the twentieth century as photographers, curators, critics, and the viewing public established what they wanted to see and where they wanted to see it, by the mid-1930s, the humanitarian crisis found within the frame of these images left little room for public debate: something must be done for these economic and environmental refugees seen pouring into places like California by the thousands each and every day. With these crises underway, and with no end in sight, the Resettlement Administration was founded in 1935 as a New Deal initiative to combat rural poverty, and by 1937, it had grown into the Farm Security Administration (FSA). Photography became the best known of these initiatives given the accessibility of the social documentary genre: crisp, tight angled shots of familiar domestic scenes set in astonishingly squalid conditions became the agency's signature aesthetic and a potent recipe for gaining public support for its New Deal agenda. Photographers from across the country—including several leading documentarians of rural American life including Walker Evans, Marion Post Wolcott, and Gordon Parks—created a body of work that brought viewers deep into the challenges that rural Americans faced during the Depression era.<sup>29</sup>

San Francisco-based photographer Dorothea Lange would come to enjoy the most public recognition of this group of federally supported cultural producers, capturing searing images of Dust Bowl migrants housed in labor camps and along highways, riverbeds, and back alleys in California. This work—like that of the other FSA photographers—spoke to the wider experience of Depression era displacement: stoic mothers, children, and families making due where little was to be made at all. What distinguished Lange—and perhaps later created challenges in her critical reception—was her ability and willingness to engage an epic narrative structure, a move that linked these migrants’ journey to California with long established tropes about pilgrims in barren, desert-like conditions finding solace—if not riches—in the Golden State.<sup>30</sup>

This work culminated in the publication of her seminal photo essay *American Exodus* (1939), the product of a professional—and personal—collaboration with economist Paul S. Taylor, a leading expert on agricultural labor patterns and conditions.<sup>31</sup> And that work—recognizable through the proliferation of Lange’s images including “Migrant Mother”—was ancestral to a second genre, photojournalistic depictions of farm workers by mainstream media sources such as *Time*, *Life*, *Newsweek*, and *Saturday Evening Post*. These photographers, however, would not enjoy the luxury of time afforded to Lange and the FSA photographers. Instead, typically working on very short deadlines, with limited previous engagement with the site, these photographers tended to focus on individual leaders of strike and protests, dramatic personalities and landscapes that were otherwise mundane to a general audience. Capturing the more sensational moments of these events was not without its advantages: sharply drawn, intense compositions intended to jump from the newspaper or magazine page became a hallmark of the genre, in as much service to the copy that framed it as it was to any thematic of aesthetic points. The costs of such economy were also high for the subjects profiled, however: with little time to

set up a shot or develop a relationship with the site, its subjects—particularly in moments of social upheaval like the Depression or the Civil Rights era—were often presented as disorganized and unfocused, establishing narratives of the cultural landscape that often obscured the broader experiences represented.

These two leading branches of photography depicting the Central Valley contrasted with the stillness presented in the third major genre in this regional photographic tradition: rural landscape photography. These images, heavily influenced by the work of artists such as Ansel Adams tended to focus on the grandeur of the landscape, either in his more widely circulated images of the natural environment—like mountains, rivers, and deserts—or, his less well-known but technically sound depictions of canals, dams, aqueducts, and levees. In both bodies of work—like other material in this genre—subjects were typically absent in the frame, presenting stirring but idealized representations of the natural and built environments, void of the people and processes that helped produce them.

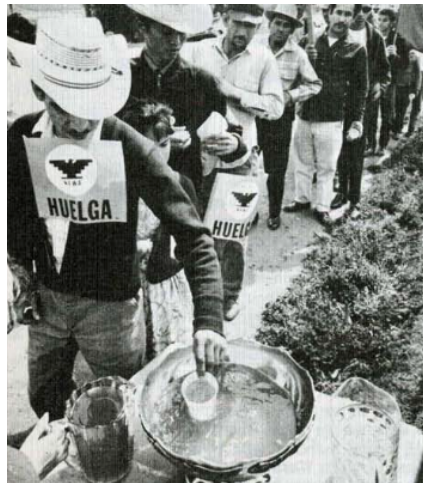


Figure 2.11. An impromptu yard installation. Photograph by Jon Lewis (1966).

On the pilgrim trail in 1966, these visual legacies would be put to use—and repurposed—by Lewis as he walked the entire journey from Delano to Sacramento as a photographer-activist. As a young photographer, outside the major photographic channels of Lange and the other FSA

photographers, Lewis's work does not fit neatly into these three categories. Instead, through a more vernacular approach, his images cut across these traditions to form a fourth category, something we might understand as photography of the cultural landscape. This photography draws strongly from each category to address the needs of this site, where like Lange, deeply held social motivations guide the work, but through the time-sensitive nature of the march, desire to create a narrative story. Through his time living on site with the workers, and his presence on the entire journey to Sacramento, Lewis became attentive to the mundane but significant details like an impromptu yard installation set up by a farm worker and his family to greet the pilgrims (Figure 2.11). Filled with *agua fresca*, a traditional fruit infused drink, the unexpected stop allowed the pilgrims to enjoy a moment of respite after a grueling second day of walking. Exhausted, hot, and eager to sit down, Lewis enjoys access to a candid moment, free of the self-conscious posing that a less trusted member of the press corps might encounter. The image also documents a significant moment in the early part of their journey: the gesture to provide punch and a moment of relaxation was the first moment of spontaneous support from fellow farm workers on the pilgrim trail, something that they would come to rely on throughout their march. In other words, this was no "hit and run" photojournalism or disengaged, aesthetic driven exercise in documentary photography. Lewis is positioned directly over the bowl as the pilgrim dips his plastic cup into the juice, a landscape where people are placed first and culture is inextricably woven into their everyday environments.

The photography of the march also expands the archive of Chicano farm worker photography, which, according to historian Richard Steven Street tends to fit into a set of five major categories: rural, semi-rural, urban, portraiture, and vernacular culture. In the photography that is place-based, such as the rural, semi-rural, and urban sites, farm workers are used to frame

the shot against the natural and/or built environment. Photographs of rural landscapes tend to feature farm workers set within orchards, fields, vineyards and other “natural” landscapes that are also their sites of work. Semi-rural photographs show overlaps and intersections of the natural and built environment, including long shots of workers in the fields, parked along the highway or standing near irrigation ditches. Urban landscapes, or the growing number of small cities and towns like Porterville, document the experiences of farm workers waiting along the roadside for rides to the remote fields they tend or the feature the celebrations and parades that are held in public parks and squares to mark Mexican heritage holidays. These photographs use the ceremonies of rural and city life to place the built environment as the dominant framing device.<sup>32</sup>



Figure 2.12. These boots were not made for walking. Photograph by Jon Lewis (1966).

In contrast, the portraiture to emerge from the march featured close up shots of pilgrims, police officers, priests, growers, children and the other touchstones of vernacular culture that shapes their lives. These photographs use close ups of signs, workers hands and boots, buttons, hats to frame the image, placing emphasis on the material culture of the human subject. Here (Figure 2.12), in a close up of the boot of a farm worker on the march, Lewis draws attention to both, capturing the austere beauty of the simple leather construction of the footwear, shoelace

tied neatly below the opening of the trousers. Accessorized with metal cross, NFWA armband, and oversized straw hat the image is at once a figure study with strong aesthetic value and documentation of the sartorial signs and symbols of the march. These representations of farm workers from the march found a wide circulation in the alternative media, the farm worker, student, church, and labor publications that were supporters of the NFWA and contracted photos from Lewis and other photographers they knew were on site during the Grape Strike. The images presented a more nuanced view of the farm worker experience and helped establish the visual iconography of the *campesino*. These images were widely seen in the pages of the alternative press, and quickly found their ways into other forms of popular culture including murals, poster art, and popular dress.

The *campesino* that emerged in the march photography thus played a major role in helping establish this figure as the primary rural subject and was widely reproduced in the emerging field of Chicana/o visual culture. Like the Lewis photos, he is dressed in jeans or khakis, with a wide straw hat, plaid cotton or flannel shirt, and work boots; he quickly took hold in murals, magazines, and posters across Mexican America. And this was no small contribution: in this formative period of Chicana/o visual culture much of the material in circulation was urban in its origin and sensibility—and for good reason—driven by the challenges Mexican heritage people in large urban centers were representing in their art, including educational reform, critiques of Vietnam and the military industrial complex, urban development, and police brutality. These issues were also of concern in rural life but the immediate pressure of labor injustices and pesticide exposure infused this work with a complementary set of views of mid-twentieth century life. As Lewis's image illustrates: the farm worker might just be starting his journey to Sacramento but the clarity of this rural figure is already well on his way to becoming an iconic

figure in Chicana/o visual culture.

When the marchers walked into Porterville in the late afternoon of the second day of their journey, then, these two seemingly straightforward images work together to highlight another important reality of their quest: their feet were full of blisters, making the nearly twenty-mile daily walk nearly unbearable. Whether they had received one of the donated pairs of new boots (Image 13) or, like Chavez stubbornly worn an older pair, few, if any of the pilgrims had proper footwear or socks for the length and duration of their walk. This added an air of emotional fatigue for the pilgrims who were often sleeping in public parks and community centers during the journey and heightened the spirit of sacrifice that the Lenten pilgrimage had established.<sup>33</sup>

Visalia, California  
March 21, 1966

To reach Visalia, the pilgrims cut in a little deeper on their route, following the north-south path of the major railroad lines. Visalia, home of the flat sweet onion that carries its name, is the largest city between Bakersfield and Fresno, a rare urban center in the chain of dusty farm worker towns that line the eastern edge of the valley floor. But the highways and county roads they walked along during the march are only one set of transportation links that define this pocket of intense agricultural activity. Like so many towns in this region, the placement of railroad lines in Visalia serves as a material marker of the community's social and cultural boundaries. Whether it was the right side or the wrong side of the tracks, Mexican heritage workers tended to live on the west side of the railroad in Visalia, a set of dirt roads and back alleys often built piece-meal and informally alongside older ethnic neighborhoods. Much like their home in Delano, these communities stood in stark contrast to the well-planned residential neighborhoods and growers' estates that defined settlement to the east side.<sup>34</sup>



Visalia is also known locally as a gateway to the lower end of the Sierra Nevada, the less affluent set of state and national parks just to the south of Yosemite, and a longstanding recreation site for Mexican heritage workers seeking to escape the heat of the Central Valley in the summer. Often following the local watershed, including the Kaweah River, these curved, east-west roads would also have been fresh in Chavez's mind having recently driven them with NFWA organizers when they travelled there in early March 1966 to make plans for the pilgrimage to Sacramento.

The mountain retreat provided much needed critical distance from the heated discussions underway at the headquarters about the direction of the Grape Strike. Frustrated in their failure to gain serious momentum across the important late winter and early spring strike season organizers were perhaps irrationally optimistic, clinging to the belief that they were just steps away from making major progress. While they had formed small outposts across the valley, the organization lacked a strong sense of community, raising major questions about its ability to successfully organize such a large and highly mobile set of workers. By early spring, the Grape Strike was reaching a breaking point and organizers were desperate to tilt the balance in their direction by the time the buds of the grape berries broke, the annual signal of the new growing season.

Lewis was in attendance during that three-day summit in the Sierra Nevada, and captured a set of informal moments that speak to the significance this retreat from daily organizing activities provided. His images capture the range of thought and emotion expressed amid the Giant Sequoias: informal discussions on the front lawn during a smoking break, indoor shots capturing the passionate discussions taking place in the home's gigantic living room, and quieter, more philosophical discussions of the motivations, political strategy, and logistics required to bring a large scale event to fruition. The frustration of the leadership was not misguided in this

fraught political moment—their movement *was* in peril—and the time and space away from the Delano headquarters to reflect, relax, and strategize was put to good use. In fact, the situation had become so tangled that it was nearly impossible to see what their next move should be, and discussions continued on deep into the night on the second day of the summit. Farm workers, fearing violent retaliation and job loss, remained skeptical of joining a union in the politically charged climate of the Civil Rights era, particularly after so many failed attempts to organize agricultural workers.<sup>35</sup>

Growers, on the other hand, were emboldened by the explosive growth of the table grape industry, and were cautiously optimistic after the record 1965 harvest brought on a set of price fluctuations as the harvest took its annual progression north from the smaller vineyards in the Imperial Valley and up across the massive farms of the Central Valley. Growers saw the potential for their investments to earn huge profits but they were also proceeding with caution given the concerns about labor stability in the absence of the federally managed Bracero Program. Resentment was also mounting among growers regarding the NFWA; it looked like their efforts were not leading anywhere yet Chavez and the pesky team in Delano were still active. And, with table grapes more popular than ever with American consumers, the fight in the fields as it became known, was threatening to spill out into view of the public, resulting in a containment strategy, through subtle, mostly unseen violence, echoing the barbed wire and police presence at the picket lines. The last thing growers wanted was for this group to gain public sympathy. They had seen that play out in the Deep South, in haunting images in the mainstream media, and they did not want that mobilization of white moderate support to happen in this rural landscape.



Figure 2.13. Selma to Montgomery March (1965) by James Karales  
Figure 2.14. March on Washington (1963) by Time Life Images

And the growers were right to fear the power of the visual message. No one in the mid-1960s could have missed the power of the camera in social struggle. According to historian Vicki Goldberg, Civil Rights era photographs had "immediate and stunning impact" and by 1963 "it was impossible to be unaware of southern racism.... The photographs gave this abstraction a visible image." Images brought what was unseen into wide view, depicting a people in search of justice along the remote highways between Selma and Montgomery and by filling The Mall of the nation's capital (Figures 2.13-2.14)<sup>36</sup>

The cultural landscape of the Central Valley mirrored the story that had come into view in the South but its message, and its lessons had not made it far from back roads and ethnic enclaves of rural California, let alone to the pages and television screens of the American public. How did this tiny band of organizers traverse such a wide gap, a journey that would in many ways locate the Civil Rights movement as a destination? What resources and experiences would be helpful to draw upon when making this move?

In 1962, after several years as a successful organizer in San Jose and East Los Angeles with CSO director Fred Ross, Cesar Chavez recognized that a turning point was approaching with Mexican-heritage agricultural labor.<sup>37</sup> With the Bracero Program ending, and no clear path forward for federal or state level management of a huge group of workers, an opportunity was

emerging to provide large-scale professional representation. Starting out as a day laborer in the apricot orchards near San Jose, Chavez recognized that a largely invisible class of labor, many of whom relied on the informal and unscrupulous “representation” of labor contractors commissioned by each grower. These workers desired something more: social visibility, or, recognition for their role in the cultural and economic life of the United States. Heading to Oxnard with his wife Helen, they camped on the beach, deciding during their week there to relocate to her hometown of Delano to begin organizing the farm workers of the Central Valley.

Delano was hard, hot, and lonely for a young organizer. But going from up-and-coming organizer to the new guy on the block was only his first challenge: he was new to the region and had few contacts beyond Helen’s family. His first move was to draw a map of all the towns from Arvin to Stockton, eighty six in all, ranging from mid-sized cities to unincorporated farm labor settlements and squatters camps. According to biographer Jacques Levy, Chavez was determined, from the start, to see these towns with his own eyes and hear its residents’ stories first hand: “I decided to hit them all. I wanted to see the San Joaquin Valley as I’d never seen it before, all put together. Of course, I knew the area, but I had never seen it with the idea of organizing it.”<sup>38</sup> On this first trip, he drove around for two and a half days in his beat up 1953 Mercury station wagon, talking to as many workers, foremen, and townspeople he could along the way. He saw the crops, the towns, the working conditions, the back-roads, and listened closely when people expressed fear or disbelief at the suggestion of creating a union for Mexican heritage agricultural workers. But he heard enough interest expressed quietly and cautiously to start making plans. When he got back to Delano he started doing house meetings, which were used to hone his “pitch,” a way to get a better feel for the concerns and desires of the Central Valley workers. This home grown strategy provided important political cover for these early

conversations, since any talk of wide scale organizing put him, his family, and any workers he spoke with in danger.

This kind of door-to-door activism at a community of Delano's scale took nearly two months. As Chavez noted to Levy, the presence of the organizer has to be seen and felt in formal and informal ways, with critical and engaged listening forming the foundation of the relationship. The house as the home of the NFWA took on real and symbolic value then, a place not only out of view of hostile or skeptical eyes, but also protected from the harsh light and overwhelming expanse of the actual fields where the power of the agricultural industry was on full display through the endless rows of crops, irrigation canals, tractors, trucks, and roads. In the more intimate space of the home, the impossibility of this David-versus-Goliath struggle was rescaled, and the power of family, community, and culture was on display.<sup>39</sup>

This meticulous attention to detail had initially paid off and by September 1965 the NFWA had grown in strength to join the Grape Strike. But after six months, the effort had yet to yield any major political or symbolic victories.<sup>40</sup> So, on the eve of their pilgrimage to Sacramento, NFWA organizers headed up to a mountainside retreat to gain perspective on their goals and objectives. While they had struggled to gain wide-spread support and the organization often appeared to be in disarray, Chavez's experience along the highways and back roads of the Central Valley suggested that broad-based support was not *that* far off. But what could the NFWA do to connect these small farming communities with each other and in the process elevate their struggles to the American public?

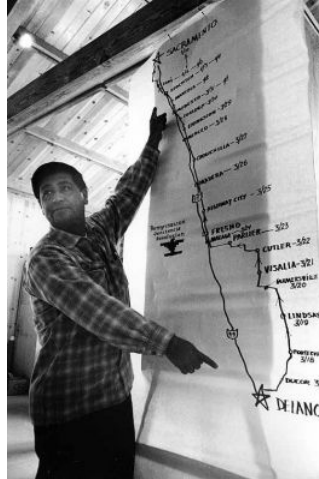


Figure 2.15. Chavez's Central Valley map. Photograph by Jon Lewis (1966).

When Chavez unfurled his hand-drawn map of the pilgrimage route, it was met with an audible *gasp* from the audience. Simultaneously shocked by its duration and route, and in awe of the scale and scope of its vision, the message to NFWA leadership was clear: Chavez was a leader who was prone to *think visually* and this route was designed to maximize their message across the places and spaces that were needed to make their movement successful. And, if this was a homegrown movement, then their walk needed to reflect that, extending in a loop at the bottom half of the frame. As they experienced in their first steps out of Delano on March 17, the more efficient path would have led straight down Albany Street, a path that run parallel to Highway 99, the long stretch of highway linking the cities of the Central Valley (Figure 2.15). By taking the long way around the lower San Joaquin Valley, through towns like Ducor, Porterville, and Visalia, Chavez was able to build their visibility, and in many ways their brand, along the corridor known as the grape belt or raisin belt, the home of their most valued audience: the small group of year round grape workers that they hoped would provide the leverage needed to bring upon industry-wide change.<sup>41</sup>

Attuned to the struggles that labor organizers had experienced for decades in California in their attempt to organize strikes, the NFWA was eager to try a new strategy based on patterns

they were noticing at the field level. Crops with relatively short growing seasons like lettuce, asparagus, wheat, and tomatoes had become highly mechanized over the course of the twentieth century and by 1966 required relatively little human labor to bring to harvest. And, the human presence that was still needed required little training, making this group of workers particularly low paid and highly mobile. With a stable supply of workers already in the state by 1966, most sectors of the agricultural industry were able to weather the changes to the post-Bracero Program labor landscape. These changes heightened the sense of precariousness for these workers who were now more dispensable than ever and without the work permits afforded by the Bracero Program and resulted in an oversaturated labor market almost wholly dependent on the informal agreements arranged by labor contractors. Often of Mexican heritage, these contractors were well acquainted with the long-standing migration circuit that had developed across the US Southwest during this period and served as a powerful intermediary between the laborer and the grower in the absence of state and federal management.<sup>42</sup>

Betting at least one growing season worth of precious organizing time and resources on the economic power of the grape workers' environmental knowledge and technical skill was both an audacious and common-sense move for the NFWA.<sup>43</sup> As the most specialized segment of the agricultural labor force they held the most potential as strikers, and organizers were eager to test the strength of their value to the industry. But, as the march approached several questions lingered over the room that day in the High Sierra: Could more grape workers be convinced to join the cause as harvest approached? Would their expertise wield enough power with growers to inspire the industry wide changes that remained so elusive? And would this journey through their homes and places of work bring the struggle into clearer view?

Parlier, California  
March 22, 1966

In the California table grape industry the off-season is, in many ways, the real season. Known as dormancy, the period between late fall and early spring is anything but inactive. Some of the most grueling and tedious work of the ten-month commercial season is done during this time by a small group of highly skilled workers in the agricultural industry. Bringing the next crop to life begins as soon as the last heavy clusters are clipped from the vine at the end of the fall harvest. The initial work is slow and sometimes a waiting game: the debris along the rootstock is easily cleared but trimming the fragments above must wait until the leaves wilt into a dull shade of yellow. It still might not look like much from the roadside as drivers pass by in the new year, just a few workers with rakes or on ladders with shears. But by January pruning and training gains momentum as the freshly thinned vines begin their long process of rehydration and growth. This moment is critical to the launch of a successful season because the trimming and resetting of vines helps promote the mineral and carbohydrate movement from the leaf to the vine that takes place during dormancy. These nutrients will fuel healthy bud maturation in the spring and even the slightest misplacement will cause berries to burn in the summer sun and color to be distributed unevenly across the grape berry.

The growing vine is an elaborate structure requiring constant attention as it stretches across the trellis, a cross-like wooden structure that will soon bear a thick load of mature hanging fruit. As the vines become larger and more supple, they benefit from the experienced hand of a seasoned worker who is attuned to the nuances of the climate, soil, and water unique to each growing season. While agricultural science guides many of these decisions at the vineyard level, workers are charged with implementing decisions at the vine level, and an experienced worker can often recognize and adapt his or her technique at a single glance. This becomes important in



the early phase of the growing season when the seemingly small act of attaching the vine to the trellis will in fact determine the distribution of shoots and clusters for the life of the plant, ensuring the even spacing that will allow the vine to concentrate its growth in the spring on a limited number of clusters. This work is critical given the scale of the job since many vineyards stretch across thousands of acres of land.<sup>44</sup>

In early spring, the first green leaves can be seen poking out along the upper edges of the vines. Known as bud break, the initial growth is slow at first, driven by the nutrients stored in the roots, trunks, and cordons of the plants. As temperatures rise over the course of a few weeks, shoots begin to appear from these permanent structures, and grow over an inch a day. Flowers bloom shortly after, followed by the small hard berries that will grow into clusters. The blooms arrive when the temperature reaches sixty-eight degrees, which should occur six to nine weeks after the initial break. To many, the process of sugar accumulation in the berries is understood simply as the natural process of fruit becoming ripe. In the table grape industry, this progression from bud to edible berry is a highly managed process overseen by the United States Department of Agriculture and the California Department of Food and Agriculture. Known as veraison, the growing grapes are subject to strict standards for size, color, and sweetness, and their development is charted across the growing season, with the sweetest and most aesthetically pleasing clusters bound for the premium table grape market, and the least appealing fruit bound for the cheap wine and spirits market. And everything in between is bound for middle class homes via supermarkets like Safeway.



Figure 2.16. The material culture of agribusiness. Photograph by Jon Lewis (1966).

When ripe, a commercially grown Thompson grape measures one inch in diameter and a little longer in length, forming a pale green translucent oval. The individual grape berries are arranged in clusters, with 20 or more berries set on each branch. Hung on the vine, the branches are woven together more densely at the top of the stalk creating a broad shoulder and draping into an elegant cone shape (Figure 2.16). The thin stalk that connects the cluster to the vine is sinuous and strong, supporting the weight of over one hundred grape berries. When the branches in the cluster are pulled apart, several small, pale green, underdeveloped fruits are revealed. The matte yellow-green skin of the individual grapes is thin and crisp, appearing shiny only briefly when wet. The texture of the interior is moist and sweet, contrasting with the slightly tart taste of the skin. With temperatures regularly exceeding one hundred degrees in the summer months, these long rows of densely backed plant life create a slight moisture in the rows, as their water filled berries produce a light perspiration in an otherwise parched landscape.

To harvest this crop, grape workers work in teams, sweeping across each row of the vineyard as the grapes reach peak ripeness. Two to four workers begin the process by cutting the clusters from the vine. One worker hauls the cut clusters to the packing area, where another worker carefully packs them into large cartons, and another packs them into small trucks where they will be taken to packing houses for storage and shipment. Grapes do not contain starch, so

have a long shelf life when harvested ripe because their sugar level is stable. This composition also prevents them from ripening post-harvest, so they must be picked at peak ripeness. This makes the fruit susceptible to decay and water loss from damaged skin, so once harvested, sulfur dioxide is applied heavily and the cartons are quickly moved to air controlled warehouses to minimize these risks.

In 1965, the NFWA, alongside Filipino organizers, recognized the high value these workers—and their environmental knowledge and technical skill—held in bringing this lucrative and labor intensive crop to harvest. Single crop strikes had a long history in California labor politics, including wheat, cotton, lettuce, and asparagus, but the move towards mechanized production in these sectors of the agricultural industry, coupled with the relatively short growing seasons, made it difficult for organizers to win more than modest increases in wages. While these victories were meaningful in localized situations, they failed to produce the larger goals of union recognition, workplace safety, and improved housing that organizers sought. The move to join the Grape Strike—and devote an entire growing (and protest) season to it—was thus a bold move by the NFWA given the struggles encountered by previous organizers and their own growing pains since their formation as an organization in 1962.

The move to focus attention on these workers appeared to be well timed but was heavy with risk. The record breaking yield of the 1965 harvest made the need for experienced workers that much more valuable as growers scrambled to extend their reach into new markets, offering an ever wider range and volume of fresh, dried, fermented, and distilled grape products. But as organizers knew well by the 1960s, finding fissures or efficiencies to exploit in their battle against the growers was still a daunting proposition, even for the boldest organizations. Could industry-wide change take hold? And could these workers—with the highest wages, most

technical expertise, and least mobility—help catalyze that movement?



Figures 2.17. Storage sheds and packing houses. Photographs by Harvey Richards (1966).

Achieving structural change in this cultural landscape held an overwhelming sense of impossibility that was captured with precision by photographer Harvey Richards. In this set of images, like the one above, the scale of the growers' capital investment in the vineyard and its equipment is on full display: a massive infrastructure built at great cost to maximize the crop's yield and ensure its safe and timely move to the consumer's table (Figure 2.17). Signaling their cultural, economic, and political power, these grand mazes of mechanized sorting belts are shown efficiently moving the product from truck to shed, where they will be housed in carefully managed refrigeration units for a few hours, days, or months—depending on the time of year and destination. Richards uses the glaring mid-day light to emphasize the scale of this system. This is no romantic image of a country barn or stable shot in the generous tones of morning or evening twilight: sun blazing, reflecting heat and light off huge metal structures into wide dusty loading zones highlights the colossal investment made in growing and protecting this delicate crop.

A closer look at the image points us to one of the key elements of this landscape: the trucks that move the neatly clipped, packed, and stacked grapes from vineyard to market. As historian Donald Worster notes, an *agroecosystem* is “reorganized for agricultural purposes” creating “a domesticated ecosystem” that is built and maintained to serve goals and objects set well outside the sites of production. As a system that privileges exports, the agroecosystem tends

to manipulate—or even eschew—the checks and balances present in nature’s ecosystem to maximize growing conditions. What comes in is intensely managed to increase value and volume of what goes out, ideally, generating the truckload size profits suggested in Richards’s work. The privileging of the investor’s bottom line, in effect then, tends to promote large-scale mono-crop production where capital investments like sheds, tractors, trucks, trailers, and irrigation systems are consolidated at a few key sites, which serve thousands of acres of farmland. And, as Worster suggests, what happens *inside* the agroecosystem, is often most defined by what happens *outside* of it: sure, people have to eat (driving production) but what they eat and how much it costs is increasingly defined by external forces in the global marketplace.<sup>45</sup>

It is no surprise that the growers in this grape-based agroecosystem would come to rely on advertising campaigns that promoted idealized scenes of family life and the harvest. In this domesticated ecosystem, the natural world was better seen as a carefully tended garden than the industrial machine that it had become by the mid-twentieth century. Richards, by way of his journeys along the back roads of the Central Valley during the Grape Strike, brings this restructuring of the natural environment through science and technology into clear view. These images, shot along the roadside and from water towers and overpasses, show the proliferation of infrastructure that appeared in the environment during the first half of the twentieth century. Set up along railroads, highways, and irrigation canals, these packing house, storage facilities, and distribution centers supplant the ditches, trails, trading posts, and town squares that defined the region in its recent past, a visual testament to the shift towards private and public investment in large scale growing destined for markets ever further from the site of production. This is a place where, as Richards shows us, the environment is at once natural and built.

In response to Worster’s call for an increased focus on ecology, economy, and the ideas

that shape them, historian William Cronon suggests a more relational reading of data, a sort of Raymond Williams-esque mode of analysis whereby capital is not an abstraction but instead a very real material and discursive part of modern cultures. In other words, where the macro-level systems analysis utilized in the study of economies and ecosystems can be quite helpful in locating overlooked features and processes in places like the agrarian landscape—and all of its sub-sites like the salmon fishing mode of production—the historian should proceed with caution as to not lose sight of how these sites and systems affect the people that live inside, and outside, of them.<sup>46</sup>

In this mode of analysis, the refrigerated grape storage shed becomes not only evidence of what is valued in the cultural landscape of the Central Valley in 1966 but also a marker of what is not: the workers who toil endlessly—at high personal cost and mostly out of view—to produce these environments. As reluctant we might be to depart from the wonders of the systems based archive—given how productive these journeys can be—this encouragement to return to the *how* and *why* of this inquiry brings us even deeper into understanding how change works in historical time. Here, where nature meets culture—and is mediated by cultural production—a layering of narrative occurs, offering insight into the often competing and contested ways that the cultural landscape is experienced, imagined, and represented. The shed, and the photograph that express some of its qualities, are far more than “timeless abstractions” or emblems of a sterile and oppressive economic system that we might find should we remain in measurements of time and meaning driven by geology, ecology, or the economy; instead a return to historical time—and how it works—invites us to probe deeper into the human stories present in the frame, to look more closely at the relation being expressed between people and their environments.



Figure 2.18. Grape workers preparing the harvest. Photographs by Harvey Richards (1966).

While Richards tended to focus on the structures of the built environment in his photography along the back roads of the Central Valley, he also produced a series of images that detail the ways that culture works in the annals of the grape-based agroecosystem (Figure 2.18). Positioned at the vineyard and packing house level—or just above it—Richards creates a kind of zoom lens on the industry, moving the viewer from distant observer to trusted insider as workers are shown *working*, the scene seemingly undisturbed by the presence of his camera. Shots taken from a slightly elevated position create a critical distance for the viewer, creating context for the work that fits somewhere between a traditional landscape shot and the more intimate small group shots at short range. These images—at various degrees of close distance—also allow the viewer to transcend the convoluted chain of production that typically minimizes the presence—and power—of the grape worker. Restoring grape workers to the vineyard and the packinghouse loading zone offers insight into their important role at each phase of the growing season.

And perhaps the most critical part of this cultural landscape, particularly to Grape Strike organizers, was the worker—and work—profiled in the final set of images produced by Richards in his ramblings across the rural roads of the Central Valley: the nearly year-round grape industry workers whose expertise carried both an industry and the protest efforts aimed at reshaping it. In these images, the worker holds a seemingly simple hand-tool, used to trim the

vines during the long phases of dormancy where old growth is removed and new growth is cultivated. But detailed images, portraits of the handiwork show the intricate work needed to repair the trellis and its guide wires, especially the light pieces of metal strung between posts to support the vines and leaves as they extend outward and slowly fill out with heavy, moisture filled grape clusters over the growing season.



Figure 2.19. A grape worker and his pruning shears. Photograph by Harvey Richards (1966).  
Figure 2.20 The grape trellis. Photographs by Harvey Richards (1966).

As suggested in the searing light, the landscape is hard and hot, hardly the sort of agrarian heroics found at a small-scale family farm or a picturesque representation of it. This reality, of an unlikely agrarian hero working in an underappreciated landscape, did not stop the NFWA from putting their support behind this image. Slightly off center and completely over-lit, the images express the mirage or echo that can be felt at these sites as a handful of workers, like this one, work in the hot, dry breeze of the vineyard (Figures 2.19-2.20). And what rests within the frame conveys a sense of humility—tiny repairs made to thin wires and knotty rootstock—the images also express the not-so-small amount of hubris that the NFWA held when they bet on *this worker* to lead their campaign to secure their first union contract. The tactic of placing a small but passionate group of supporters on a picket line to support *this work* can, in this formulation then, be seen not only as the David versus Goliath battle in which it is typically characterized—and,



which it most certainly was—but also as another form of politicized performance that carried with it as many risks as it did rewards. Could this cultural capital really hold up against the economic and political capital that surrounded them? Would voicing visual dissent where the vineyard meets the county road really work?

Getting working people to stop work, with strategic precision, is the art, or, perhaps the informed magic, of the labor organizer. As Cesar Chavez recalled to biographer Jacques Levy, the scenario is, in its structure, improbable verging on impossible. The worker is in the field, orchard, or vineyard. You, as an organizer, are standing at the edge of the road careful not to trespass onto the grower's property. Ideally, the worker is in a section of the farmland that is close to the road, allowing you to speak in a slightly raised voice but with an even tone. More often, especially in the vineyards, the worker is deeper into the row, enmeshed between the trellis, vines, guide wires, shipping cartons, and irrigation channels so you must yell, sometimes into a bullhorn. Now in view, to other farm workers as well as any labor contractors and supervisors on site, it becomes unlikely that workers will even acknowledge your presence, let alone set their shears down to speak with you. Given that the growers and local law enforcement officers have your personal and vehicle information on file, you likely have been followed to the site, making a conversation with the worker nearly impossible as they pull up to the scene armed and often accompanied by the shrill sound of the siren and brusque barking dogs.<sup>47</sup> The effort, then, with all its signs, bullhorns, and impassioned speeches, has only a fleeting moment to take hold as member recruitment, quickly coming full circle and fading into its more distant and expository performance: the picket line.

While the door to formal recruitment has closed, the presence of a picket line signals an important act of solidarity with the worker and a protest against the grower. This tactic—to make

on-site demonstrations a focal point of organizing activity—was widely popular with farm workers in organization because it placed emphasis on their daily struggles to earn a living. And, as the most highly skilled workers in the agricultural industry, it was particularly risky—economically and socially—for these workers to join organizing activity, creating a poignant paradox where the vineyard meets the road: the Grape Strike might have rested on the economic power of their environmental knowledge and technical skill, but for the march to go on, it would need to go on to Sacramento without most of them. With the buds poised to break across the vineyards in late March, their power was at its peak, their nimble and experience hands caring for the new season’s crop as their advocates marched on.

Fresno, California  
March 24, 1966

When the pilgrims walked into Fresno during the afternoon they were greeted by a large crowd lining the streets of the historic downtown. With Chavez’s name on the movie marquee, a theatrical star backed by a cast of worker-pilgrims, the ensemble was achieving the visibility that they had sought. But, along their journey in the small towns like Tulare, they had been attacked by police dogs and experienced other hostilities along the remote rural roads they walked along. How, then, did the tone of the audience change so quickly? What happened?

A week into the march, the pilgrims were cautiously optimistic about their journey. The number of participants on the daily trail were growing, as farm workers and supporters heard and saw their message. Still, the event had attracted little mainstream media attention since the press corps covering Senator Kennedy had captured the march as it left Delano. Although their advance team had improved their efforts since Ducor, arranging for members to stay with local supporters each night and creating scenes like the one in Porterville, pilgrims remained

vulnerable to insults and threats along the highway as traffic refused to slow in their presence, a kind of counter-protest to their peaceful roadside resistance.

Walking into Fresno was different, though, and for several reasons. As the administrative headquarters for agricultural industry in the lower San Joaquin Valley, Fresno seemed like an unlikely site for a reception that verged on revival ceremony emotional intensity but through the careful orchestration of one of its most esteemed Mexican heritage civic leaders it became a turning point in the journey to Sacramento. Arturo Romualdo Tirado was born in Mexico City to Spanish heritage performers and raised in Los Angeles, where his father enjoyed a successful stage and film career with RKO and Universal Studios. As a young man, Tirado became interested in the production side of the entertainment industry and with his wife and young family set out for his first management position in 1944. A stage in Bakersfield was in need of a manager sensitive to Spanish language programming, a growing niche market in mid-twentieth century Central Valley. Just over the maze of hills and freeways connecting Los Angeles and the rural interior, known as the Grapevine, the site was a long-standing crossroads, as it also served as a connection point to Las Vegas and the US Southwest. He briefly returned to Los Angeles to manage a theatre there, but soon returned to the Central Valley in 1956 to lease a theatre in Fresno from his friend Gustavo A. Acosta.

Fresno had long been the administrative and cultural headquarters of the Central Valley and home to a growing Mexican-heritage middle class, who like Tirado, found themselves in a curious relationship with the Mexican-heritage working class. So much so that Fresno had become home to a robust site of cultural production by mid-century, including Spanish language radio, Mexican holiday themed parades, circus shows, dance troupes, rodeos, community theatre, films, musicals, and concerts. As a civil leader, he was eager to support the farm workers cause

by donating use of the theatre when the farm workers marched through Fresno. As a businessman, and child of the Golden Age of Mexican cinema, he recognized a rising star in the making and billed Chavez as the event's headliner, with his supporting cast of Delano pilgrims. And Tirado's timing could not have been better: given Fresno's size, and the growing strength of the pilgrimage, the event served as the first major press coverage since they departed Delano. Working behind the scenes to secure police protection and the support of the Mayor Floyd Hyde's office, they were greeted by their largest group of supporters yet.



Figure 2.21. Staging the cause. Photograph by Jon Lewis (1966).

Spanish language cinema wasn't the only reference point drawn on in Fresno that night (Figure 2.21). As a theatre student at San Jose State University, Luis Valdez was deeply influenced by the performance traditions found in silent films, the travelling theatre and vaudeville like productions known as *las carpas*, as well as Japanese *kabuki* theatre. Valdez met Chavez in San Jose when Chavez was working with Fred Ross in CSO activity. Valdez had just finished his degree at San Jose State and was spending time with the mime troupe in San Francisco. They had been interested in working together but needed the right project, a place where these vernacular visual traditions could enhance their political agenda. Like the others in NFWA's small staff, Valdez moved to Delano in 1965 with a few belongings and an enormous commitment to arts-based activism. Serving as a strike captain, he (much like Lewis) spent most

of his days on the picket lines and long nights at the headquarters writing and rehearsing what were becoming small one act plays or skits known as *actos* chronicling the issues farm workers experienced in the strike as well as their everyday lives.

If the Grape Strike gave them the cause, the March to Sacramento gave them the event. Performed on flatbed trucks, in empty lots and city parks, and community stages across the valley, the *actos* used “minimalism and humor... with a large dose of *corazon*” to inspire, illuminate, and satirize the condition of the farm worker. The *actos* also explored the masculine archetypes of the Grape Strike, including the *campesino* (farm worker), the *patroncito* (labor contractor), the *esquirol* (the strike breaker). These simply produced productions were widely popular with the mostly male pilgrims and were a cornerstone of the evening programming along the pilgrim trail, collectively written pieces, with a strong emphasis on improvisation, and framed by passionate readings of political statements by Valdez and musical performances by Augustin Lira, a gifted lyricist for the popular folk ballads known as *corridos*. Given the highly performative nature of the march, and its gestures to older political theatre traditions, it was consistent that it was portrayed in theatrical terms. The pilgrimage was theatre, it used theatre, and it found a very welcome home on the stage of the Aztec Theatre this night in Fresno.<sup>48</sup>

Stockton, California  
April 3, 1966



Figure 2.22. The pilgrims approach Sacramento. Photographs by Jon Lewis (1966).

As the march grew closer to its destination in Sacramento during the first week of April, its leadership engineered a series of political maneuvers that spoke to the fragile power of the

levees they walked atop in the San Joaquin Delta region. On April 3, based on national level union pressure, the pilgrims were greeted by another massive crowd when they walked into Stockton. Based on internal political maneuvering, this crowd was mixed with fervent supporters and regional union affiliates pressed into a display of solidarity. While not ideal, the nuances were lost on the national media, and like Fresno the march was pictured as a success.

The afternoon rally to mark their arrival was part of a day-long set of events and culminated in an evening Mass and performances at Saint Mary's church. The most notable of these performances was the reenactment of the Stations of the Cross, a typical ritual for Catholic pilgrims in the Lenten season. The fourteen part pictorial narrative charts the journey Jesus takes after he is condemned to death to the moment he is laid in the tomb. At each stop, modern-day pilgrims stop to reflect on each leg of his journey, from the moment he hoisted the cross above his shoulders and began his march towards Jerusalem to the moment he was nailed to it. Beaten, spat upon, and stumbling numerous times along the way, he is shown receiving support from several devoted women (including his mother Mary), as well as Simon of Cyrene who carries his cross for part of the journey. The remaining scenes commemorate his final moments where his cross is installed at the Calvary, or small hill known as the "place of skulls" used frequently for public executions, and he is stripped of his clothing (except for a small purple robe at his waist and crown of thorns), affixed to the cross where he dies, later to be removed and placed in a nearby garden tomb.

Along more established pilgrimage trails, these same scenes would be commemorated with fixtures such as shrines, tableaus, carved wooden panels, metalwork, and hand-painted panels. Along the waterways of the Delta, the ceremonial landscape of the pilgrims was more informal, consisting of readings and objects from their march such as the Virgin of Guadalupe

banner (Figure 2.22). While less ornate than the highly stylized pieces on view along the older routes, the scenes played out here spoke to the sometimes informal, yet no less significant, cultural bonds the NFWA shared with the many of the marchers who joined them on this part of their journey. As home to a long-standing network of Filipino activists, as well as a major port and navy base, commemorating the Stations of the Cross provided a moment, and place, to transcend the political differences that had emerged by the spring of 1966 between farm worker organizers as debates over the efficacy of the Grape Strike intensified. The penitent mode of this ritual, framed by the celebratory spirit at the events marked their arrival, masked the internal turmoil that was playing out behind the scenes but was used to good effect along the pilgrim trail, and allowed the NFWA to maintain the image of strength and coherence they had begun to project in Fresno.

In fact, the unity that marked the public representation of the Stockton events also foreshadowed what would become one of the NFWA's defining political legacies: the successful negotiation of their first union contract for agricultural workers. After an ongoing battle with Schenley Industries, a major liquor distributor based in New York City that the NFWA had long identified as a key stakeholder in labor negotiations, the company made the decision to support part of the farm workers' agenda by agreeing to raise hourly wages by thirty-five cents, provide a union hiring hall for workers in its vineyards, and support the NFWA credit union through a check issuing service. The deal almost fell apart however, as regional and national labor leaders tried to assert their influence in negotiations, so midway through the Stockton visit, Chavez was driven over night by a supporter south on Interstate 5, through the Grapevine, and into Los Angeles. Meeting at the Hollywood Hills home of Schenley executive Sidney Korshack, representatives from the Teamsters and AFL-CIO unions—who were heavily represented at the

packinghouse and transportation level of the grape industry—negotiated the deal over the pool table. Talks nearly broke down over which organization would take the lead on the deal, ideally incorporating the farm workers into one of the more established unions through the contract. But Chavez stood to return to Stockton without a contract, determined to maintain some sense of independence for the NFWA, and, whether it was a bluff or sincere exasperation, or both, Schenley operatives backed down and the core agreement of the contract was signed on the spot by Chavez.<sup>49</sup>

The message was delivered over the phone as Chavez and his driver prepared to return to Stockton and an announcement was made the following morning on a flatbed truck. The news was met with great joy: after decades of work, agricultural workers had won their first union contract. And, perhaps it is no surprise that the response on the ground was intuitively aesthetic. Immediately after the news broke, a can of black paint appeared along the roadside rally and the signs were changed to explicitly name (and thereby put pressure on) other growers. This shift from general strike to boycott would prove to be one of the most successful political action and public relations moves made by the union. In a few swift brushstrokes the NFWA identified a simple action for its supporters: buy *our* grapes.

And the timing was impeccable. Just an hour's drive away from the Bay Area, the event served as an important moment for network building with supporters. Students from Stanford, UC Berkeley, and San Francisco State, activist groups, and photojournalists from the San Francisco Examiner, Los Angeles Times, and New York Times found their way to Stockton, cameras and notepads in hand, and returned home from the experience to share fresh, impassioned stories in their publications. These moments would prove important to the movement throughout the Grape Strike, creating a participatory activism for supporters who



were not otherwise closely connected to the agricultural industry. The boycott was now a cause people could see.

Sacramento, California  
April 10, 1966

With the boycott in clear view, the NFWA tasted its first success. When the pilgrims awoke in West Sacramento on April 10, they assembled for a grand Mass ceremony at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, the first of several events planned that day to maximize their reach across the sites that had become so key to their visual program. As they left the ceremony, they were escorted by two mounted horsemen in full *charro* dress, a type of suiting from the Jalisco region of Mexico that features detailed embroidery, typical of the costuming of mariachi musicians from this region. The pageantry was on full display as the pilgrims crossed the Sacramento River and made their way into downtown Sacramento. Ten thousand supporters filled the plaza at the steps of the Capitol Building, and the stage was host to a full program of speeches and musical performances.

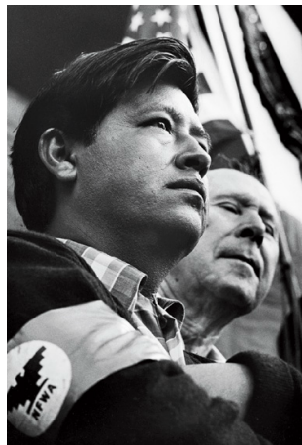


Figure 2.23. The eagle has taken flight. Photograph by Jim Marshall (1966).

With such a robust set of cultural memory on display that day, photographers were faced with a nearly endless set of critical and creative choices in their viewfinders. And, having

successfully gained the attention of the local and national press during the march, there was a certain amount of audience fatigue around protest images that felt too staged. While these shots were important early in the march to establish a connection between these marchers and others in the Civil Rights era political activity their visual program was so powerful that it became challenging for photographers to express a unique point of view that drizzly afternoon in Sacramento.

Perhaps it was his experience as the leading documentarian of the emerging musical genre of rock music through the pages of Rolling Stone and Life Magazine, or his experiences as a young street photographer in the still edgy corners of San Francisco, but when Jim Marshall climbed on the stage that afternoon, he knew what he was looking for and with a cool and ruthless precision, he got it. The composition is straightforward at first glance, a thoughtful and poised leader *leading*. The thick sweep of black hair, cut neat, and touched lightly by wind, sweat, and sun. Arms folded, Chavez is pictured at a very tight angle, a move that Marshall uses to bring the viewer into the intensity of emotion felt, and on display, in that moment. Framed on the diagonal by the signs and symbols of the march, and set in front of another speaker in mid-movement, Chavez's determination and will fill the frame (Figure 2.23). The viewer is close, uncomfortably so, to feel such stillness captured amid such a chaotic time and place. This is not the farm worker of Zermeño or Valdez, instead, Marshall presents an emerging leader at the precise moment that his movement has coalesced.

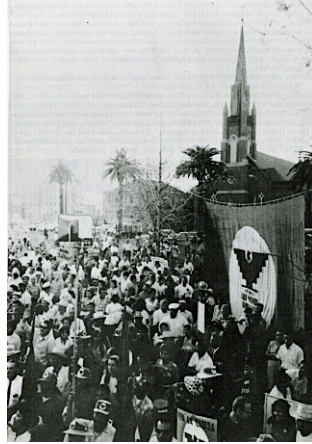


Figure 2.24. The pilgrims assembled in Sacramento. Photograph by Jon Lewis (1966).

The photographs that Lewis captured that day offer a very different point of view. Exhausted from his work as a photographer-pilgrim along the 340-mile route, he struggled with the technical and affective dimensions of his work that day; he felt nothing lined up in the frame just right. Portraiture was nearly impossible, unable to engage the physical proximity and emotional availability needed to produce a fresh take on such well-known subjects. Pilgrims, in motion, with all their signs, banners, and supporters, proved overwhelming, and it became nearly impossible for him to square up scenes that had become so intuitive to his eye and hand during the march. What Lewis captured then, speaks to his power as a documentarian, producing primarily long angle shots that bring subtle closure to the event. Exhausted, with blistered feet, and slightly damp from the day's light rain, Lewis' archive from the Sacramento events shows a march mid-launch (Figure 2.24). Hovering just above the fray, with thick, portentous clouds above, Lewis guided the viewer into the promising but uncertain future of the movement. Exasperated yet optimistic, their assembly that day signaled the storm that their victory would generate over the coming years in the agricultural industry.

Sierra Vista Camp  
Di Giorgio Fruit Corporation

Delano, California  
May 1966

In late April three women arrived at 102 Albany Street in Delano and were led to Chavez's office. Seated in the small, spare room they spoke of their experiences as vineyard workers at Sierra Vista camp, and the increasingly tense relations between workers and Di Giorgio Fruit Corporation staff. The camp was adjacent to the company headquarters, and had quickly emerged as a battleground in the post-march labor landscape, as growers like Di Giorgio increased their efforts to prevent unionization to take hold across the agricultural industry. The women were concerned with the severe scrutiny the Grape Strike pickets were receiving at the Sierra Vista camp, impacting not only their efforts to organize but also their productivity in the vineyards, work that still carried important volume and quality incentives. Was there something that could be done, they asked Chavez, to help diffuse the situation?

Working all night with his brother Richard, a carpenter, Chavez converted his 1953 Mercury station wagon into a roadside installation that became the central organizing site during the next several months as Di Giorgio fervently resisted unionization of their grape workers at their Delano vineyards (Figure 2.24). The site also found a wide audience with the women of Sierra Vista camp, many of whom visited daily, sitting or kneeling on the cardboard placed below the altar and contributing flowers, candles, photographs, and other personal effects to the installation. Part shrine, part political platform, the piece spoke to the visual legacy of the March to Sacramento that was often placed out of view.



Figure 2.25. Prayer and protest at the roadside's edge. Photograph by Jon Lewis (1966).

Stories, according to historian Patricia Nelson Limerick, are something written deep into the soil of the US West. Over time, new narratives are added and existing interpretations are revised, forming “layers and layers of accumulated human activity and thought” that can be thought of as a “strata of memory.”<sup>50</sup> This physical record of ideas and events has, over time, grown into a cache of material memory that can be read like ledger book, or register, of the human presence in the past. And, much like the material used by geologists in sedimentary rocks to measure how the earth has changed over time, the historian encounters similar challenges in her interpretation of the trace amount of organic material found in these layers of the cultural landscape. While the inorganic material provides valuable contextual clues it is this organic material—all the living, and once living stuff—that is prized for its ability to illuminate how life was experienced in a particular time and in a particular place. In this region, then, where the land has become so deeply entangled in public management and private investment—the industrial garden of the Golden State—this archive of material memory shows us that something as seemingly ordinary as a ditch along a country road, and the pilgrimages and shrines that lined it in the spring of 1966 are as elaborate in its social texture, dense in its cultural composition, and politically significant in its structure, as the soil from which it emerged.

The Chicana/o countryside, now seen, holds a revealing archive, a rich trove of material memories built into the landscape—like the roadside installation and nearby fence posts and trellises—expressing both turbulence of the historical moment it marks and the ways its historical actors found solid ground amid these sweeping changes. In fact, as indicators of economic, political, and social change, these everyday features of the natural and built environments—and the visual stories used to represent their relation to them—bring into view the ways that these rural subjects—many of whom were in the process of becoming the Chicana/o Central Valley—were both as remote from, and central to, the institutions of power that surrounded them.

The roadside installation becomes particularly evocative here because it brings into view what was often most frequently left out of view in the cultural production of the march: the women of the Grape Strike (Figure 2.25). By installing the piece across the street from the camp and corporation headquarters soon after their return as they settled into a perhaps even more grueling phase of *launching* the union for which they had earned recognition, they again looked to the non-violent visual strategies crafted on the march. The installation became the center-point to this summer activity, visited frequently by the women who worked at the Sierra Vista ranch and supporters from across the region who came to lend support to the cause.

These images were also telling in their relation to the photographic record of the site and the larger movement of which it was part. Jon Lewis was making preparations to renew his enrollment in the photography program at San Francisco State, and the roadside installation images are among the final set of photographs Lewis would create as an onsite artist-activist. And it would be a fitting final chapter for the NFWA and the visual program he helped produce during its first two years. While the strike would continue on for another three years, a series of

gains and step-backs in farmworkers' rights, by the fall of 1966 the NFWA would join formally with the Filipinos to form the United Farm Workers (UFW) and expand their operations to other sectors of the agricultural industry. By the time the Grape Strike ended in 1970, the union was experiencing deep rifts that isolated many of its earliest leaders and supporters, and an estrangement symbolized by its move from Delano to Laz Paz in 1971. While its initial move to the larger space in Delano, known as Forty Acres, was necessitated by growth, the move deep into the foothills of the Tehachapi Mountains—connecting the bases of the Sierra Nevada and Coastal Ranges south of Bakersfield—signaled the constriction underway in UFW leadership. While their cultural significance would continue to grow over the course of the twentieth century, driven by the success in legislative work, their most memorable work would remain the early period of the Grape Strike, particularly the March to Sacramento and the visual material supporting it.

This material, by Lewis and others, captures the nuanced way nature and culture intersected in mid-twentieth century California, a place where both migratory and skilled workers helped bring an agricultural empire to life. The environment proved central to the story, particularly in the grape industry, where bringing thousands of acres of crops to market took the skill of horticultural artisans. By promoting a robust visual program, the NFWA offered an important counter-point, or alternative narrative, to make place this often-invisible work into view. In the process of making this labor visible, the NFWA came to fruition as a cultural and political force in the Civil Rights era. And, by targeting grapes as the entry point, they were able to successfully place themselves in the powerful political and social discourse of this era, and distinguish themselves in their use of rural vernacular scenes.

The lineage between pilgrimage and justice claims made for a powerful and evocative unifying experience for marchers and viewers, a move further enhanced by the participatory nature of the Grape Strike boycott that gained clarity and momentum near the end of their pilgrimage. But the uses of visual material, particularly photography, to amplify the pilgrimage, were not derivative productions lifted from *Life* and *Time* magazines: the images created during this era of farm worker organizing were cultural expressions that took form in drama, signage, rallies, banners, clothing and accessories, as well as representations of actual farm work. These things were both expressions of, and generative moments in Chicana/o visual culture, images within the images that expressed the complex relationship between humans and their environment in this grand cultural landscape.

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<sup>1</sup> This image is one of several hundred images taken by photographer Jon Lewis during the National Farm Worker Association's March to Sacramento between March 17-April 10 in 1966. Lewis' original archive, including thousands of images he took during his work with the farm workers can be found at the Yale Collection of Western Americana at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University. This archive will be abbreviated as: JL Papers, Yale. The images used in this chapter are drawn from material available through the Farm Workers Documentation Project archive, a web-based initiative led by activist LeRoy Chatfield that has made over 13,000 images available to the public through digital archiving based at the University of California, San Diego. This archive will be abbreviated as: FWDP, UCSD. Additional visual material based in the United Farm Workers Papers at Wayne State University and El Teatro Campesino Papers at the University of California, Santa Barbara has greatly shaped my understanding of how photography was used during this era of farm worker organizing in California and these archives will be abbreviated as: UFW Papers, Wayne State and Teatro Papers, UCSB. Jon Lewis' images in used in this chapter can be found at:

<https://libraries.ucsd.edu/farmworkermovement/gallery/index.php?cat=16>

<sup>2</sup> Since the mid-nineteenth century, the watershed of California's Central Valley has become an increasing complex and highly managed set of natural and built features carefully designed to both enable and maximize agricultural production. For an overview of how water and soil are understood by the scientists, engineers, policy officials, and rural landowners who have helped build and maintain these systems see: Tim Palmer, *Field Guide to California Rivers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); David Carle, *Introduction to Earth, Soil and Land in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, *Highway Drainage Guidelines* (2007); "Rural Roads: A Construction and Maintenance Guide for California Landowners" (2007), University of California, Davis, Division of Agricultural And Natural Resources, Publication 8262.

<sup>3</sup> The early period of National Farm Worker Association (NFWA) and United Farm Worker (UFW) organizing has gained considerable attention from scholars and a particularly strong body of work in the field has explored the intersection of Catholic traditions, race, and social justice. See: Luis Leon, "Cesar Chavez and Mexican American Civil Religion" in *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Paul Barton, "Ya Basta! Latino/a Protestant Activism in the Chicano/a and Farm Workers Movements" in *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Mario T. García, "Religion and Chicano Movement: Católicos Por La Raza" in *Mexican American Religions: Spirituality, Activism, and Culture*, Gaston Espinosa and Mario T. García, eds. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009); Stephen R. Lloyd-Moffett, "Holy Activist, Secular Saint: Religion and the Social Activism of Cesar Chavez" in *Mexican*



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*American Religions: Spirituality, Activism, and Culture*, Gaston Espinosa and Mario T. García, eds. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Biographical focused research on NFWA/UFW cofounder Cesar Chavez remains the most widely studied facet of the mid-twentieth century farm worker movement in California. In addition to providing an exhaustive map of the leader's interests, motivations, and challenges, this extensive collection of work also provides a wealth of knowledge about the scope of activities that he and other leaders in the union supported between the formation of the NFWA in 1962 and Chavez's death in 1993. The most frequently cited of these studies include: Jacques E. Levy, *Cesar Chavez: Autobiography of La Causa* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975); Griswold del Castillo, Richard and Richard Garcia, *Cesar Chavez: A Triumph of Spirit* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995); David G. Gutierrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Randy Shaw, *Beyond the Fields: Cesar Chavez, the UFW, and the Struggle for Justice in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); Mariam Pawel, *The Union of their Dreams: Power, Hope, and Struggle in Cesar Chavez's Farm Workers Movement* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009); Frank Bardacke, *Trampling Out the Vintage: Cesar Chavez and the Two Souls of the United Farm Workers* (New York: Verso Press, 2011), and Matt Garcia, *From the Jaws of Victory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> For more on the geologic history of the Sierra Nevada see: Allan A. Schoenherr, *A Natural History of California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> John Muir, *Mountains of California* (New York: The Century Company, 1874), p.3.

<sup>7</sup> For more on the geologic history of the Central Valley see: Greg De Nevers Deborah Stanger Edelman, and Adina Merenlender, *The California Naturalist Handbook* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); David D. Alt and Donald W. Hyndman, *Roadside Geology of Northern and Central California* (Missoula, MT: Mountain Press Publishing, Company, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> For more on how geologic and ecologic processes have shaped the California watershed over time, see: David Carle, *Introduction to Earth, Soil and Land in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> C. David Whiteman, *Mountain Meteorology: Fundamentals and Applications* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 17, 105-111, 335.

<sup>10</sup> For more on the ways culture can be read in the rural American vernacular landscape, see: John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984) and John Stilgoe, *Common Landscapes of America, 1580-1845* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

<sup>11</sup> For more on the role of ranching in Spanish and Mexican California, particularly on its relation to the cultural landscape, see: David J. Weber, *The Spanish Frontier in North America* (Yale University Press, 1992) and *The Mexican Frontier, 1821-1846: The American Southwest Under Mexico* (University of New Mexico Press, 1982); Herbert Eugene Bolton, *Outpost of Empire: The Story of San Francisco* (New York: Knopf, 1931).

<sup>12</sup> Walter Prescott Webb details this phenomenon with candor and detail in *The Great Plains* (University of Texas Press, 1931), noting that while significantly more head of cattle were run in other parts of the United States in the early days of ranching culture, it was the indelible image of the Western cowboy (often drawing his styling from the Mexican heritage *vaquero*) that has placed the ranch life of the historical imagination and popular culture in the US West.

<sup>13</sup> As Richard White notes in *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012), these effects had profound effects on the settlement of California, particularly in the swift ascent of its agricultural empire in the first half of the twentieth century. Outstanding digital maps and spatial analytics related to this research can be found at the "Shaping the West" project website at the Center for Spatial and Textual Analysis, Stanford University:

<http://web.stanford.edu/group/spatialhistory/cgi-bin/site/project.php?id=997>

<sup>14</sup> For more on the cultural history of barbed wire and its impact on the development of the US West, see: Henry D. and Frances T. McCallum, *The Wire that Fenced the West* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965). For more on the ways that objects in the vernacular landscape shape human and environmental relations in the Latina/o West, particularly as tools or markers of state violence, see: Monica Muñoz Martinez, "Recuperating Histories of Violence in the Americas: Vernacular History-Making on the U.S.-Mexico Border." *American Quarterly*, Volume 66, No. 3 (September 2014).

<sup>15</sup> Michael Denning. *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (1997), pp. 259-282.

<sup>16</sup> Balderrama, Francisco E. and Raymond Rodriguez. *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s* (University of New Mexico Press, 2006), pp. 97-122.

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<sup>17</sup> Long form media coverage of the Grape Strike helped publicize the “fight in the fields” with both alternative and mainstream readers, providing more in depth coverage than typically enjoyed by short form pieces such as newspapers articles, single photograph images with limited text, and brief interviews. Photo essays such as Eugene Nelson’s *Huelga: The First Hundred Days of the Grape Strike* (Farm Worker Press, 1966) and John Gregory Dunne’s *Delano: The Story of the California Grape Strike* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967) are representative of this work. Nelson’s *Huelga* enjoyed extensive promotion in the pages of the NFWA/UFW newsletter *El Malcriado*, and Dunne’s *Delano* was initially serialized, and later reprinted, by *The Saturday Evening Post*.

<sup>18</sup> The plight of the California farm worker has long been of concern to the scholars and writers concerned with the civil rights issues in American labor. Two of the most insightful and widely cited studies, attentive to the multicultural and transnational dimensions of this labor pool, and how it has changed over time, include: Carey McWilliams, *Factories in the Fields: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in The United States* (1939) and Cletus Daniel, *Bitter Harvest: A History of California Farmworkers, 1870-1941* (UC Press, 1981).

<sup>19</sup> Further research indicates potential intersections with mainstream environmentalism in this period. While issues of toxicity and toxic discourse tend to point to the catalytic effect Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962) had on raising public awareness and action about the use of pesticides such as DDT, a review of early NFWA primary sources including the speeches and correspondence of Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta make similar claims, often based on anecdotal evidence culled from extensive conversations with farm workers and their own observations of the agricultural industry, presenting appealing and tricky evaluation issues for researchers. For an overview of Chavez and Huerta’s concerns about pesticide exposure, as well their promotion of related issues such as food security and justice, women’s health, and human rights, see: Cesar Chavez, *An Organizer’s Tale: Speeches* (New York: Penguin, 2008), ed. Ilan Stavans; Dolores Huerta, *A Dolores Huerta Reader* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2008), ed. Mario T. Garcia.

<sup>20</sup> Cartier-Bresson, Henri. *The Decisive Moment* (Paris: Verve, 1952).

<sup>21</sup> Recent scholarship on Chicana/o photography has begun to fill an important gap in our understanding of Latina/o contributions to Civil Rights era visual culture. See: Colin Gunckel, “The Chicano/a Photographic: Art as Social Practice in the Chicano Movement” (*American Quarterly* 2015) and Randy J. Ontiveros, *In the Spirit of a New People: The Cultural Politics of the Chicano Movement* (NYU Press 2014). For more on the development, historical uses, and aesthetics of Chicana/o photography, see: Chon Noriega, curator. *From the West: Chicano Narrative Photography* (Mexican Museum of San Francisco, 1995) and Ruben Ortiz-Torres, curator, *MEX/LA: “Mexican” Modernism(s) in Los Angeles, 1930-1985* (Museum of Latin American Art, Long Beach, California, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> The chronology of March and the nuances of its orchestration are gathered from a wide range of archival sources and secondary scholarship, a kind of tapestry or collage of moments, that comprised the event itself, as well as the larger Grape Strike it aimed to catalyze. For more first-hand accounts on the March, including interviews and supporting material such as organizing notes, flyers, logistics worksheets, and audio recordings of planning meetings, see: JL Papers, Yale.; Series JLevy Papers, Yale, and Teatro Papers, UCSB. For more on Lewis’ reflections on the March in the early years following its completion, see: Lewis, Jon. “From this Earth... of the Delano Grape Strike” (1969). And, for popular and scholarly appraisals of the March, see: Street, Richard Steven. *Jon Lewis: Photographs of the California Grape Strike* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 2013) and Jacques E. Levy, *Cesar Chavez: Autobiography of La Causa* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975).

<sup>23</sup> For more on the creative atmosphere of the NFWA headquarters, a kind of live-work space for many cultural producers during this era of farm worker organizing, see: Luis Valdez and El Teatro Campesino, *Luis Valdez—Early Works: Actos, Bernabe and Pensamiento Serpentino* (1990); Luis Valdez. *Actos* (1971); Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez. *El Teatro Campesino: Theatre in the Chicano Movement* (1994 University of Texas Press); Richard Steven Street, *Jon Lewis: Photographs of the California Grape Strike* (University of Nebraska Press 2013).

<sup>24</sup> See: Series IX, Box 19, Folder 404, JL Papers, Yale.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Steven Street notes in his biography on Lewis, that Kennedy’s visit to Delano for the Senate Subcommittee meeting proved to be highly influential for both emerging leaders, paving the way for a productive set of relations over the next several years. The visit was also important to Lewis, resulting in extensive use of his photographs that day in the pages of *El Malcriado*. For more on this encounter, see: Richard Steven Street, *Jon Lewis: Photographs of the California Grape Strike* (2013), pp. 185-191, 411 and Jacques Levy, *Cesar Chavez: Autobiography of La Causa* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975), pp. 201-205.

<sup>26</sup> See: Series I, Boxes 5-6, 47; Series IV, Box 19, JLevy Papers, Yale.

<sup>27</sup> See: Series IX, Cassettes A7247-7249, Teatro Papers, UCSB.

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<sup>28</sup> For more on the history of this genre of photography, and its important use documenting the social changes that captured, and perhaps often contributed to, during the twentieth century, see: Arthur Rothstein, *Documentary Photography* (1986).

<sup>29</sup> The role of photography in Depression era American life has been well covered by scholars with foci as far ranging as the medium's role in advocating for social change, as a political tool to promote government intervention, and its perhaps unintended effects of aestheticizing environmental catastrophe and human suffering. The following criticism and images have had the most influence in shaping my view of these issues: Lawrence W. Levine, "The Historian and the Icon: Photography and the History of the American People in the 1930s and 1940s"; Alan Trachtenberg "From Image to Story: Reading the File" in *Documenting America, 1935-1943* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Maurice Berger, *FSA: The Illiterate Eye: Photographs from the Farm Security Administration* (Hunter College Exhibit Catalog, 1985); Lawrence W. Levine "American Culture and the Great Depression," *Yale Review* (1985); Roy Stryker and Nancy Wood, *In This Proud Land: America 1935-1943 as Seen in the FSA Photographs* (New York Graphic Society, 1973).

<sup>30</sup> Several recent studies have revisited to Lange's place in the American photography canon, including: Anne Whiston Spirn, *Daring to Look: Dorothea Lange's Photographs and Reports from the Field* (University of Chicago Press, 2008) and Linda Gordon, *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits* (2009).

<sup>31</sup> Dorothea Lange and Paul E. Taylor, *American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion* (1939).

<sup>32</sup> For another important photographic essay collection in this era of farm worker organizing, see: Paul Fusco and George D. Horowitz, *La Causa: The California Grape Strike* (Collier Books, 1970). For a critical discussion of the wide use of photography in Chicana/o culture, see: "Many Wests" by Chon A. Noriega and "Negotiated Frontiers" by Jennifer A. Gonzalez in *From the West: Chicano Narrative Photography* (Exhibit essays and catalog, The Mexican Museum, San Francisco, 1995) and Richard Steven Street, *Everyone Had Cameras: Photography and Farmworkers in California, 1850-2000* (Minnesota, 2008).

<sup>33</sup> See: *El Malcriado*, January-May 1966 issues, FWDP, UCSD.

<sup>34</sup> The rise of Visalia as a major town along the eastern edge of the Sierra Nevada is greatly understudied and further attention to materials located at the Special Collections office of the Visalia Historical Society is needed. For the most comprehensive extant work on the region, albeit to the west at Tulare Lake, see: William L. Preston, *Vanishing Landscapes: Land and Life in the Tulare Lake Basin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

<sup>35</sup> Scholarship addressing the political context and strategies of the NFWA/UFW form another major arm of the extensive body of literature on the organization. Among the work that has been most influential to my thinking on issues related to political strategy, social network analysis, and organizational structure, see: Marshall Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins: Leadership, Organization, and Strategy in the California Farm Worker Movement* (Oxford University Press, 2009); Miriam Patwal, *The Union of Their Dreams: Power, Hope, and Struggle in Cesar Chavez's Farm Worker Movement* (Bloomsbury 2009).

<sup>36</sup> For more on the uses of photography in Civil Rights movement organizing, see: Elizabeth Abel, *Signs of the Times: The Visual Politics of Jim Crow* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), Maurice Berger, *For All the World to See: Visual Culture and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010). Martin A. Berger, *Seeing Through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011). For more on the how documentary photography has changed over time across the twentieth century, see: John Berger, *Understanding a Photograph* (New York: Aperture, 2013). Fred Ritchin, *Bending the Frame: Photojournalism, Documentary, and the Citizen* (New York: Aperture, 2013). Andy Grundberg, "The Machine and the Garden: Photography, Technology, and the End of Innocent Space" in *The Crisis of the Real: Writings on Photography* (New York: Aperture, 1999), and John Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye* (New York: Museum of Modern Art exhibit and catalog, 1966; reprinted 2007).

<sup>37</sup> For more on the antecedents to Chavez's move to Delano, particularly his early organizing efforts with the CSO in East Los Angeles and San Jose, see: Gabriel Thompson, *America's Social Arsonist: Fred Ross and Grassroots Organizing in the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016).

<sup>38</sup> See: Series IV, Box 19, JLevy Papers, Yale.

<sup>39</sup> See: Series I, Box 6, JLevy Papers, Yale.

<sup>40</sup> For more on the significance of the Grape Strike in early NFWA/UFW organizing, see: Matt Garcia, *From the Jaws of Victory: The Triumph and Tragedy of Cesar Chavez and the Farm Worker Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

<sup>41</sup> Richard Steven Street, *Jon Lewis: Photographs of the California Grape Strike* (University of Nebraska Press, 2013), pp. 179-180.

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<sup>42</sup> For more on how the US Border Patrol shaped this and earlier generations of farm labor relations, particularly the use of labor contractors in shaping migration circuits and the use of violence to suppress uprisings among agricultural workers, see: Kelly Lytle Hernandez, *Migra!: A History of the US Border Patrol* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

<sup>43</sup> The long form journalism of the period provides insight into how these experiences were felt at the vineyard level: Eugene Nelson, *Huelga: The First Hundred Days of the Grape Strike*; John Gregory Dunne, *Delano*.

<sup>44</sup> The grape industry consists of three main categories, most of which is grown commercially in this increasingly consolidated area of the lower San Joaquin Valley surrounding Delano: fresh or “table” grapes, raisins, and alcoholic beverages including wine and spirits such as cognac and brandy. For more information on how the grape industry has changed over time, see: Paul F. Stars and Peter Goin, *Field Guide to California Agriculture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010). And, for more information on how the raisin grape in particular functions, see: L.P. Christensen, “Raisin Grape Varieties” in *Raisin Production Manual*, University of California, Agricultural and Natural Resources Publication 3393 (2000).

<sup>45</sup> Donald Worster, “Transformation of the Earth: Toward an Argoecological Perspective in History” (*Journal of American History*, 1990).

<sup>46</sup> William Cronon, “Modes of Prophecy and Production: Placing Nature in History” (*Journal of American History*, 1990).

<sup>47</sup> See: Series IV, Box 19, JLevy Papers, Yale.

<sup>48</sup> Due to its mainstream success and its resonance at the popular level in Chicana/o culture, El Teatro Campesino was one of the earliest cultural producers to gain wide critical acclaim and coverage of their work, including: “The Talk of the Town: Actos” (*The New Yorker* August 19, 1967); Luis Valdez, “El Teatro Campesino” in *Aztlán: An Anthology of Mexican American Literature* (Random House 1972), eds. Luis Valdez and S. Steiner; Yvonne Yarbrow-Bejarano. “From *Acto* to *Mito*: A Critical Appraisal of the Teatro Campesino” (1979).

<sup>49</sup> See: Series IV, Box 19, JLevy Papers, Yale.

<sup>50</sup> Patricia Nelson Limerick, *Something in the Soil: Legacies and Reckonings in the New West* pp. 13-14, 28.

## Chapter 2 Murals and the Chicana/o Vernacular Landscape



Figure 3.1. Untitled mural at Del Rey (1968) by Antonio Bernal.

A woman, in a full-length rose-colored skirt, takes a wide stance, planting the soles of her leather sandals firmly in the ground (Figure 3.1). Her right forearm is fixed squarely on her hip and the curved edge of her sword cuts a clean line ahead, reinforced by her sharp brow and steady gaze. Her left hand touches the lower end of her bandolier, the leather sash of bullet cartridges that drape across her white cotton blouse. Set with an oversized straw hat, she establishes a strong feminine presence at the front of this figurative sequence, a progression otherwise defined by masculine sartorial hues, shapes, and patterns. Although this march appears

to have stopped—as the long line of boots and oxfords behind her indicate—movement continues as a light breeze sweeps across the woman’s clothing and hair, guiding the eye back across the procession and the small red flag that flies above it.<sup>1</sup>

Dressed in their iconic uniforms of dissent, these nineteenth and twentieth century revolutionaries combine to produce a sort of rhythm of political resistance through the variety and proportion of their lines and shapes. At front, the *soldadera* reprises her fierce care-taking role as a soldier-military camp servant, guiding this group of distinguished men into the heart of the cultural and political battles that defined America in the late 1960s. Francisco “Pancho” Villa and Emiliano Zapata follow, their dual double bandoliers crossed prominently at the chest, accentuating the ammunition for the field rifles used in their cavalry attacks, as well as the wide-brimmed *sombreros* needed to shield them from such long days spent on horseback in the open country.<sup>2</sup>

The arrangement continues right, to the lithe figure of Joaquin Murrieta, the infamous anti-hero of the California Gold Rush (1848-1855). Perhaps mythical, or a composite figure of numerous Latin American heritage vigilante-bandits roaming the gold fields of the southern Sierra Nevada, Murrieta signals a smooth and brutal poise in his posture as his side swept *rebozo* (shawl) exposes the broad hand placed across his revolver.<sup>3</sup> Standing guard across the front half of the mural, these four figures present an intimidating—and inspiring—repetition of leather, straw, wood, cotton, and metal. While this might be the relatively humble costuming of rural combatants, the subtle complexity of its geometry speaks to the aesthetic force held in something as small as a sash or its polished rifle bullets. With the four figures taking wide, grounded positions—their feet, shoulders, and hats in close contact—the size, shape, and arrangement

combine to create a sense of stylized unity that speaks to their status as heroic figures in the agrarian struggles that would come to define the US/Mexico borderlands.<sup>4</sup>

Armed with the United Farm Workers Association eagle flag, grape pruning shears, flannel shirt, and neatly cut and parted hair, Cesar Chavez leads the figures in the second half of the panel, a move that places the Central Valley farm workers at center *in*—and inheritors *of*—this illustrious rural borderlands visual history.<sup>5</sup> His location just to the edge of center in this composition also gestures to the symbolic weight that these earlier rural leaders held and his position as a bridge between these figures and his political contemporaries featured in the second half of the mural.

The use of red as a focal point conveys his passionate commitment to this struggle, a commitment that was sometimes in question among UFW leaders and members during this phase of farm worker organizing due to his promotion of non-violent strategies such as fasting and the table grape boycott. A bright red flag, raised high over a bright red patterned shirt is anything but unobtrusive, however, and serves as a move by Bernal to link Chavez with the more overtly radical tactics of the next two men in the panel.

Known for a more fiery brand of African American and Chicana/o activism, New Mexico land reformer Reies Tijerina and Malcolm X—stylized here as a Black Panther—provide aesthetic and political balance to the more centrist aimed political and visual strategies of Chavez and Martin Luther King, Jr., seen here at the end of the panel. Placing these leaders in such close contact then, with Malcolm X's hand on Tijerina's shoulder, reveals Bernal's clever use of scale and proportion. Where Malcolm X might tower over this group with his imposing stature, instead he achieves a sense of proportion through the dark blue and black stripes of a casual sports coat.

With t-shirt un-tucked, the elongated lines make him *feel* taller than his three contemporaries, a physicality that is reiterated by the long, thick barrel of his semi-automatic rifle.<sup>6</sup>

The *soldadera* and Chavez, in turn, become almost larger than life through a lighter touch: as a set of complementary shades of red and brown, with an outsized display of material culture, they express both strength and warmth, a fashioning of political resistance that is both accessible and aspirational. Through these expressive qualities—where a hat is not merely a hat but instead an object imbued with deep cultural and political messages from a far off time and place—this vernacular material becomes something far more than its actual functions suggest, elevating its visual value. The hats in Bernal’s mural, then, do not simply act as a shield to the overhead sun; they also evoke a sense of grandeur in a cultural landscape that otherwise might appear bleak, parched, and rather mundane. Instead, as presented, the hat becomes part of these revolutionaries’ sartorial tools, used to lead the Central Valley farm workers, and their contemporaries in their quest for Civil Rights. Cultural and visual difference, then, strike a fine balance in Bernal’s figurative sequence, serving as poignant and recognizable images amid the political turbulence of the Civil Rights era. In other words, the heroine, and her accompanying heroes, might be under attack, their forward progress thwarted, but here in Del Rey in 1968, they *look* more vital and strong-willed than ever.

What happened next—as the extensive body of research on Chavez and the UFW indicates—serves as much as a cautionary tale as an exemplary one. The spirit of resistance expressed by Bernal in his mural at Del Rey captures the strategic idealism that guided this particular moment of farm worker organizing in California’s rural interior.<sup>7</sup> The key architects of the March to Sacramento in 1966—including UFW co-founders Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta, and UFW strike captain and El Teatro Campesino founder and director Luis Valdez—



drew widely from earlier non-violent organizing strategies seen across the US South throughout the first half of the decade, a move that made their cause more widely visible and placed the farm workers within the larger visual discourse of rural civil rights advocacy. This move, a kind of embodied call for equitable treatment in American society, was waged over a twenty-five day journey from their organizing home in Delano to the state capitol in Sacramento, and helped them gain much needed traction in the slippery terrain of American labor politics.

Gaining this foothold was no small victory: the contract negotiated with the Schenley Corporation was their first major “win” in the larger Grape Strike (1965-1970) and produced a sense of optimism that industry-wide changes were possible despite decades of thwarted negotiations with growers and distributors. However, just two years after the March to Sacramento, when Bernal’s figures continued the journey into Del Rey, enough had changed in farm worker organizing to suggest that the mural asserted a sense of optimism that was waning among its general membership.

A major cause of this emerging rift, or fissure, was the union’s increasing support for a table grape boycott that was aimed at middle-class consumers, often in urban areas, who the leadership imagined could become allies through their buying practices. In many ways this was true: boycotting non-union grown and harvested table grapes led to high profile battles with major retailers like Safeway and produced a rich and productive body of solidarity work in cities and suburbs across the country, opening important conversations about fair labor practices, pollution, and food justice.<sup>8</sup>

But, by 1968, this attention to the boycott was increasingly read among rank and file union members as privileging the mainstream audience, as well as a de-emphasis of the activity deemed most politically significant and personally meaningful to the workers themselves: the

roadside strike. Although organizers valued—and implemented—both strategies simultaneously throughout most of the Grape Strike, the expansion of consumer-focused activity via the boycott proved controversial among local supporters who favored the production-focused work that guided the early campaigns. The emotional and strategic possibilities of *huelga*-centered activity were tremendously appealing to the local audience and illustrate the continued sense of urgency the farmworkers and their closest supporters felt regarding their situation and the tensions that emerged post-march for the UFW as they attempted to promote the growth of both their union membership and a broad group of political allies.

Bernal's placement of Chavez at center, with the UFW eagle flag flying high above, can be seen as a precursor of sorts to the series of organizational changes that would take place post-March across all areas of union activity, particularly its creative enterprises. These shifts often had aesthetic and spatial dimensions as the organization, and its cultural producers, outgrew the scale and scope of their initial set of makeshift headquarters in Delano. El Teatro Campesino's relocation in 1967 from the living room of the Grey House to their own facilities in Del Rey thus symbolizes the artistic and political challenges produced by such explosive growth. As founding director Luis Valdez points out in "Notes on Chicano Theatre," farm worker theatre was "born in the Huelga, but the very Huelga would have killed it had we not moved 60 miles north of Delano" given that "a struggle like the Huelga needs every person it can get to serve its immediate goals in order to survive."<sup>9</sup> As an incubator of the visual message, the Grey House (and Teatro's dynamic presence in it), facilitated a kind of seamless transition between art and activism that resonated across the young organization's diverse audiences. Serving as both strike captain and theatre director, Valdez was able to provide a centralized image as an

artist/organizer, a role that shifted more decidedly towards playwright and director when Teatro sought new space in Del Rey to accommodate their own growing profile in the theatre scene.

Establishing a new home in Del Rey, El Centro Campesino Cultural allowed Teatro the much needed time and space to explore “things beyond the Huelga” including the Vietnam War, educational reform, public health, racial discrimination, and cross-cultural solidarity movements. It also provided the time and space from the immediate, day-to-day logistics of the farm worker movement, allowing for more focused attention on the aesthetic dimensions of their politically informed productions. This work formed the canon of their second major productive period, including the production of their first film (adapted from Corky Gonzalez’s *I am Joaquin*), training their first cohort of professional actors, and writing and performing an extensive set of new material. Installing Bernal’s work on a prominent exterior wall at El Centro Campesino Cultural mirrored the expanded political and social messages that were appearing on Teatro’s stage during this time, as they took on an increasingly regional, national, and international performance schedule. As a visual cue then, to the local audience that continued to serve as their inspiration and impetus, Bernal’s mural shows local farm worker organizing in step with a wider set of movements, messaging the centrality of agrarian struggles to past, present, and future dissent in the Americas.<sup>10</sup>

The placement and thematics of the mural also held significance geographically and spatially: Del Rey’s location between their former headquarters (and spiritual home) in Delano and the capital of the grape industry in Fresno placed them squarely in the center of what was becoming known as the “grape belt,” the particularly fertile region of the lower San Joaquin Valley that formed the first section of their pilgrimage to Sacramento in 1966. One major, and often overlooked corollary to the successes of the grape industry, and the ongoing battle to

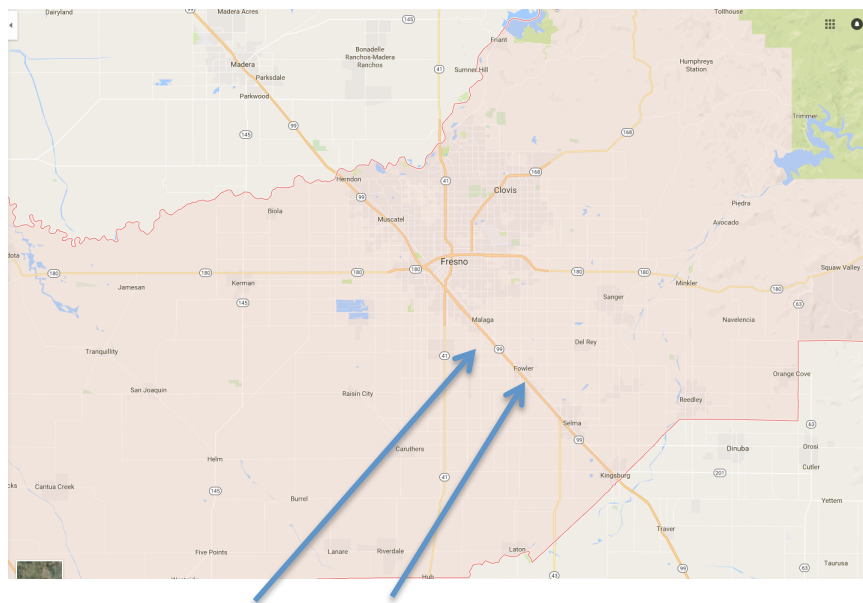
improve its labor system, is the set of changes it brought to the built environment. If the first chapter of this dissertation argued for the criticality of the environmental knowledge of grape workers, this chapter will attend to a related element: the infrastructural environment that enabled the grape industry. As California's rural corridor grew in tandem with the agricultural economy during the twentieth century, a massive and intricate set of roadways, waterways, and other transportation infrastructure was expanded to manage the flow of people and products, as well as the water that was essential to their growth. This was particularly true in Fresno, and the small farm worker towns and settlements like Del Rey that surrounded it, where grape production grew from a small local endeavor in the late nineteenth century into a startling array of globally distributed products in less than half a century.

The cost of making table grapes, raisins, wine, and brandy at that scale wasn't cheap to establish, or maintain, though, and the effects of the necessary capital investment were felt far beyond the vineyards of the lower San Joaquin Valley. In the built environment, these challenges manifested in a series of designs that sought to address the social—and aesthetic—problems that had emerged related to housing and community development. The initiatives, centered in the period between the Great Depression and the long Civil Rights era, were led by stakeholders as diverse as federal architects and planners, state housing authorities, and local artist collectives and would play a major role in changing how greater Fresno would look, feel, and function during the twentieth century. The projects would reach across race and class, extending deep into the cultural landscape of the region including farm labor camps, indoor and outdoor malls, sculpture, fountains, walkways, and murals, offering a unique archive of the social, political, and economic tensions that emerged during this pivotal moment of urbanization in this quintessential rural American environment.

Perhaps it was in anticipation of this growth, or a shrewd observation of what was taking shape around them, but the decision by the National Farm Workers Association—the precursor to the UFW—to establish roots for a political and social movement along this often-invisible corridor in the California countryside proved invaluable. By the late 1960s, the Central Valley was enjoying the fruits of postwar expansion, and its population grew quickly. Although the union would struggle to gain widespread changes to the agricultural labor system itself, its cause had become widely visible, and a small but fervent group of Chicana/o cultural producers had emerged to help extend its message. And, as a result of changing social and economic conditions, this group of Mexican heritage artists and activists came of age with better educational and work opportunities than previous generations.

In this chapter, I argue that vernacular objects—like Bernal’s mural at Del Rey—serve as critical records of Chicana/o environmental history and movement politics in the Fresno area during the Civil Rights era. They offer rare glimpses into the processes of spatial formation from which they emerged—land, political economy, transportation—as well as the place-making practices that informed their creation—landscape, narrative, imagery, and art in a vernacular key. These histories—of how large scale *space* is made and re-made over time in the natural and built environments (spatial formation) and the localized responses to its form, function, and logic (place-making)—find a ready locale in the greater Fresno area. The Fresno region has been too-easily passed over by researchers, particularly in terms of its rise during the twentieth century as the cultural and economic center of California’s vast agricultural empire. While excellent research has examined the social and economic history of Mexican heritage farm workers in the larger region of the Central Valley—correctly identifying the *campesino* as the primary rural subject in this cultural landscape, a topic I explored in Chapter 1 through the use of visual culture

by the NFWA in the March to Sacramento (1966)—a more specific gap exists in our understanding of how other rural Mexican heritage subjects such as students, mothers, children, young adults, and a growing number of middle class and upper middle class professionals experienced and responded to the vast changes taking place around them. The story told in this chapter, then, offers a critical account of how Chicana/o Fresno took shape in a particularly fertile moment of political organizing between 1968-1978 and why some of the best evidence documenting the key events shaping this history are found, not in the city, but in the rural vernacular landscape. To pursue this line of inquiry, we might well pursue another mural, one produced in aesthetic dialogue with Bernal’s work and the larger tradition of Mexican-heritage political murals—but also out of a distinctly telling set of contexts. To find this mural, we must head south of Del Rey just a few miles, to another grape town: Parlier.



Del Rey Parlier

Figure 3.2. Map of Parlier and Del Rey, California.

## The Parlier Migrant Center



Figure 3.3. Untitled mural at Parlier (1978) by Mujeres Muralistas del Valle. Photograph by Ester Hernandez.

Early one summer morning in 1978, a plastic landscape post was set in the soil of the Parlier Migrant Center. As the sun broke over the Sierra Nevada and cast soft light across the lower Central Valley, the second post was planted sixty feet away. As one man held the aluminum chalk reel at the first stake, a second man unlocked the safety clamp and pulled the line across the width of the northern courtyard, placing its hook at the base of the other stake. Locking the reel into place to create a taut line between the stakes, the first man lifted the line slowly, allowing it to snap sharply against the soil, creating a light cloud of chalk.

A few moments later, a thin blue line of chalk was visible on the soil. The men—along with eight female artists from the Fresno area who were on site for the installation of their mural—then set additional stakes at four foot intervals along the chalk line. Once the stakes were installed, they worked in pairs to dig three-foot-deep post holes that they filled with six inches of

gravel. Mixing cement with sand, gravel, and water in a wheelbarrow, they then worked inward from the end posts to fill each hole with wet concrete, stirring each with a stick to remove pockets of air. The anchored posts were then reinforced with wooden support beams on two sides and checked frequently with a level throughout the day to ensure they set evenly.

Late in the afternoon, as the farm workers returned to the camp, the group prepared to hang the fifteen-panel plywood mural the women had painted in Fresno and coated with a waterproof seal. Two large tarps were laid at the base of the wooden posts and the panels were spread out face down in narrative order. To join the mural panels, 2x4s were secured along the top, middle, and bottom of each panel with nails. Smaller pieces of wood were used to create cleats, or reinforcements, at each panel joint. After nearly six months of work, the massive mural was ready to be hung.<sup>11</sup>

The Parlier mural project (Figure 3.3) began in November 1977 when artist Cecilia Aranaydo was approached by Fernando Hernandez to participate in a mural project sponsored by La Brocha del Valle, a Chicano arts and culture organization that had been active in the Fresno area since 1974. Led by Hernandez, founder Ernie Palomino, Salvador Garcia, and Francisco Barrio, La Brocha quickly established a series of art workshops, performances, and public art projects—driven by grants from the National Institute for the Humanities (NIH) and National Endowment for the Arts (NEA)—and incorporated as a non-profit in 1976.<sup>12</sup> But wall space was hard to find, as was support from local arts and culture organizations, and the group found itself in the tricky position of stitching together small local grants to support the larger set of programming they were interested in.

One such grant came that fall in 1977, with the stipulation that the work be produced by a group of women artists. While La Brocha had worked with women on some of their activities,



mural production had always been directed by the four men. The grant created an opportunity for women artists active in the Fresno arts and culture scene to produce a large scale public project. Aranaydo, widely respected in the community for her work in visual culture and Chicana/o student organizing at Fresno State, was their first call: *Would she be interested? Could other Chicanas in the community join her?*

It was a simple enough a proposal, met with all the excitement one might imagine coming to a young artist-activist eager to get her message out into the kind of wide view that comes with producing large scale public work. During the winter and spring in 1978, Aranaydo worked with Sylvia Figueroa, Lupe Gonzalez, Earnestine Silva, Tomasa Cruz, Helen Gonzales, Cecilia Rico, and Theresa Vasquez on the fifteen-paneled piece that would become the Parlier Camp mural. Hung along the walls of La Brocha's small space in downtown Fresno during its production, the mural relied on support from its affiliated community groups, including a host of students from area afterschool programs, providing a direct link to the Chicana/o youth pictured throughout the mural. The women also relied on consultations from other artists to help develop the pictorial narrative and technical skills required to produce a piece of this scale, creating around them a vibrant workshop-like atmosphere of multi-generational artists and artists-in-training.

Like most murals produced during the formative period of Chicana/o art from 1965-1985, or, the period of "resistance and affirmation," this mural would follow a familiar form: a chronological pictorial narrative tracing the journey from Mexico's ancient past to its Chicana/o present, marking the key people, places, and aesthetic traditions found along the way.<sup>13</sup> The size of the work and the scale of the narratives presented offer a wealth of information about how artists in this generation, and the audiences that viewed their work, created a sort of cultural history on concrete—or in this case plywood—that offers insights into how they imagined both

their place in the past and their presence in a future built upon land, labor, and belonging.

The town of Parlier itself comes into material being in this mural. As the earliest known Chicana mural from the Central Valley Chicana/o mural scene, the piece also offers important insights into how these young Mexican heritage women processed an important moment in their political consciousness. Murals painted on the mundane surfaces of the vernacular landscape like walls and fences—rather than the cathedral or palace frescoes of Michelangelo or Rivera—say as much about *where* this visual material was produced as it does about who produced it. The rural plywood mural installed at a labor camp is both a part of these mural-making traditions through its content—what Aranaydo likens to “an historical lineup” of Chicana/o figures and traditions—and apart from it—through its relative distance from the leading centers of production.

### **Modern Views of an Ancient Past**

In the opening panels of the mural at Parlier, the sun is shown setting on the empires of Mesoamerica as Spanish *conquistador* Hernan Cortes steps into the foreground of the scene. He is framed by a tropical bird—the kind he would have likely seen when he and his men arrived from Cuba to the Mayan held Yucatan Peninsula in 1519—and the agave they surely would have cut through during their two-year trek through the interior to the Aztec strong-hold at Tenochtitlan. Symbolically located in the shadows stands La Malinche, the woman who would take on a frequently-depicted set of roles during her life with Cortes: translator, lover, and mother. Looking forward, at a slight angle towards the viewer, these two figures mark the moment where old and new worlds collide and create, hurling the past through a mystical land of corn, copal, and fiery hearts, and into the Revolution. With one hand on her hip, and the other on her rifle, the familiar figure of the *soldadera* is seen underneath a canopy of stars and the full glow of a harvest moon. In a layering of organic and geometric shapes flowing down from the

mountain peak that frames the top of the scene, modernity creeps into the rural landscape as orchards, colonial archways, and the flag of the nation convene behind the Revolutionary heroine. But her soldiers, and the camp she serves, is curiously out of view; instead she is presented in the foreground flanked by a heady and prickly stand of *nopal* paddles. Rescaling the human figures to match these rich elements from the natural and built environment points suggests a kind of balance among nature, built environment, and human action places in a historical memory that is at once shadowy and magnificent.

The aesthetic underpinnings of this representation of Mexico's move from an ancient society to a modern one have its strongest roots in the Mexican mural tradition that flourished following the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920). And this is no coincidence, given the intense attention given to aesthetics post-Revolution. These concerns—the linkage between Mexican history and Mexican identity—would play out in their most powerful form in the public works of the internationally acclaimed muralist Diego Rivera (along with other major muralists of the period), and the themes would play a major role in shaping subsequent generations of muralists, including those in the Fresno scene.

Born in 1886 in Guanajuato, Mexico, Diego Rivera came to Mexico City at the age of ten to begin his artistic training at the San Carlos Academy of Fine Arts. At the oldest arts institute in the Americas, Rivera was exposed to a classical painting program, and by 1907, he had been awarded a major travel fellowship by the Mexican government to study in Europe. He began in Barcelona and Madrid, exploring his interests in the Spanish Baroque through work by El Greco and Velasquez, but after a year moved to Paris to experiment in post-Impressionism. Spending time with Picasso, Gauguin, Matisse, and Cezanne proved fruitful, and by 1910 he was experimenting with the emerging movement of cubism. This form became particularly appealing

for Rivera during this formative period of his training in Paris because it allowed him, among many other things, to explore simple, everyday objects from multiple angles and vantage points. To really *know* a guitar, in other words, one must break it up and reassemble it to reveal things that are out of view in a more direct representation of it. Through abstraction, or, the use of an alternative architecture, the shape of its sound became clearer.

This early work in the more sculptural wings of Modernism sweeping across Europe would prove to be influential for Rivera—if short-lived. During his visit home to Mexico in 1910, the Revolution erupted and he was deeply affected by the ensuing political and social storms. He would soon return to Paris—where he had found a home with Russian painters who were equally affected by their own country’s political upheavals—and spend the duration of the Revolution (1910-1920) in Europe, traveling to Italy in 1920-21. What he missed during this turbulent decade marking the end of President Diaz’s administration—a period of intense consolidation of land through the hacienda system known as the *Porfiriato* (1876-1911)—were a series of coups, uprisings, occupations, resignations, revolts, and counter-revolts across the nation’s diverse cultural landscape.

The conflict in Mexico would come to a head during Rivera’s trip to Italy in 1920-21, with the election of President Obregon in October 1920. By then an established painter, Rivera was deeply inspired by the scale and narrative power of the Italian Renaissance frescoes, which would also make their way into his mural aesthetic and the inspired conversations he would have with other cultural producers upon his return to Paris. Perhaps most notable was his time spent with David Alfaro Siqueiros—a muralist himself—a brief but formative set of encounters that would foster dreams of a return to Mexico. With the end of the Revolution and the desire of the new administration to present symbols of national heritage and unity in public spaces, the dream

arrived. And after nearly two decades of experimentation in art school and Europe, Rivera returned home with a complexly realist style, and produced a series of acclaimed murals in the 1920s in public space in Mexico. These works defined that era of artistic production, and they shaped the works of Mexican heritage artists for the next six decades.<sup>14</sup>

Much like the murals he viewed in grand cathedrals of Florence, Rivera's first set of murals addressed the sweeping stories of creation and the challenges of society. But his interest in indigenous culture and his longstanding engagement with political critique, drew Rivera specifically to the narrative and aesthetic heritage of Mexico, providing copious references to rural life, indigenous culture, and Spanish colonization. By visualizing the historical narrative of the state—and the agrarian struggles that defined it—Rivera asserted that the everyday should be represented in public life, creating a bridge between traditional life (and aesthetic practices) and the European formalism that was promoted in art schools and government fellowship programs. He blended an indigenous color palate and local themes with techniques drawn from the finest European training, powerfully figuring the themes of cultural fusion and progress that he and the other major muralists of the period were charged with promoting in the commissions they received to paint large-scale murals along the walls of post-Revolution government buildings, palaces, and schools.

Rivera's turn to realism became a productive space to wrestle with the challenge of visual representation of the story of ancient and modern Mexico—and to do so in explicitly political terms. This was important because the political victories of the Revolution were only the beginning of the battles underway for the newly reorganized state. Perhaps even more fraught was the challenge of creating a sense of unity across such a large and diverse space as Mexico, a space that was not deeply divided along linguistic, geographic, and social lines. The murals

produced in public buildings in Mexico in the 1920s aimed to create a kind of common language for the population, a sort of shared identity in difference. The bold political move of the Revolution required an equally bold aesthetic one, inextricably linking identity, culture, and architecture in modern Mexico. The murals were thus accessible both visually and conceptually: the grandeur of culture is on display as *Mexican* culture rises from the dramatic natural landscapes to create Aztec and Mayan pyramids, bustling factories, rich folk traditions, and sophisticated cultural institutions.<sup>15</sup>

With land redistribution at the crux of the national agenda, Mexican realism became an important tool for post-Revolution artists to represent the power and intensity of these kinds of cultural and environmental changes.<sup>16</sup> Coming just after the initial break from classical tradition through post-Impressionism and just before abstract expressionism coalesced in modern art, Mexican realism drew from the accessible pictorial methods found in genre painting, particularly portraiture, history, and still life, to refigure the landscapes, material culture, and people that had been long standing touchstones. This iconography was then supplemented with the images of the new nation to make visible at large scale the parts of Mexican history and culture that the artists and the new administration wanted to bring into focus: indigenous and multicultural heritage, the connection between rural and urban environments, and relationships between science, technology, and traditional knowledge. These themes, and the style and techniques that powered them, would serve as the direct ancestral visual vocabulary for the muralists of the Chicano/a movement.



Figure 3.4. Diego Rivera, South Wall from *History of Mexico*, Palacio Nacional de Mexico (1929-1935).

In this panel from *The History of Mexico* (1929-1935), the role of rural culture in Mexican culture is particularly vibrant. High atop the panel, against a molten sun and bustling factories, Karl Marx delivers a passionate directive to workers, as the Communist Manifesto drapes, scroll like into a foursquare of scientific research, backroom political deals, nightlife, and high society. A hammer, atop a cycle, against a red swath of fabric pull the eye right and initially drift down the column of the factory worker's blue overalls and his gesture to dissenting masses that surround him before being pulled hard left to Marx's pointed instruction: look to the countryside and the apartments, factories, and dams that stream from its tidy orchard rows (Figure 3.4).

Evoking this sense of grandeur in the everyday landscape of Revolution era Mexico can be seen elsewhere in this panel, particularly through Rivera's use of red tones. Echoing the political agenda expressed at the top of the mural with the play on the Soviet flag and Marxist thought, the large Huelga banner at the center right of the piece becomes a kind of secondary focal point, carrying the viewer's eye down the composition and into an agrarian scene set with an oversized set of farmworkers and mounted revolutionaries. A generous use of rural sartorial traditions—the bandolier, sombreros, farm tools—affirms the significance of these sites and this

work in the new political state. If rural dissent here is about being seen and being heard in the lower portion of the panel, its culmination comes in a third use of red, this time in the bright sweater set of Cristina Kahlo. With her sister Frida seated just behind her, these two women lead a group of children in instruction, alternatively looking to printed material and the performance of the man kneeling before them. Guns might be drawn immediately behind Cristina—with the campesinos caught between—but the women remain focused on the task ahead.



Figure 3.5. West Wall from *History of Mexico*, Palacio Nacional de Mexico (1929-1935) by Diego Rivera.

In this second panel, one can see another set of visual vocabularies and techniques that would characterize the mural painting associated with the Chicano movement. Above—and this is only a small part of a larger mural representing Mexican history (Figure 3.5). Center left, the viewer can see Cortez and La Malinche, along with their son, a frequently-used symbol of the *mestizaje* at the heart of Mexico. The rhythmic clustering of faces and figures underpins a representational politics in which each person is actual—much like Cesar Chavez or Malcolm X in Bernal’s mural—and/or symbolic, standing in for a richer world of evocative meaning. These



murals were often part of the individual memory of Mexican heritage workers and artists; they were clearly part of the shared memory of twentieth-century Mexican California. The members of Mujeres Muralistas de Valle, for example, had access to the works of the Mexican muralists, particularly Rivera's, during their coursework at Fresno State in the 1970s. With few courses available to them on Mexican American history, politics, and visual culture, small encounters with things like Rivera's work in a textbook or in prints on view in their daily lives, were tremendously important to the shaping of their aesthetic and political views. And the visual and physical traffic between Mexico and California insured that the Mexican murals lived in the collective consciousness of both artists and viewers in the Central Valley.

During their time developing their mural in their downtown storefront studio, Mujeres Muralistas del Valle worked to establish the same kind of broad historical narrative that would follow the major plot points heralded in Rivera's productions: Pre-Columbian architecture and spiritual traditions, European contact, Mexican Independence, the Mexican Revolution. However, rather than create emotion through a dense layering of images, Mujeres Muralistas del Valle slowed down their visual narrative, positioning their figurative sequences at an exaggerated scale that emphasized the relation between humans and the environment. Across the panels, human characters are depicted not just as life size (compared to the viewer) but almost larger than life, particularly when the viewer's focus shifts to the points at which the figure and setting meet. Cortes, La Malinche, La Virgen, children, teenagers, mothers, and the emerging class of professional Chicana/os become the focal point in this rendering of the cultural landscape, a place where the stories of nature and culture are deeply intertwined like the roots of the gigantic oak tree in the central panel.

The Parlier mural had a political history; it came out of the aesthetics of the UFW campaigns, which were developed during the decade of the 1970s into a full-blown Chicano movement that took seriously the possibilities for an art—murals, theater, literature—that spoke to the question of social justice and social change. That political history knitted together racial and ethnic politics with gender politics: the women’s mural focused on themes and techniques that broke with what we can now recognize as masculinist representational strategies. At the same time, the mural had an aesthetic history; it drew on mural traditions that went back to the Mexican Revolution, and which—in the form of Diego Rivera—had been formed in relation to both classic and modernist Western art heritages. And the mural had a landscape history; it spoke to the specific circumstances of the Fresno region: its geography, its work regimes, the environmental knowledge of its grape laborers, and of course an actual history of struggle, dispossession and possibility.

### **The Cultural Landscape of the Lower San Joaquin Valley**

The story of the US West, argues landscape geographer J.B. Jackson, has been driven by “the large scale organization of man-made spaces, usually in the open country.” This western spatial organization—which marries industrial capacities with the “natural” feeling of those open spaces—has formed an intricately woven network of large-scale infrastructure projects, often built along natural resource corridors.<sup>17</sup> In the Central Valley, the Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers form the spine of this natural and built environment, a major north/south axis line spanning nearly the length of the state. The rivers themselves are a complex system, fed by a network of tributaries flowing down the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada, where they stretch across the Great Central Valley, with many eventually draining into the Pacific Ocean via the San Francisco Bay.

At least that was the case prior to the industrialization of California's agriculture. Although not always in view or fully operational, by the early twentieth century the earliest forms of mass transportation, irrigation, and communications networks had been established in the Central Valley, quite literally paving the way for a future aimed at maximizing the efficient movement of people, natural resources, products, and information.<sup>18</sup> How and when, then, did this move towards a more productive organization of the Central Valley countryside occur? What kinds of cultural forms, rural aesthetics, and cultural identities accompanied the transformation of the countryside? And given the politics of the Chicano movement, what role did Mexican-heritage visual and vernacular production play in these cultural forms? To understand these contexts, it is important to step back in time, and quickly survey the region itself as it changed in relation to colonizations and settlements, markets and technology, advertising and imagery.

In the beginning—as elsewhere in North America—California was Indian country. Its rich and varied environment created the conditions for a diversity of cultures, societies, and languages, and a particularly dense population. European diseases and Spanish conquest would begin the devastation suffered by California's indigenous people. During the late eighteenth century, a small group of political, military, and religious leaders led an effort to develop the northernmost expanse of Spanish territory along the Pacific Coast. After years of missteps along Baja California, and shifts in leadership and political thinking in Madrid and Mexico City, the exploration and settlement of Alta California began. The plan was driven by Visitor-General Jose de Galvez, a sort of political operative for King Charles III, who, largely through personal ambition sought to achieve the impossible: settlement of the long-desired but far flung sites at San Diego and Monterey. These achievements, given the Spanish empire's struggles at home and

abroad, were important public relations victories for the King and brought Galvez the attention and political advancement that he sought. But, as anchors to a new wave of colonization along the Pacific Coast, they were also precisely what Captain Gaspar de Portola feared when he explored the region and was charged with administering their military presence: the coastal areas of Alta California—however fertile and picturesque—were also remote, difficult to locate and navigate by ship, and even more challenging to access by horseback. And, despite the inspired—and ruthless—vision provided by the Father Junipero Serra, leaders in Madrid and Mexico City provided an underwhelming amount of economic support to the settlements, relegating the twenty-one missions, three presidios, and three pueblos it formed in the Spanish colonial period (1769-1821) to a largely subsistence-based agricultural economy, dependent upon the unfree labor of Indian neophytes<sup>19</sup>

Although it was ultimately small in scale, the Spanish agricultural program would prove to have wide and lasting effects in the region, weathering the political storms that would continue over the next two centuries. Spanish heritage land use, including cattle ranching, sheep herding, and a surprisingly diverse set of field, orchard, and vineyard crops carried over as the dominant form of economic, political, and social activity in the Mexican national period (1822-46), and enjoyed particularly wide implementation in the Central Valley.

In fact, the rancho can be seen as both a physical and discursive legacy of this era, entangling itself with the grand mythmaking that was soon to come in California, a move that would prove invaluable to its survival as a major settlement strategy in the second half of the century. The *Californios* were correct in their assessment of potential productivity of the Central Valley and its surrounding hillsides: the leather and tallow market had gained considerable value between the 1830s and 1840s as the coastal missions were secularized, and economic and

political power expanded in the interior. In this period, it was not unusual to see land holdings reach twenty thousand acres in size, particularly with the large cattle and sheep ranches that characterized the settlements in the Central Valley. But the *Californios* were never able to realize the dream of expanding their holdings and seizing political leadership despite the opportunities presented by a crumbling mission system and a distant state.<sup>20</sup>

The most important factor in the shift away from Spanish and Mexican control in California was the arrival of settlers and traders from the East Coast and Midwest in the Central Valley in the early 1840s. Gaining land grants from the Mexican government, which was eager to see development in any form take hold, this small but equally determined group established extensive land holdings along the richest agricultural land in the Valley and surrounding foothills, and almost immediately set up the beginnings of large-scale growing in their orchards, fields, and vineyards. Following long established regional trading routes, and the advice of the mountain men that had been exhaustively exploring the natural and cultural resources of the area, the new settlers initiated a chaotic period of land acquisition and violence in the build up to the US-Mexico War (1846-48). Although the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848) negotiated at the war's end established Mexican property rights, enforcement became unrealistic once gold was found at Sutter's Mill along the American River near Sacramento.<sup>21</sup> A global migration ensued, and its initial influx of squatters, claim jumpers, and unscrupulous investors were no match for the gentleman's approach to land use favored by the *Californios*. The battle for prime land during the Gold Rush (1848-55) was thus swift and extensive, resulting in significant losses for Mexican landholders and what Benjamin Madley has convincingly demonstrated was the beginning of a genocide that would largely depopulate the state of its American Indian communities. Ultimately, whether through physical force or administrative maneuver, by the

time California became admitted as the thirty-first state in the Union in 1851, many of the large landowners had experienced dramatic erosions to their estates or had returned to Mexico.<sup>22</sup>

This shift in landownership in the second half of the nineteenth century marked the acceleration of large-scale agriculture that would come to define the form and function of the Central Valley in the twentieth century. The shared commitment by public and private investors to maximize productivity in the countryside would soon be seen across the cultural landscape, fueled initially by the fluctuations in the mining industry. Despite the well-chronicled busts that plagued the minor gold and silver rushes of the late nineteenth century, migrants continued their rush into the hills of the Sierra Nevada, creating an oversaturated labor market that was made worse by the turn towards hydraulic and other mechanized techniques of extraction and processing.

With laborers desperate for work, Central Valley growers recognized an opportunity taking shape and quickly established what would become a signature market strategy: maximizing profits through the recruitment of economically vulnerable laborers, working on short term projects, in the presence of a large labor surplus. In other words, laying rail ties, digging ditches, and preparing a field for harvest was hard work, but for an increasing number of people, it wasn't bad work if you could get it.<sup>23</sup> In these circumstances, where dangerous and precarious work offered a lifeline, the relationship between humans and their environments takes on heightened value, as workers risk their health and well-being—and even their lives—in an effort to scratch out a livelihood in the landscape.

But seeing value in hard work is not as simple as it might suggest—and for good reason. As historian Richard White observes, the workplace, and its workers, have consistently been undervalued as producers of environmental knowledge in the study of American landscapes, so

much so that what often emerges from narratives about a mine or a field is not the experiences or contributions of its workforce but instead a critique of its “destruction or disturbance qualities.” These critiques of the role of the worker in producing the American cultural landscape have been essential to identifying the capitalist and imperial tendencies undergirding these projects, something very much on view on the side of a mountain as water blasts out its wall and funnels its silt into a labyrinth of wooden sorting chambers that may or may not capture tiny traces of gold—a process, in fact, that is not dissimilar in cause or effect from the irrigation channels that were installed nearby along the valley floor. But to omit or ungenerously assess the contributions of the worker in these fraught landscapes erases an important part of the environmental and cultural archive given their unique location at the site of production. We would do well, then, to follow White’s encouragement to reconsider the ways that workers—like the miner and the farm hand—and their work, can help us better understand the cultural topography of the Chicano/a rural vernacular landscape—and the art that emerges out of it.<sup>24</sup> The laborer, then, can be imagined as yielding both agricultural products and political landscapes. After all, both Bernal’s mural and that of the Mujeres Muralistas del Valle represent not only the land itself, and the abstract qualities of capitalist labor systems, but also the workers themselves, the ones who arrange trees into orchards and wind vines on trestles into a kind of environmental aesthetic, found in patterns of vegetation and structures of buds and fruits.

The move towards a more productive agricultural organization of the Central Valley countryside was particularly aggressive in the lower San Joaquin Valley where the soil was especially conducive to growing high value and labor-intensive crops. In search of work, many of Gold Rush migrants ended up down the hill, as it is known colloquially, moving from the mining camps in the Sierra foothills to the farmland of the Central Valley. The “hub” of this

activity would soon be concentrated in the area surrounding Fresno, as a small but particularly motivated set of private investors set about building a lush garden in a vast desert. Given that the east side of the valley enjoyed better access to the Sierra Nevada watershed, settlement concentrated itself along that edge of the valley.<sup>25</sup>

In 1876, a French-Canadian heritage migrant from Indiana named I.N. Parlier settled at one such site along the Kings River, a 160-acre parcel where he initially grew wheat and pumpkins and ran a few head of cattle and sheep. In a typical deal orchestrated by successful small-scale operations like Parlier's, he soon acquired another 600 acres from the Southern Pacific Rail Road, which he used to establish a trading post, general store, and post office. Parlier was not alone in his effort to grow his estate and adjoining small town. During the late nineteenth century, he was part of a fairly large cohort of settlers who sought to establish themselves as agricultural and civic leaders in the lower San Joaquin Valley. But what made Parlier's holding unique was its soil. A rich loam, full of nutrients from its origin along the ocean floor and the runoff that replenished it from the canyons of the Sierra Nevada and the alluvial plains of its foothills, the town of Parlier sat square center in this hub of activity. It became known as the "buckle" in the raisin belt stretching from just south of Fresno to just north of Bakersfield. As Larry Trujillo notes in his exhaustive research on early agricultural and social activity in Parlier, the site was originally imagined by its founder as "a place for local farmers who needed supplies and a place for social gatherings." Averse to the excessive influence he felt corporate monopolies and centralized government exerted at the local and regional level, Parlier's leadership took on what Trujillo identifies as a Jeffersonian quality, where small scale farming was led by a benevolent local elite focused on small to mid-sized operations and the cultivation of strong civic engagement.<sup>26</sup>



What Parlier and his peers imagined when they established their often eponymous communities was exactly what took shape in the decades that followed. While deeply opposed to monopolies among peers, Parlier actively promoted labor consolidation for his own workforce, efforts that were effective in minimizing the presence of Asian land owners and labor collectives, and established a path forward for a mostly migratory pool of Mexican heritage workers. Parlier's community, in other words, was known as a grower's town in the early twentieth century and it showed in the bank, church, and storefronts that lined Main Street.<sup>27</sup>

Over time, geography, capital, and social relations combined to produce two distinct cultural landscapes in the region surrounding Parlier: a thick circuit of economic activity and settlement along the roads, canals, and railroads lining the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada range and a relatively sparse presence of people and infrastructure along the western edge of the valley. And, as seen along Main Street in Parlier, this spatialization had strong racial links, a disparity that became even more entrenched with the introduction of large-scale irrigation in the twentieth century. As a result, a tiered system of agricultural labor emerged in the Valley, with highly specialized, long-term workers forming a rich network of cities and towns along the eastside and relatively little permanent settlement along the west side, where seasonal workers and high rates of mobility were the norm. In Parlier, this growth was most acute at the town's edge, where, by the early twentieth-century, informal farm worker housing sites began to appear to accommodate a growing body of racialized—and spatialized—labor.

Meanwhile, just north in Fresno, another settlement pattern was underway. It would come to dominate the region by the end of the century. In 1869, twenty-seven year old Irish immigrant Martin Theodore Kearney arrived by steamship in San Francisco, eager to find a lucrative niche in the up-and-coming California real estate market. Kearney soon found work

with rancher and real estate developer William S. Chapman, who was one of the largest landholders in the state at the time, owning just over one million acres. Working on several of his ventures, Kearney distinguished himself as a gifted writer and salesman, and quickly was promoted to manage Chapman's most ambitious project: The Central California Colony.<sup>28</sup>

Through conversations with educator-turned-entrepreneur Bernard Marks, Chapman became convinced that Fresno was on the cusp of major growth and that a privately financed irrigation scheme would yield major profits in orchard and vineyard products. The enterprise required an initial outlay of capital from Chapman to purchase a large tract of land, facilitate the building of a small but well managed system of canals, and pay for the initial planting of trees and vines. To mitigate the risk, Chapman and Marks divided most of the property into twenty-acre parcels, a shrunken vision of the 1862 Homestead Act, which matched land parcels (160 acres, usually) to individual Jeffersonian agrarian settlement. Chapman and Marks envisioned paying settlers establishing small farms and thus anchoring a major period of growth in the agricultural industry and, in the process, transforming Fresno into a major cultural and economic center.

Given the task of selling 192 lots, Kearney undertook an aggressive promotional campaign that aimed at both advertising the venture and changing the perception of the region from barren desert to lush, Edenic farmland. Campaign materials took the form of newspaper advertisements and editorials, pamphlets, posters, and chapbooks. And the campaign, in large part, worked. By 1878 most of the original parcels had been sold and by 1903, over 71,100 acres were under cultivation, allowing Kearney to form his own landholding company.

The story of Fresno's rise to prominence—and Kearney's place in it—would soon take even greater significance. Known as the "Raisin King," Kearney's efforts during and after his

time with the Central California Colony, and his own later vineyard development, established a cooperative business model that would have lasting effect. While the industry struggled to take hold during early years of production and minor economic crises during the late nineteenth century, raisins became wildly popular during World War I—just as the economy improved. Promoted as a natural and wholesome snack food, as well as a versatile baking ingredient, the product quickly established itself as a staple of the middle-class American diet, inspiring an equally compelling set of promotional material such as magazine advertisements, cookbooks, and nutrition guides.

Kearney sits at the center, then, of a three-pronged tale of transformation: changes in the land, in the form of irrigation and large-scale grape cultivation; changes in the models of land speculation and industrial organization; and changes in the cultural imaginary that defined the Fresno area. Kearney's narrative—of quaint family-run farms, orchards, and vineyards driving progress in the region—was often made as a visual argument, and it promoted the region as not only one of the most productive agricultural regions in the world but also one of the most desirable. Idealized harvest scenes depicting a lush valley bursting with ripe produce, often hand-picked by well-dressed young women, quickly took hold across the agricultural industry, and it was hard to find a grape carton, citrus flat, or nut crate that did not have one of these picturesque scenes stapled to it.

Toward the end of the twentieth-century, a less idealized—though perhaps no less sentimental—version of this scene would appear in the later panels of the Parlier mural. Where the early agricultural industry advertising in California used highly stylized landscape views and tranquil domestic scenes to appeal to—or cultivate—a taste for fresh produce (still a relatively new trend for the middle-class consumer), the appeal to emotion made by Mujeres Muralistas del

Valle was driven by a very different set of objectives—or desires. Expressed in a set of near life-size figurative images, the Parlier mural shows workers in a far broader cultural landscape, and, in the process, reveal important clues about how Mexican heritage aesthetic traditions were carried forward in time and place by these artists.



Figure 3.6. Inset, Mujeres Muralistas del Valle mural at Parlier.

Here, in the final panels of the Parlier mural the viewer's attention is drawn initially to the bright red flag and huelga sign below it, a gesture to both Rivera and UFW uses of fiery imagery (Figure 3.6). Their strike is on here in the women's depiction of their cultural landscape and the grape is at center as the workers tend the vines. The soil is set on the diagonal, taking a path from community life, through political dissent, and into the future they hope to cultivate in Chicana/o Fresno: a culturally rich professional class. There is a logic—of environment, labor, and history—that helps explain, at least partially, one of the great mysteries surrounding the Mujeres Muralistas del Valle project: why paint it in Fresno, on portable plywood rather than on the side of a building, and why mount it in Parlier?

The agricultural history of the Fresno area produced particular environments: orchards and vineyards, descended from Spanish efforts but transformed through irrigation, land speculation, subdivision, and white agrarian settlement, based on an individualistic Jeffersonian dream but formulated as cooperatives in a structure of market capitalism. Those vineyards

masqueraded as family farms, but they really relied upon cheap labor. At first, workers were drawn from the excess labor pool represented by busted miners. Over time, however, the valley's labor regimes became increasingly racialized: owners were more likely to be white; field and processing workers were more likely to be Mexican heritage people, drawn from complex histories that included dispossessed *Californios*, older immigrants who were often long-time skilled agricultural workers, and newer immigrants, perhaps drifted in from the west side of the valley. Those workers knew their world in relation to their labor creating the environment that surrounded towns like Parlier—growers' towns that held the capital and housed the elites.

Workers created out of their own experience a politics that challenged those elites. They built forms of protest that drew upon the broader Civil Rights movement—the march, the boycott—but which channeled their own histories and their particular situatedness in the land and labor regime. The march took the form of a pilgrimage. The strike drew upon their knowledge of the seasonal needs of grape cultivation and their own vital skills and knowledges. The visual vocabulary drew upon the very patterns of planting ... and fruit-grower propaganda... and a Mexican mural tradition... and a set of religious imagery.

The situatedness of workers and artists in the rural landscape produced distinct forms of cultural production that connected landscapes, histories, and politics. These forms included vernacular landscapes of houses, gardens shrines, and religious sites, as well as aesthetic productions: images, signs, newspapers, and murals. Indeed, the murals in Del Rey and Parlier were only two of the scores of murals that accompanied the Chicano/a movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Many of those murals appeared in urban landscapes—Los Angeles, for example, became a central hub for mural culture—which is why the rural mural offers a distinct angle on the very nature of the cultural politics of the movement. Indeed, the Del Rey and Parlier murals

suggest the range of possibilities *internal* to the Chicano/a movement: distinctions between northern and southern California, between urban and rural cultural production, between farmworker politics and the move toward artistic production, between men and women, and even between places like Fresno and places like Parlier. To understand some of these distinctions, we can delve more deeply into the mural and its visual vocabularies.

### The Women of the Countryside



Figure 3.7. Inset, Center panels, Mujeres Muralistas del Valle mural at Parlier (1978).

La Virgen de Guadalupe stands quietly at the center of the Parlier mural. Her delicate hands are pressed together as she bows her head in prayer. (Figure 3.7) Her eyes are closed but through her elevated position she casts a watchful eye over the women and children pictured at her feet. Set within the tree's trunk, her glow appears to emanate from the soil itself, moving up the horizon line and filling open sky behind her. A *piñata* swings from the great tree's branches, as a young girl attempts to crack open its riches for the delight of the children—and pre-Columbian creatures—that surround her.

The use of celestial light to define the negative space surrounding her image—the primary focal point in the Parlier mural—establishes a connection to both traditional Catholic imagery and the reworking of that imagery underway by other Chicana artists during this period. Depicted as an activist-martial artist, seamstress, runner, and fashionable young woman on a

walk, these images demonstrate the broader interest during this period to open La Virgen—and by extension contemporary Chicanas—to a more active, assertive, and flexible presence in Chicana/o visual culture important variations on this traditional image.

The version at Parlier, while also altering the traditional iconography, emphasizes her particularly rural origins. Rooted in the deep and rich soil of the lower San Joaquin Valley, the incarnation at Parlier also honors the spirit of the connection to the natural world in the original apparition in 1531—where she appeared to farm worker Juan Diego on a hillside near Mexico City—but there are no hillside roses to be seen here, a visual gesture typically made by artists in La Virgen-related cultural production to reference the wild roses Diego found near the original apparition site. Instead, in the Parlier mural depiction, she is set in *their* environment, and, more specifically, within an iconic feature of the local ecosystem: the valley oak. Known to live for hundreds of years, these large, deep rooted trees are a major feature in the Central Valley landscape, noted for their extensive root system and shade producing ability. By seamlessly shifting these roots into to a thick mane of hair, enveloping mother and child, the artists place emphasis on the strong connections between motherhood, spirituality, and the natural environment.

The prominent placement of women and children in the Parlier mural also shares another important connection to the most dynamic—and widely viewed—Chicana visual culture produced during the 1970s. The Fresno women who formed Mujeres Muralistas del Valle drew inspiration—and took their name—from an earlier group in the Bay Area, based in San Francisco's Mission District. The neighborhood was, at that time, experiencing an explosion in Latina/o visual culture, including performance art, student theatre troupes, printmaking, and murals. A powerful group of galleries and museums emerged during the 1970s and hosted a

dynamic set of exhibits and performances. The mural scene was also flourishing and played an important role in documenting and celebrating the diversity of cultural experiences in a city that had long been home to people from across Latin America. This mural scene was particularly vibrant, driven in large part by Chicano murals depicting Mayan and Aztec civilization, using heroic symbols from ancient Mexico to evoke a sense of strength and resistance.<sup>29</sup> But the murals had a particular politics of gendered representation.

San Francisco's Mujeres Muralistas moved away from the overtly masculine "blood and guts" pictorial narrative of Chicano history, and towards scenes featuring women and children in their everyday cultural landscapes. Their insistence on another form of Chicano/a consciousness proved tremendously influential in the artistic and intellectual development of the Fresno group, with members of the San Francisco collective travelling to Fresno on several occasions to help develop the piece in La Brocha's downtown studio. Honoring their work—as a namesake—also subtly speaks to the shared challenges both San Francisco's Mujeres Muralistas and the Fresno group faced in gaining a foothold in their respective arts and culture communities as well as providing important input on their project from other female muralists. This input was also important because it provided valuable and sympathetic advice from the original Mujeres Muralistas, who had initially had experienced similar challenges in finding support—and wall space—in San Francisco's male dominated scene in the 1970s.

Looking close to home for visual inspiration (as the San Francisco collective also did) would resonate with the Fresno artists, a move that proved to be one of their most lasting contributions to this era of early Bay Area mural production. As students at the California College of Arts, Irene Perez and Patricia Rodriguez were living in Balmy Alley, a tiny street on the 24th Street corridor. While they had participated in several neighborhood mural projects,



they were dissatisfied with their relegation to support roles on these projects. In response, they sought to create a set of murals that explored historical narratives from feminist, queer, and multicultural points-of-view. Pooling together resources to put the first mural on the exterior of their own garage, Perez and Rodriquez used paint acquired from neighbors to create a mural based on an aquatic theme, given the city's location on the San Francisco Bay and Pacific Ocean.<sup>30</sup>



Figure 3.8. *Latinoamerica* (1974) by Mujeres Muralistas.

Inspired by the collective process, and the results it produced, they applied for a grant to mount a large scale project. Successful in their application, they used their funding to develop a piece—*Latinoamerica*—that would take a similarly less didactic or overtly political approach to the visual narrative that was typical of other murals in the scene at the time. To research their imagery, the two consulted *National Geographic* and other magazines with landscape and documentary photography, seeking to acquire a sense of cultural and geographic diversity. The result was a nine-panel piece on the side of an automotive shop along the 24<sup>th</sup> Street corridor, just a few blocks from their home and first mural. Each section is driven by human actors, with visual interludes in which natural elements frame or connect the sections. The dominant focal

point is a sun with an AfroLatino family set in its interior. The sun family sits above a diverse set of Latin American environments, drawn from the Andes to the Caribbean, with the sun's rays providing the energy needed to grow both food and communities. To the right is a large Aztec dancer in an extended Y shape. His white suit is intricately embroidered with bright colors and his mask is richly carved and painted, and set against his red cape. The sky turns light above him. Drawing the viewer's gaze to the left is a subtle but evocative use of negative space: a black and white drawing of two urban scenes. In the first, a young family positioned in the middle of the city environment; in the second, a simple drawing of 24th Street that extends into the horizon, serving as the main street in a neighborhood, and then fading into a house party with a young woman dressed in stylish bell bottoms and large accessories (Figure 3.8).

Duality is a key tension in "Latinoamerica," felt most strongly with the cross extending across the top of the piece, as night moves to day, creating a seamless line across environments and cultures. In the night, and as day breaks, the human figures are contemplative. A group of Andean musicians with wind instruments stands in a quiet pose, facing east as the sun rises. A diverse group of llamas and a modern indigenous couple look on, establishing a moment in which the present gazes at the past. Duality is also at play in natural forms, as humans are drawn at the same or larger scale than most of the natural elements: the sun is filled with a family; the dancer is far larger than the corn and the horses that frame him; the women with the child and water are larger than the mountain range, industrial agriculture, and palms; the *campesino* is as large as the mountain he sits on. This perspective, of rooting humans firmly in a range of rural and (sub)urban scenes, stands in a stark contrast to traditional landscape painting, which so often utilizes tiny human subjects to highlight the grandeur of wilderness and pastoral scenes. Here, it is the grandeur of culture that is on display, expressing the significance of culture embedded in

the natural and built environments--or the ways that culture is *at work* in natural and built environments—including those of Parlier, Fresno, and the grape fields and raisin towns of the Central Valley that hosted Cesar Chavez's political pilgrimage.

Perez's and Rodriguez's mural *Latinoamerica* was only one in a series of projects that were part of the explosion of such work by Latina/o muralists in the 1970s. In Los Angeles, artists such as Judy Baca produced murals that spoke to the challenges of urbanization that were reshaping Latina/o communities across the city. Installing work on freeways, in housing projects, and along the paved LA River bed, muralists' work sought out and claimed highly visible public space. Artist Yolanda Lopez created important murals in this vein in San Diego, and the Royal Chicano Air Force Collective initiated a series of mural-driven community development projects in Sacramento. The iconography in these murals bridged the religious symbolism from Aztec and Mayan traditions with contemporary spiritual and cultural symbols including modern uses of La Virgen de Guadalupe and quasi-religious political heroes such as Cesar Chavez, bringing together ancient and modern traditions to give shape, texture and images to an emergent political consciousness.<sup>31</sup>

The Parlier mural avoided Aztec pyramids and warriors in favor of the feminist iconography of families, couples, children, reproduction, and resistance visible in murals like *Latinoamerica*. It captured a particular moment of political rebellion, a small town manifestation of the larger social and economic ferment of the Chicano/a movement. To do so, it incorporated local landscapes and labor, emphasizing the rural nature of places like Parlier. It drew from the *muralista* tradition of Diego Rivera, and the Bay Area women's collectives, and it mixed the modernism of the 1930s with specifically regional forms of California art and design. To

understand these aspects of the mural tradition, we might return to the question of town development, planning, and infrastructure—particularly in the town of Parlier.

### **The Rise of Rural Modernist Spatialization**

The wealth and social disparities that were taking place—mostly out of view—in Parlier and other rural communities during the early twentieth century would soon come into wide visibility when the Wall Street Crash of 1929 initiated a decade-long economic crisis. The rapid industrialization of urban and rural landscapes proved too much for the American economy to absorb, and the effects of the Great Depression became particularly acute in California as millions of migrants, primarily from the Great Plains, fled the series of droughts and wind storms that would create the Dust Bowl in the 1930s. In the wake of these extreme economic, environmental, and social emergencies, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt targeted rural redevelopment as a priority, providing extensive federal funding for “back to the land” models of community development. Part economic stimulus plan, part social and environmental recovery effort, the New Deal rural redevelopment agenda aimed to reshape how rural communities like Parlier looked and functioned, given the gruesome media coverage of once-flourishing farms and villages replaced by dry, barren fields and an exodus of small farmers camping informally along roadsides and squatters camps.

Documentary photography became the most widely known of these New Deal programs to address rural poverty, and photographers including Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, Jack Delano, and Marion Post Wolcott created a set of stirring images that helped personalize the crisis for law makers and everyday Americans in an effort to promote the Roosevelt Administration’s relief efforts. These images, in their time, were appreciated for both their social and aesthetic value—offering intimate portraits of the daily lives during a time of

displacement—and were used effectively by the Roosevelt Administration to encourage public sentiment that something could, and should, be done by the federal government to help these migrants.<sup>32</sup>

Less appreciated is the set of public interventions to the built environment that the photographs document—often in great detail—and that provide insight into how the crisis was imagined and addressed. Even farther out of view, despite providing the frame—and sometimes even the focal points—for these images is the rural housing initiatives themselves. They focused on the creation of infrastructure—large federally administered labor camps that were aimed at helping displaced farmers and their families transition into the modern methods of farming that Farm Security Administration (FSA) officials were eager to see take hold. These techniques, aimed at maximizing the relation between productivity and sustainability, had a strong social component and were widely opposed by leaders in the agricultural industry who saw the cooperative model promoted by the FSA as a threat to their newly-won market control over workers and as potential sites for the kind of labor organizing that would threaten their model of low-paid, highly mobile workers who were located too far outside the structures of power to advocate for better conditions and wages. This major federal initiative to reshape the rural American landscape in the 1930s transformed the lower San Joaquin Valley, and is evocatively visible in the shape these housing designs took, the functions they served, and the towns where they were—and were not—located.

In 1936, the Great Plains experienced one of the most severe droughts—and ensuing dust storms—of the decade-long environmental catastrophe, escalating a humanitarian crisis, as a record number of farmers fled their parched fields.<sup>33</sup> In response, the United States government initiated a relief plan in 1937, through the Farm Security Administration, aimed at addressing the

wide-spread challenges that economic and environmental refugees presented to their new communities. Earlier federal and state plans had struggled to provide assistance for these refugees, as well as other rural residents struggling to maintain their farms during the Depression. Public pressure mounted for a more a more effective response.

During the remaining years of the Depression, the FSA rural redevelopment agencies built ninety-five farm labor camps across the country to address this large-scale human displacement. Sixteen of these camps were built in California, the destination of many of the migrants. The largest camp was located at Tulare, just south of Fresno, and included 448 permanent homes and over 1,000 short-term units. Several other large camps were located nearby in the lower San Joaquin Valley, including Firebaugh, Shafer, and Arvin. Initially, these camps flourished, becoming an integral part of the rural relief plan. Due to its large number of migrants, rural California became a focal point of this New Deal social architecture, a set of projects and processes that laid powerful political, physical and aesthetic templates across the region.<sup>34</sup> Just as growers had reshaped the built landscape, so too did the creation of these federal housing camps.

While the camps did not reach the scale planners targeted, a modest but robust set of labor camps were established across the United States, many of which were repurposed in subsequent decades to address changes in regional and local housing priorities. While in use during the Depression, the camps had major social implications on-site and, in the process, influenced a generation of rural planning and design. Through the creation of temporary housing, new cities, and revised land use practices—and in response to the needs of a massive and visible migration—California’s Central Valley quickly became the nexus of the federal rural redevelopment agenda. Over time these templates became defining characteristics of the place—

as well as things to be resisted, for they often reinforced the long-term settlement patterns that unevenly divided the eastern and western parts of the Valley.

The design plans for the camps quickly gained international recognition. Twelve regional offices were opened by the FSA during this period to aid in the effort, and the San Francisco office quickly emerged as a leader, largely through the efforts of a dynamic group of young architects who were charged with planning camps across California and the US West. Vernon DeMars, Burton Cairns, and Garrett Eckbo designed over fifty buildings for the FSA and were noted for their integration of local aesthetics, design practices, and building materials to create structures and grounds that would address long term and temporary housing needs for farm workers, even as they also provided space for education, health care, recreation, and sanitation.<sup>35</sup>

The strongest work to emerge out of this cohort was by Eckbo, a young designer hired soon after finishing his studies at the University of California, Berkeley and at the Harvard School of Design. Eckbo would move on to form internationally renowned landscape architecture firms in Los Angeles, but his brief career with the FSA office in San Francisco produced some of his most lasting contributions. His designs use a wide range of plants and shrubs to create desirable social space—such as courtyards and playgrounds—but also to serve functional purposes such as blocking the wind and providing shade. The intricate patterns of plant life in the arrangement of Eckbo’s gardens and courtyards were framed by the clean, sharp lines of his housing structures and the nearby industrial fields, all brought full circle with the dramatic peaks of the Sierra Nevada jutting along the horizon line to the east.

As a modernist-regionalist architect, Eckbo incorporated innovative features: kitchen-dining room space that led into a private garden, extensive trees and shrubs with decorative and functional purposes, and shared gardens and recreation space. The camp structures varied by site,

some with hexagon, L-shapes, or rows. But what united the sites was an attention to the existing elements of the landscape. Dissatisfied with previous rural design models that did not incorporate the local character, Eckbo's work sought a more open relationship between the natural and built environment. Thus, his designs incorporated the efficiency of movement and use of light, wind, and shade that became the hallmarks of modernist architecture while also introducing elements of shared green space that were decidedly efficient. The trees, shrubs, and flowers were planted in ways that not only provided shade from the sun or relief from the wind but that were also beautiful. Eckbo intended them as a refuge from the harsh realities of lives lived working outdoors in hostile climates. This fusion of modernist housing and what we might think of as baroque landscaping would become Eckbo's defining contribution to twentieth century architecture.<sup>36</sup>

The federal rural redevelopment strategy was not simply driven by crisis. It also had important roots in the larger "regionalist" turn in modernist aesthetics, a current that would hit American architecture shortly after it swept through the world of art. These currents, too, would become part of the visual vocabulary and the ideological makeup of the Fresno muralists. Regionalism's interest in local traditions resonated with many New Deal art and design projects, as artists, writers, and other cultural producers documented and interpreted the rapid changes in rural American culture in the early twentieth century. As Marc Treib observes, "For an agricultural society in turmoil, with hundreds of thousands of displaced nomads forced to wander on western roads, the idea of soil, roots, and home became a preoccupation." These concerns can be seen in the murals, photography, and oral history projects of the Depression; they were also manifested in the built environment. Thousands of WPA and CCC structures bear witness to this meeting of a still-forming regional aesthetic and a focus on vernacular construction techniques.



These projects occupied a significant portion of the arts and culture work of the New Deal, including facilities for the National Park Service and Department of Labor in the 1930s and continuing into the early 1940s with the Department of Defense. This interest in rural vernacular design led to a prolific period of production that the NPS architect and writer Albert H. Good would refer to the “golden age of rustic design.” Characterized by the use local materials and techniques—much like Eckbo’s work—these walls, signs, fences, drinking fountains, entranceways, trail steps, and benches were produced widely, and reinforced the subtle grandeur of rural environments through everyday engagement with sturdy, unpretentious, and hand-crafted features intended for public use.<sup>37</sup>

Regionalism, in this aesthetic sense—and read in terms of the modernist (re)design of the natural and built environments of the Central Valley—sits in a curious and strong relation to the broader currents of modernism, and in particular to the movement’s evolution in Europe and the United States. In the late nineteenth century as realism, Impressionism, and post-Impressionism gave way to Modernism, a similarly significant physical shift was of course underway in the Central Valley landscape. The completion of the water reclamation projects and the railroad accelerated the development of the rural interior of the state, enabling industrial agriculture to flourish by the early twentieth century. This massive restructuring of the environment resulted in its own set of visual images of the landscape, images that echo the experiments European painters were making with line, form, and view point. Led in Europe by Picasso and Braque, that movement would become Cubism, and it set modern art down a path that would reshape how an entire generation of artists understood how art *works* and what it *does*. In California, the modernist reimagining and reworking of the Central Valley landscape also materialized in relation to aesthetics. The forms of the Valley showed up in photography, landscape painting,

and the design and functionality of domestic structures. Much of this art was the work of outside observers and social strategists: the FSA photographers, FSA designers of labor camp architecture, and modernist-regionalist painters.

But an equally important set of aesthetic practices originated with local people. These cultural producers included workers, their families and friends, and artists who emerged from their ranks. Among the key forms of expression—critical to Chicano movement art in general—was the mural. The absence of local expressions of Mexican and Mexican American cultural production at the FSA camps was no coincidence: the 1930s saw the repatriation of up to two million people of Mexican heritage, over half of which are estimated to have been born in United States. These effects were felt strongly by migratory agricultural workers who found themselves caught between the events of the Mexican Revolution, the Depression—or, *la crisis*—and the Bracero Program, a centerpiece of sorts in the decades long set of upheavals experienced in the US/Mexico borderlands.<sup>38</sup>

The relative stability projected in the FSA camp images was thus structured around placing in view the set of programming that aimed to restore a sense of pride and dignity for its residents, mostly white Dust Bowl refugees. In a time of great economic, geographic, and social instability, a well-organized set of activities defined camp life, running from early morning to late in the evening throughout the year. The well-being of children, from infancy to young adulthood was given particular attention in camp programming, including a well-baby clinic at the public health center, an extensive nursery school curriculum, and evening, weekend, and summer activities for the older children who were bussed to nearby local public schools during the school year. Cultural programming was also extended to the adults at the camp, focusing on a

wide range of arts and crafts workshops and a baseball league. Activities were reported in the camp newsletter *The Hub* which also served as a recruitment tool for new initiatives.



Figure 3.9. The Eckbo designed camp at Tulare.

But the mechanical quality to this routine that subtly appeared in these interior shots of daily camp life was in clear view in a second set of camp photographs produced by the FSA (Figure 3.9). These images, shot in light aircraft by uncredited photographers, revealed an efficient geometric layout of the camp buildings and grounds that resembled military designs. And this spatialization was no coincidence. As political geographer Don Mitchell notes, the tense labor relations of the 1920s and 1930s in the Central Valley, created a climate of deep suspicion among the region's growers to threats of Communist activity and unionization efforts among migratory workers. Many of the strikes in this period had turned violent, particularly a string of activity during the 1933 growing season. Much of this organizing activity took place in the informal auto and squatter camps, as well as the minimally staffed state camps. The garrison-like structures erected by the FSA aimed to address those concerns through a strictly regimented social structure created by disciplinary built environments that are clear in the aerial point-of-view.

In fact, this fear of Communist influence in the California agricultural labor scene was the primary reason the FSA designated photographer Arthur Rothstein to document activity at

the lower San Joaquin Valley camps in 1940. Spurred by relentless Congressional pressure—in large part due to the influence of agriculture lobbyists—the FSA sought to place the domestic and educational dimensions of its rural redevelopment strategy in clearer view. Eager to assuage these fears, the agency instructed Rothstein to focus his attention on the activities that emphasized the camp residents' adaptability to their new environments, particularly the community-based activities that promoted a modern approach to rural life, one that maintained an emphasis on the virtues of small scale agricultural practice and civic mindedness, but with an increased role for the federal government.

Social, economic, and political crises underpinned and justified the camps. Representational aesthetics was the answer to the questions they posed. Rothstein's images document a shift in federal rural policy, and in the process, answer the FSA request to place emphasis on the places and spaces most often occupied by women, children, and families. Here, typical of these scenes, children are shown playing against the backdrop of steel cabins that frame the upper edge of the photograph, nestled closely in the protective center of the camp's central courtyard. The design of the migrant camps aimed to answer other questions: what to do with a displaced surplus labor pool of failed white agrarians? How to most effectively combat the communistic possibilities of labor activism?

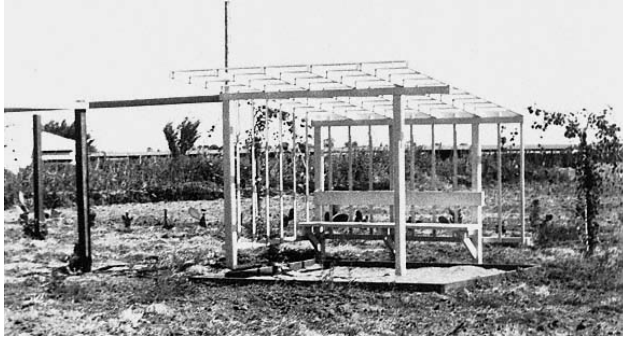


Figure 3.10. Eckbo's trellis style bench with sandbox. Photograph by Arthur Rothstein.  
Figure 3.11. Children in the Eckbo designed sandbox. Photograph by Arthur Rothstein.

What stands just out of view in Rothstein's photos—overhead—is another structure intended to offer an another answer and to convey a sense of strength and beauty in its seamless integration between nature and society: Eckbo's grape trellis, a well-intentioned but ultimately insufficient answer to the questions of social engineering posed by the camps (Figures 3.10-3.11). The trellis was the essence of the modernist dream: beautiful objects, houses, and material forms, great design that could be both aesthetically pleasing and encourage social engagements in the built environment that were meaningful. A well designed and placed bench and sandbox—however well imagined and executed—do not necessarily alter structural economic conditions and racial hierarchies, particularly as entrenched as they had become during this period. Nowhere was this fact more apparent than in Parlier, which was *not included* as a labor camp site in the federal plan. It had no geometrically designed layouts of steel cabins with modernist trellis areas and didactic gardens. That fact—the result of Parlier's own particular history—helps explain why the Mujeres Muralistas del Valle made the trip from Fresno to mount their mural.

During the early twentieth century, Parlier had been known as the “buckle of the raisin belt.” Anchored by the Sun Maid Raisin Company headquarters, the town served as the economic and cultural center for the raisin industry that had developed south of Fresno and

which included “raisin towns” such as Del Rey, Reedley, Dinuba, Selma, and Kingsburg. Incorporated in 1921, Parlier became home to the raisin industry elite, with growers and other raisin industry leaders making their homes close to the banks, packing houses, and administrative offices that had come to form the foundation of the corporate presence in the region. But during the Depression, the once-flourishing raisin economy sputtered. The result was a slow re-spatialization of the raisin industry’s local and regional networks: as raisin consumption fell, companies began closing or consolidating their businesses, and Parlier’s Main Street became nearly vacant, as did the surrounding fields, packing houses, and distribution centers.

The corporate disinvestment of the early 1930s meant that the town functioned, first, as an informal housing site. In the turmoil of the Depression, it became one of many sites that hosted informal camps for migrants and out of luck workers. As the crisis wore on, however, the town’s character changed. Mexicans—the subjects of forcible repatriation—were denied access to the federal programs, and Parlier increasingly became increasingly a site for Mexican settlement. No longer an elite center, the town became home to a racialized landscape of Mexican heritage workers living on the economic edge. The federal government saw no need to send Garrett Eckbo and his designers to Parlier.

As the Valley economy started to rebound during World War II, however, the situation changed again. The surge in economic activity required additional labor capacity and new forms of housing. Almost overnight, the region went from a threadbare production level—with a large surplus of idle workers—to high levels of production that often produced labor shortages. In response, post-war farm labor housing experienced another major shift: from providing housing to the desperate homeless, it now looked to lure, and then to accommodate, workers. Always a complicated mix, this new housing regime took four major forms: federal camps, state camps,

grower-sponsored camps, and the informal housing in backhouses and squatters camps that the federal plans all aimed to eliminate. Without the major reinvestment represented by an FSA camp, Parlier was in danger of becoming an example of the last of these: an informal, unplanned, haphazard bedroom community for the surrounding grape industry. And so, at the very end of the federal effort to build modernist-inflected, locally-sensitive labor camps, Parlier received its camp.

The messy effects of the rapid wartime expansion were particularly acute in Parlier, given its historic role in the development of the grape industry and its early exclusion from the FSA housing program. During the economic growth of the 1940s and 1950s, the region experienced a resurgence in raisin production, and it enjoyed steady population growth as the fields swelled with larger and larger grape harvests. By the 1960s, as raisins became a staple in the American diet, Parlier—now with a utilitarian state-funded labor camp—was again a flourishing center of the industry.

But a major shift in capital and demographics had occurred during those troubled decades. As a growers' town, Parlier's pre-Depression population had been nearly 95% white residents. Now, most of the raisin industry's management cohort had relocated to surrounding towns; by 1977 the population of Parlier was over 80 percent Mexican. Parlier then, through its loss of economic capital found itself with a new challenge: understanding and cohering the *cultural* capital of its new residents.

The Parlier labor camp was built in 1958 and included four apartment buildings, a community center with three classrooms, and a public health clinic. The apartment buildings opened out into a central courtyard that included a small baseball diamond and an enclosure with picnic benches and cooking grills. The 128 units were built to accommodate multigenerational

households and included a modest bathroom, kitchenette, living room, and two bedrooms. The courtyard connects to the community center and to the street. There are four trees in the courtyard and three on the exterior.

The neighborhood sits on the very edge of Parlier: to the north is the market, highway, and modest single family homes. To the south is the unincorporated part of town, where squatters' camps and other informal housing remains prevalent. Main Street is visible from the inside but it is difficult to see from behind the cement wall. The highway is not visible. These state camps, built in the 1950s and 1960s, did not receive the same level of design attention as the federal camps of the Depression era, resulting in a choked utilitarian modernism characterized by austere design elements. These later camps did not take into account the local landscape and did not aim to encourage community building through use of green space. The intent was pure efficiency: with the resurgence of squatters' camps, backhouses, and other informal dwellings, the state simply sought to place workers out of view. It was here, in 1978, that the Mujeres Muralistas del Valle work would rise on anchored four by four posts, lined up on a line of blue chalk.



## Picturing Rural Dissent



Figure 3.12. Inset, lower panel, Mujeres Muralistas del Valle mural at Parlier (1978).

Although Mujeres Muralistas del Valle took influence from their San Francisco counterparts and tended to not directly address political action, the panels forming the edge of the second half of the Parlier mural do exactly that, highlighting an often-overlooked moment in Chicana/o civil rights known as the “Chicano Revolt,” which provide a final vital piece of context for understanding why the mural was mounted in Parlier (Figure 3.12). On the right edge, one sees the dream of an educated rural society—a nurse, a teacher, a judge, a musician—grown from the activist and agricultural work featured at the left of the left edge. The storm clouds above—and the stillness of the women huddled below—signal to the viewer the rough journey underway for these artists and their contemporaries as they battled as young activists, artists, and students to bring their dreams forward and into the light.

One such battle had recently taken place nearby. By the early 1970s, the benefits of increased political power in the region coming from the success of the United Farm Workers (UFW) collided with Parlier’s increasing status as a farm worker town with a majority Mexican heritage population living in a slapped-together housing camp and a collection of informal backhouses. If its racial demographics had shifted, however, Parlier was still under the lingering

control of a mobile white elite. Conflict was seemingly inevitable. In January 1971, two Fresno State students with roots in Parlier organized a series of events in support of John Martinez who hoped to become the first Chicano Chief of Police. As a small town, mostly reliant on the public works infrastructure of Fresno County, the position was one of only a few paid positions, and carried with it a certain level of prestige.<sup>39</sup>

Instead, a white man, Pat Carnahan, was appointed Chief at the City Council meeting, even though he was fairly new to the force, and had recently been involved in a scandal regarding allegations that he had used excessive force with Chicano youth. In response, students Arcadio Viveros and Andrew Benites asked for a special hearing on the issue, which the City Council swiftly rejected. Over the next sixteen months they held a series of city-wide marches, vigils, and demonstrations that were successful in both raising the profile of the issue and consolidating a larger sense of civic mindedness among a disparate set of residents. Their work was largely successful: in addition to organizing support for the Chief of Police position, they recruited a full slate of Chicano candidates to run in the April and July 1972 city elections and nearly all were elected to office.<sup>40</sup>

Taking control of Main Street and City Hall offered a powerfully visible instance of an important constellation of new realities: the demographic imbalances found in the Valley, the political energy of the broader Chicano movement, the angular and local potency of the UFW, and the strategic choice to engage in electoral politics. But where their *organizing* strategy relied on more collective forms of negotiation and consensus building, their *political* strategy relied on what political scientists Adaljiza Sosa Riddell and Robert Aguillo Jr. identify as “confrontation politics,” which quickly tested the limits of the political system in which this newly elected group of Chicano public officials had to work. Bound by the limitations of the small city

budget—which was often subject to county level decisions—the group struggled to govern effectively. In the long run, the result was mixed: six years later, when the mural was installed down the street from City Hall, Chicanos were still holding the majority of city leadership positions—and had begun offering a more culturally relevant set of programming through its offices and programs—but they had encountered numerous challenges along the way as they navigated the labyrinth of daily city management responsibilities.<sup>41</sup> Nothing was easy in either Parlier’s labor camp or its City Hall.

As the mural’s themes and overarching aesthetics suggest, less overtly political forms of visibility and community engagement also mattered in the takeover of the city government. Families, kin networks, women’s organizing, and cultural messaging all proved central to the effort. Only a few years later, then, another important form of political visibility—a plywood mural that fused political claims to aesthetic production, with a dash of historical memory and gender politics thrown in for good measure—would rise in Parlier. Among other things, the mural was both the product of the regional design modernisms of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, which exacerbated the political and physical marginalization of Mexican heritage people in the region. It was also a resistance to the failures of those programs, to the environmental changes, to the labor regimes, to the masculinist politics of the movement.

By installing a large scale piece, focusing on Chicana contributions to the cultural life of the Valley, *Mujeres Muralistas del Valle* offered a corrective to a dominant narrative built on Martin Theodor Kearney’s romantic images of the rural Jeffersonian agrarian paradise. The land was instead a place of agricultural industry, of flexible labor pools, and poor living conditions, the site of a local Chicano/a revolt and an emblem of the issues that underpinned Cesar Chavez’s organizing efforts and the work of the United Farm Workers. Parlier lacked the didactic

modernist design that Garrett Eckbo hoped would lead to social hygiene and happiness, but the mural drew on a wide range of modernist visual vocabularies, channeling European modernism through Diego Rivera and the form of the mural, and grabbing a bit of California regionalism even as the collective took a strong visual sense of land and labor from their own vernacular aesthetics. As important, *Mujeres Muralistas del Valle* painted *as* women, in direct response to a Chicano mural tradition that was largely male and masculinist. And they painted as Fresno regionalists, artists with their own alternative narrative: the cultural landscape of the lower San Joaquin Valley, they suggested, holds a sense of grandeur in cultural terms, if one knows where to look.<sup>42</sup>

### **Last Words on Firstness**

The spirit of the *huelga*, the strike, became an important legacy of the March to Sacramento in the years following Chavez's March. In aesthetic terms, that spirit branched out, as the *Teatro Campesino* took on new challenges, even while retaining its political commitments. Murals, art, literature, magazines and other endeavors represented a similar expansion, even while these also found ways to return again and again to the rural land and labor that centered the movement. The spirit of the *huelga* took particular form in Parlier in the Chicano Revolt. From organizing farm workers in their homes, organizers expanded to the gym/community center, continued their efforts with a bold and controversial walk along the main business and transportation corridor in town that was inspired by NFWA and UFW activity in that period, and culminated in the election of new Chicano/a leadership in town. These things were made possible by the desire—particularly among young student leaders—to make the cause of the farm worker more visible across a wide range of cultural and political expression.

The desire to place more women in view in these moments of dissent was captured in the mural at Parlier just a few short years later. While Chicanos remained marginalized as a group, Chicanas remained further out of view in the dominant cultural production of the era, and this mural—both as process and product—offers an important rare glimpse into how Chicanas saw and imagined their place in the cultural landscape of Civil Rights era Fresno.

The placement of the mural at the Parlier Migrant Center calls attention to the ongoing marginalization of Mexican heritage people despite their centrality. They too, could bring a rich garden to life even as, just down the road, in the FSA camps intended for Okies and other Dust Bowl era migrants, rehabilitation programs flourished amid architectural designs that would become celebrated for their attentiveness to the more social dimensions of the migrant experience.

The Parlier mural has become a key site of memory for Chicana arts, often invoked for its aesthetics, its “firstness,” and its powerful race and gender politics. The mural is a memory only, however, and in this too, Parlier is implicated. The mural was vandalized shortly after that emotional day when the chalk line snapped and the posts were mounted and the panels hung. Retrieved to a nearby school gymnasium, it was lost in a fire, and lives on only in a few rare photographs. Who defaced and later destroyed the mural and with what intent? The answer to this question, alas, remains a mystery.

What matters is this. Chicana/o Fresno, as imagined in the final panels, reflects the dream that these women held: that the works, as community based artists, students, and mothers, that they helped bring into life in subsequent decades would echo the subtle leadership expressed by the *soldadera* figure in both their mural and the Bernal mural. They were care-takers of the cultural revolution that was underway in greater Fresno during this period and they helped

cultivate a passion for an aesthetically-based politics that, in the process, would honor the contributions of a range of rural subjects: the activist, the student, the mother, the lawyer, the doctor, the children. All were part of the land and the work that shaped it, even as both land and labor shaped the art and politics that came together through marches and murals, prints and pilgrimages and—as we shall see—houses and gardens.

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<sup>1</sup> Antonio Bernal's mural at *El Centro Campesino Cultural* in Del Rey, California is widely credited as the first Chicana/o mural (1968), the first of many such pieces in the early period of Chicana/o mural production that would visually narrate the Chicana/o movement it would come to help shape. For more on the early Chicana/o art history and criticism that places this piece at the front of this early phase of production, see: Shifra M. Goldman, "The Iconography of Chicano Self-Determination: Race, Ethnicity, and Class" in *Art Journal* (New York: Vol. 49, no. 2, Summer 1990) and *Dimensions of the Americas: Art and Social Change in Latin America* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1994); Richard Griswold del Castillo, Teresa McKenna, Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, eds. *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965-1985* (Los Angeles: Wight Art Gallery, University of California, Los Angeles, 1991); Peter Howard Selz, *Art of Engagement: Visual Politics in California and Beyond* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), p.171; Eva Sperling Cockcroft and Holly Barnett-Sanchez, *Signs from the Heart: California Chicano Murals* (1993).

<sup>2</sup> The *soldadera*, along with Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, have become one of the most recognizable images in Mexican heritage visual culture. For more on the history of her presence in the Revolution era camps and the later representational journeys her figure would take, see: Elizabeth Salas, *Soldadera in the Mexican Military: Myth and History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990); Elena Poniatowska, *Las Soldaderas: Women of the Mexican Revolution* (El Paso, Texas: Cinco Puntos Press, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Joaquin Murrieta remains an alluring figure in the popular culture of California's Gold Rush, although his origins remain unclear. For more on how his legend evolved, particularly in the pages of San Francisco's most significant newspaper during the period, *The Californian*, see: Susan Lee Johnson, *Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000); John C. Harard, "John Rollin Ridge's Joaquín Murieta: Sensation, Hispanicism, and Cosmopolitanism." *Western American Literature* 49, no. 4 (2015): 321-349; Lori Lee Wilson, *The Joaquin Band: The History Behind the Legend* (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> For more on how these two figures shaped this major era in Mexican history, see: Alan Knight, *The Mexican Revolution, Volumes I and II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); John Womack, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968).

<sup>5</sup> As I argued in Chapter 1, visual culture served as a major tool in Grape Strike (1965-1970) organizing in the Central Valley and was particularly significant to organizing efforts during The March to Sacramento. For more on how visual cultural shaped Chavez's larger body of work, see: Max Benevidez, "Cesar Chavez Nurtured Seeds of Art," *Los Angeles Times*, April 28, 1993; "Cultivating Creativity: The Arts and the Farm Workers' Movement During the 1960s and '70s" at J. Paul Leonard Library at San Francisco State University:

<http://library.sfsu.edu/exhibit/cultivating-creativity-arts-and-farm-workers-movement-during-1960s-and-1970s>

<sup>6</sup> For more on how visual culture shaped and was shaped by Civil Rights era dissent, see: Elizabeth Abel, *Signs of the Times: The Visual Politics of Jim Crow* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010) and Maurice Berger, *For All the World to See: Visual Culture and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010). For more on how the Vietnam War became a particularly important issue in Civil Rights era Chicana/o organizing, particularly its solidarity efforts, see: Lorena Oropeza, *Raza Sí!, Guerra No!: Chicano Protest and Patriotism during the Viet Nam War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Marcia Eymann and Charles Wollenberg, *What's Going On?: California and the Vietnam Era*. (Oakland: Oakland Museum of California, 2004); George Mariscal, *Aztlán and Viet Nam: Chicano and Chicana Experiences of the War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

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<sup>7</sup> For an incisive account of Chavez's presence in the farm labor movement and the political strategies he would develop and implement as part of the UFW leadership, see: Matt Garcia, *From the Jaws of Victory: The Triumph and Tragedy of Cesar Chavez and the Farm Worker Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> These solidarity efforts between farm workers and their supporters such as students, churches, and leftist political organizations would be featured prominently in the pages of the UFW newsletter *El Malcriado*, often accompanied by images from Mexican Revolution era artists such as Diego Rivera and Jose Guadalupe Posada, particularly material dating from 1965-1970. Digital copies of this print material, including issues of the newsletter and a rich set of accompanying flyers, drawing, and posters can be found in University of California, San Diego's Farm Worker Documentation Project archive, located at: <https://libraries.ucsd.edu/farmworkermovement/archives/>

<sup>9</sup> Luis Valdez and El Teatro Campesino, *Actos* (San Juan Bautista, California: Cucaracha Publications, 1971), pp.3-4. For more on the history of El Teatro Campesino and its early motivation, goals, and thematics, see: Luis Valdez, *Luis Valdez—Early Works: Actos, Bernabe and Pensamiento Serpentino* (1990); Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez, *El Teatro Campesino: Theatre in the Chicano Movement* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> The Central Valley has not received substantial attention from scholars of Chicana/o visual culture and its collected archives remain relatively sparse. Important scholarship has begun to explore the work of the Sacramento area art collective the Royal Chicano Air Force (RCAF), particularly projects led by Jose and Malaquias Montoya; see: for more on how this recent scholarship has explored the RCAF's contribution to Sacramento area Chicana/o visual culture, see: Stephanie Sauer, *The Accidental Archives of the Royal Chicano Air Force* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016) and Maria Ella Diaz, *Flying Under the Radar with the Royal Chicano Air Force. Mapping a Chicano/a Art History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017). Stockton based artist Rupert Garcia and Dinuba born artist Ester Hernandez (whose work I explore in Chapter 3) have also gained attention as Bay Area based artists with strong Central Valley ties. For more on Garcia's work, see: Rupert Garcia, *Prints and posters, 1967-1990 = Grabados y afiches, 1967-1990* (San Francisco: Publications Dept. of The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1991); Rupert Garcia and Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *Aspects of resistance* (New York City: Alternative Museum, 1993). The Fresno area, thus, remains the primary gap in this research and is best represented in the modest collection of material devoted to artists Ernie Palomino and John Sierra, located in the Shifra M. Goldman Papers at Papers (CEMA 119 Goldman Series 2, Box A Fresno area art, including John Sierra's mural "Planting of Cultures," c.1970.) and Ernesto R. Palomino Papers (CEMA 6 Box 4, Folder 3 on La Brocha; Box 1, folders 1-3 on biography and Fresno area art) Department of Special Collections, UC Santa Barbara Library, University of California, Santa Barbara.

<sup>11</sup> Cecilia Aranaydo (artist) in conversation with the author May 2014 and June 2016.

<sup>12</sup> La Brocha del Valle has been identified as a significant contributor to the Fresno area arts and culture scene. See: Shifra M. Goldman, *Dimensions of the Americas: Art and Social Change in Latin America* (1994) and "How, Why, Where, and When it All Happened: Chicano Murals of California" in *Signs from the Heart: California Chicano Murals* (Venice: Social and Public Art Resource Center, 1990), Eva Sperling Cockcroft and Holly Barnett-Sanchez, eds.

<sup>13</sup> Mujeres Muralistas del Valle have also been noted by important Chicana/o art scholars—although not at length, as well—in several early Chicana/o art exhibits and catalogs including: Eva Sperling Cockcroft and Holly Barnett-Sanchez, eds., *Signs from the Heart: California Chicano Murals* (Venice: Social and Public Art Resource Center, 1990); Diana Burgess Fuller and Daniela Salvioni, *Art, Women, California 1950-2000: Parallels and Intersections* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Jill Fields, *Entering the Picture: Judy Chicago, the Fresno Feminist Art Program, and the Collective Visions of Women Artists* (New York: Routledge, 2012); David Maciel, Isidro D. Ortiz, and María Herrera-Sobek, *Chicano Renaissance: Contemporary Cultural Trends* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> For more on the aesthetic significance of this period in Mexican visual culture, see: James Oles. *Art and Architecture in Mexico* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2013); Justino Fernández, *A Guide to Mexican Art, from its Beginnings to the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1973). For more on the specific ways Mexican artists interfaced with emerging trends in early modern art, see: Landau, Ellen G. 2013. *Mexico and American Modernism*. New Haven: Yale University Press. For more on Diego Rivera's early influences, see: Jean Charlot, *Mexican Art and the Academy of San Carlos, 1785-1945* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1962).

<sup>15</sup> The mural, in this period of Mexican history, became a particularly significant record—and locus—of political, economic, social, and aesthetic power. For more on Rivera's role in this story, see: Mary K. Coffey, *How a Revolutionary Art became Official Culture: Murals, Museums, and the Mexican State* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012). For more on Rivera's work produced at the National Palace, see: Leonard Folgarait, *Mural Painting and Social Revolution in Mexico, 1920-1940: Art of the New Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

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1998); Alejandro Anreus, Leonard Folgarait, Robin Adele Greeley, *Mexican Muralism: A Critical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press).

<sup>16</sup> The mural was just one of many forms of visual culture to gain support from the Mexican government during this period. For more on how other forms, such as dancing and small crafts became tools of the revolution, see: Rick A. Lopez, *Crafting Mexico: Intellectuals, Artisans, and the State after the Revolution* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2010). For more on the environmental history of modern Mexico, see: Christopher R. Broyer, ed. *A Land Between Waters: Environmental Histories of Modern Mexico* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012).

<sup>17</sup> John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), p.141.

<sup>18</sup> Water management, particularly irrigation for large scale agricultural use, has formed a rich body of literature in interdisciplinary studies of the landscapes of the US West. For more on how these issues have remade California environments, see: Norris Hundley, *The Great Thirst: Californians and Water: A History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Robert William De Roos, *The Thirsty Land: The Story of the Central Valley Project*. (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1948); Donald Pisani, *From the Family Farm to Agribusiness: The Irrigation Crusade in California and the West, 1850-1931* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Stoll, Steven. *The Fruits of Natural Advantage: Making the Industrial Countryside in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). For more on how the federal and state water management story evolved in political networks, see: United States, *Central Valley Project Studies History* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of the Interior, Bureau of Reclamation, 1943); Paul S. Taylor, "Central Valley Project: Water and Land" *Western Political Quarterly* 2 (1): 228; Tim Strohane, *Drought, Water Law, and the Origins of California's Central Valley Project* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2016).

<sup>19</sup> For more on how the early cultural landscapes of northern Mexico and early California took shape and changed over time, see: Steven W. Hackel, *Alta California: Peoples in Motion, Identities in Formation, 1769-1850* (Berkeley: Huntington-USC Institute on California and the West, 2010); Herbert Eugene Bolton. *The Spanish Borderlands* (1921); Albert L. Hurtado, *Herbert Eugene Bolton: Historian of the American Borderlands* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Verónica Castillo-Muñoz, *The Other California: Land, Identity, and Politics on the Mexican Borderlands* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017); Robert L. Bettinger, *Orderly Anarchy: Sociopolitical Evolution in Aboriginal California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015); Lisbeth Haas, *Saints and Citizens: Indigenous Histories of Colonial Missions and Mexican California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014); Paul S. Taylor, *Foundations of California Rural Society* (San Francisco: California Historical Society, 1945).

<sup>20</sup> For more on this important moment of change between Spanish, Mexican, and US control during the mid-nineteenth century, see: Leonard Pitt, *The Decline of the Californios: A Social History of the Spanish-Speaking Californians, 1846-1890* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). Shelton, Tamara Venit, *A Squatter's Republic: Land and the Politics of Monopoly in California and the Nation, 1850-1900*. (Berkeley: Huntington-USC Institute on California and the West, University of California Press, 2013).

<sup>21</sup> Madley, Benjamin. 2016. An American genocide: the United States and the California Indian catastrophe, 1846-1873 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

<sup>22</sup> For more on how mining, mining culture, shaped early California, see: John F. Burns and Richard J. Orsi, *Taming the Elephant Politics, Government, and Law in Pioneer California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). Kevin Starr and Richard J. Orsi. *Rooted in Barbarous Soil: People, Culture, and Community in Gold Rush California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). Kirker, Harold. "Eldorado Gothic: Gold Rush Architects and Architecture." *California Historical Society Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (1959): 31-46. Erwin Gustav Gudde and Elisabeth K. Gudde, *California Gold Camps: A Geographical and Historical Dictionary of Camps, Towns, and Localities Where Gold Was Found and Mined, Wayside Stations and Trading Centers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009). James A. Sandos, "'Because He Is a Liar and a Thief': Conquering the Residents of 'Old' California, 1850-1880." *California History* 79, no. 2 (2000): 86-112.

<sup>23</sup> Labor inequities have long defined California's agricultural sector. For more on the effects of this tiered system of labor, see: Paul S. Taylor, "Foundations of California Rural Society." *California Historical Society Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (1945): 193-228. Don Mitchell, *The Lie of the Land: Migrant Workers and the California Landscape* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

<sup>24</sup> The place of work in the American environmental story forms a small but important part of environmental studies scholarship. For more on labor as a site of environmental knowledge production, see: Richard White, "Are you an environmentalist or do you work for a living?" in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon, 1996. For recent examples of how this labor has shaped the California cultural landscape—beyond



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the spotted owl controversy profiled by White—see: Fred Glass, *From Mission to Microchip a History of the California Labor Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016); Maria E. Montoya, “The Not-So-Free Labor in the American Southwest” in *Empire and Liberty: The Civil War and the West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015); Ryan Dearing, *The Filth of Progress: Immigrants, Americans and the Building of Canals and Railroads in the West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).

<sup>25</sup> For more on the turn from small scale ranching and farming to industrialized agriculture in California, see: David Iglar, *Industrial Cowboys: Miller & Lux and the Transformation of the Far West, 1850-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); John Ryan Fischer, *Cattle Colonialism: An Environmental History of the Conquest of California and Hawai‘i* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Lawrence James Jelinek, “Property of Every Kind: Ranching and Farming During the Gold-Rush Era.” *California History* 77, no. 4 (1998): 233-49; John Ludeke, “The No Fence Law of 1874: Victory for San Joaquin Valley Farmers.” *California History* 59, no. 2 (1980): 98-115; Karen R. Merrill, *Public Lands and Political Meaning: Ranchers, the Government, and the Property Between Them* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). And for more on the important connections that these changes brought to the regional watershed, see: Douglas H. Strong, “The Sierra Forest Reserve: The Movement to Preserve the San Joaquin Valley Watershed” in *California Historical Society Quarterly* 46, no. 1 (1967): 3-17.

<sup>26</sup> In “Parlier, The Hub of Raisin America: A Local History of Capitalist Development and The Quest for Chicano Community Control: A Case Study” (Berkeley: Institute for the Study of Social Change, University of California, 1978), Larry Dean Trujillo offers a brief outline of Parlier’s founding, focusing on IN Parlier’s resistance to pressure to join large scale growing operations taking shape around his parcel and in the wider region. For more on the cultural dimensions of these geographies, see: Wilbur Zelinsky, *The Enigma of Ethnicity: Another American Dilemma* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa City Press, 2000).

<sup>27</sup> “Postoffices and Pensions.” *Los Angeles Times* (1886-1922), Feb 26, 1898. “W. W. Parlier, Fresno County Leader, Dies.” *Los Angeles Times* (1923-Current File), Feb 05, 1962.

<sup>28</sup> The Fresno Historical Society is the primary repository for material related to the Central California Colony and its related business ventures including Chateau Fresno. The most significant of these holdings are held in the M. Theo. Kearney (Martin Theodore Kearney) Papers, 1887-1907, 1966. A secondary set of material related to Kearney and this period of Fresno city and county history can be found in the Kearney Ranch Records, 1873-1949 and the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>29</sup> As the leading women’s mural collective practicing in San Francisco during this period, Mujeres Muralistas, a relatively well documented mural scene, the collective has received a generous amount of scholarly attention. For more on their contribution to community development in the Bay Area, particularly through their original set of projects in San Francisco’s 24<sup>th</sup> Street corridor, see: Maria Ochoa, *Creative Collectives: Chicana Painters Working in Community* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003) and Tere Romo. “A Collective History: Las Mujeres Muralistas” in *Art/Women/California, 1950-2000: Parallels and Intersections* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). For visual context of how this collective’s work fit into the broader set of productions underway in the city at this time, see: Timothy W. Drescher. *San Francisco Murals: Community Creates Its Muse, 1914-1994* (Saint Paul: Pogo Press, 1994).

<sup>30</sup> For critical context on the collective’s place in this era of Chicana/o visual culture, see: Shifra M. Goldman. “How, Why, Where, and When it All Happened: Chicano Murals of California” in *Signs from the Heart: California Chicano Murals* (Venice: Social and Public Art Resource Center, 1990), Eva Sperling Cockcroft and Holly Barnett-Sanchez, eds. Tomas Ybarra-Frausto. “Arte Chicano: Images of a Community” in *Signs from the Heart: California Chicano Murals* (Venice: Social and Public Art Resource Center, 1990), Eva Sperling Cockcroft and Holly Barnett-Sanchez, eds. pp. 54-67.

<sup>31</sup> For more on California based Chicana visual culture in this period, see: Amalia Mesa-Bains. “Califa/Califas: A Brief History of Chicana California” and Jennifer Gonzalez, “Landing in California” in *Art/Women/California, 1950-2000: Parallels and Intersections* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). For more on how spirituality shaped this era of Chicana visual culture, see: Laura Pérez, *Chicana Art: The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetic Altarities* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007) and Amalia Mesa-Bains, *Ceremony of Spirit: Nature and Memory in Contemporary Latino Art* (San Francisco: Mexican Museum, 1993).

<sup>32</sup> For more on how FSA photography was used to promote federal rural redevelopment initiatives, see: Johnathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Roy Emerson Stryker and Nancy Wood, *In this proud Land: America 1935-1943 as seen in the FSA photographs* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1975).

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<sup>33</sup> Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: the southern plains in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); Mathew Paul Bonnifield, *The Dust Bowl Men, Dirt, and Depression* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1979).

<sup>34</sup> For more on how these designers imagined the social implications of their designs, see: DeMars, Vernon. "Social Planning for Western Agriculture." *Task*, no.2 (1941):4-9 and Greg Hise. "From Roadside Camps to Garden Homes: Housing and Community Planning for California's Migrant Work Force, 1935-1941." In *Gender, Class, and Shelter*, ed. Elizabeth Cromley and Carter Hudgins, pp. 243-58 (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996).

<sup>35</sup> Eckbo would emerge in this period as a key member—along with his Harvard School of Design classmates—as early advocates of merging science and aesthetics in their public commissions, a move typically reserved at that point in the early and mid-twentieth century for elite spaces like private gardens or urban parks. For more on their early formations of these design principles, see: Garrett Eckbo, Daniel U. Kiley, and James C. Rose, "Landscape Design in the Rural Environment." *Architectural Record* 87, no. 2 (February 1940): 74-79, "Farm Security Administration." *Architectural Forum* 71, no. 1 (January 1941): 2-16, "Farm Security Administration: 72 Permanent Units-Rental, Taft, California." *Architectural Forum* 76, no. 5 (May 1942): 296-98.

<sup>36</sup> Eckbo would enjoy a long career as a landscape designer, and return frequently to these public design concerns. See: Garrett Eckbo, "Architecture and the Landscape" in *Arts and Architecture* 81, no.10 (October 1964):22-23, 37-39, *Landscape for Living* (Architectural Record, F.W. Dodge Corporation, 1950), "Farm Security Administration Projects" in *Arts and Architecture* 63, no. 1 (January 1946): 34, "What is Landscape Architecture?" in *Arts and Architecture* 62 (October 1945): 40-41, 52.

<sup>37</sup> For more on how Eckbo's FSA designs fit into the larger modernist turn underway in this period, see: Marc Trieb and Dorothee Imbert, *Garrett Eckbo: Modern Landscapes for Living*; Marc Trieb, *Modern Landscape Architecture: A Critical Review* (Cambridge: The MIT Press. Eckbo, 1994); Garrett Eckbo, *The Art of Home Landscaping* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co.); Albert H. Good, *Patterns from the golden age of rustic design: park and recreation structures from the 1930s* (Lanham, Md: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 2003).

<sup>38</sup> For more on this period in Mexican American history, see: Balderrama, Francisco E., and Raymond Rodriguez. 2006. *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s*. Albuquerque, N.M.: University of New Mexico Press; George J. Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American: ethnicity, culture, and identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>39</sup> For more on the inter-cultural and intra-cultural challenges Chicana activists faced in this period of political organizing, see: Maylei Blackwell. *Chicana Power: Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).

<sup>40</sup> The Los Angeles Times provides a small but rare window into this political moment that unfolded in Parlier during the early 1970s. Though a series of articles, the major plot points of this story of Chicano resistance gained a state-wide, and perhaps even regional, audience. A selection of its key writings include: Dove, Art. "Violence Brings Emergency at Fresno State." *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*, May 21, 1970. "Parlier Mayor Pleads Innocent in Store Fire." *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*, Sep 28, 1971. "City Boosters Hold Meeting." *Los Angeles Times (1886-1922)*, Jul 06, 1921. "Former Parlier Mayor Cleared in Arson Trial." *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*, Apr 27, 1972. "Fire Destroys Store of Parlier's Mayor." *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*, Sep 02, 1971. "State College Student New Parlier Mayor." *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*, Apr 20, 1972. "Parlier Police Quit in Feud." *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*, Apr 16, 1972. Willis, Doug. "Town, Numbed by Violence and Fear, Braces for More Trouble." *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*, Sep 19, 1971. "Deputies Quell New Mexican-American Unrest in Parlier." *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*, Jul 28, 1971. Jones, Jack. "San Joaquin Valley Latins Turn to Elections to Upset Status Quo." *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*, May 08, 1972. Jones, J. (1972, Jun 04). Chicanos' groundwork pays off in elections. *Los Angeles Times*.

<sup>41</sup> As seen in Blackwell's coverage, the majority of scholarly attention to Chicana/o Civil Rights dissent has focused on campaigns in South Texas. The Parlier case, by contrast, has received far less attention: Adaljiza Sosa Riddell and Robert Aguillo Jr., "A Case of Chicano Politics: Parlier, California Significance of the Events Leading to the Chicano Takeover of Local Government in 1972" in *Aztlan* 9, (10, 1978): 1-22 and Larry Dean Trujillo, "Parlier, The Hub of Raisin America: A Local History of Capitalist Development and The Quest for Chicano Community Control: A Case Study" (Berkeley: Institute for the Study of Social Change, University of California, 1978).

<sup>42</sup> For more on the possibilities towns like Parlier present to landscape architects and vernacular landscape scholars, see: Sandoval-Strausz, Andre. "Viewpoint: Latino Vernaculars and the Emerging National Landscape." *Buildings & Landscapes* 20, no. 1 (2013): 1-18.

**Chapter 3**  
**Dinuba: Chicana/o Printmaking in the Home of the Raisin Industry**

*A Poster, 1982*



Figure 4.1. Sun Mad (1982) by Ester Hernandez.

Completed in 1982, Ester Hernandez's *Sun Mad* stands as one of the most widely circulated—and most iconic—images in Chicana/o art (Figure 4.1). The familiarity of its imagery—a reworking of the Sun Maid raisin logo in the spirit of Mexican Revolution era printmaker Jose Guadalupe Posada—and its central message—a pointed critique of pesticide use in the agricultural industry—make the piece both instantly recognizable and resonant, a kind of

short hand for expressing the high cost of cheap food in America during the late twentieth century.

This move—a searing fact, simply expressed—is a defining characteristic of Hernandez’s visual language and can be seen across the large body of work she has steadily produced during the last several decades.<sup>1</sup> From the early drawings she contributed to campus publications as a student at the University of California, Berkeley during the 1970s, through her ongoing work in printmaking, pastel-based portraiture, drawings, and installations (including numerous collaborations with film-makers, writers, and activists), Hernandez’s style might be imagined as equal parts wit and grit, a straight-forward and incisive homage to the everyday experiences of the people, landscapes, politics, and histories that surround her.<sup>2</sup>

The architecture of *Sun Mad* engages the viewer with a kind of generous and frank efficiency: a quick tour around its focal points provides swift, ample, and unequivocal commentary on issues related to labor rights, environmental justice, ecofeminism, and agribusiness. A large yellow circle is set just above center, establishing both a line into the image through the figure set within its center and a diffused set of lines out through the pointed edges of the small triangles that surround it. The sun, and its bright rays, place emphasis on the smartly dressed woman set within it. With an oversized red bonnet and broad basket (handmade from dried grape vines), the skeletal face draws attention to the inconsistencies—or disinformation—that the agricultural industry drew upon in its advertising in twentieth century California to create the perception of health to promote its products. Hernandez’s image—through a Posada-like use of satire in the Mexican graphic arts tradition that flourished during the Mexican Revolution—*Sun Mad* offers a counterpoint by emphasizing the toxicity of grapes, noting that they are “unnaturally grown” through the aggressive use of pesticides including insecticides, miticides,

herbicides, and fungicides. Held at womb level, their placement also brings subtle attention to the disproportionate effects for female farmworkers, particularly on their reproductive systems.<sup>3</sup>

The basket is also important because it brings attention to the rural aesthetic practices that repurpose materials such as dried vines into vernacular domestic arts such as baskets and wreaths. This kind of decorative basket is better suited for home display than heavy use in the harvest, obscuring the reality of the sheer scale of industrial grape production. The eighteen pound cartons are stacked high and with swift precision, requiring not a gentle touch suggested here by the pastoral basket but instead a more rugged engagement requiring the use of gloves, long-sleeve shirts, and sturdy hats to protect from the hundred degree heat typical in the region during the harvest season.

Scholars have shrewdly recognized the semiotic power of the image, and it has enjoyed broad use across a number of disciplines. It is, not surprisingly, a landmark in Chicana/o aesthetic and political discourse. The sheer volume of its use attests to its facility—and utility—in communicating complex social and environmental concerns to diverse audiences.<sup>4</sup> Passionate, precise, and presented in an accessible format, the image has a familiarity that has also gained wide favor in museums, galleries, and among the general public.<sup>5</sup> In other words, even if a viewer has not seen the image previously, any familiarity with its thematics, aesthetics, landscape, or the cultural heritage it references produces a sense of intimacy: it *feels* like you have seen it before, or, *should* have seen it all along.

In fact, perhaps this is the enduring gift of the image, a gift that simultaneously haunts it: because many of its central messages and lessons *are* self-evident, *Sun Mad* it has become as ubiquitous as the agricultural advertising and *calavera* imagery it references—but has yet to enjoy the depth of treatment that works of its cultural significance tend to receive. A closer look

at the critical attention the piece has received—while impressive in its breadth—reveals a dearth of historical analysis, particularly in relation to the traditional formalist readings so important to understanding the aesthetic and cultural significance of the piece. What does *Sun Mad* tell us about Chicano/a environmental and aesthetic politics? And how might we pursue that question, in terms of its relation to the material landscapes, political and economic histories, and aesthetic traditions that gave it life?

To look more closely at *Sun Mad* requires us to locate the vernacular landscape from which the image emerged: the back-roads of raisin country, a landscape that came alive with startling speed during the twentieth century through a series of massive public and private investments required to transform a desert landscape into a lush, productive garden.<sup>6</sup> This was the rich cultural landscape that nurtured Hernandez's artistic style and political voice, given shape to and through the larger set of historical forces that shaped it. The story of *Sun Mad* requires a close reading of the everyday sights and sounds of the raisin industry. And, by stepping inside the houses, gardens, and yards of the Hernandez family—across generations—we can touch what often remains elusive in the history and cultural production of the Central Valley (but where *Sun Mad* is so instructive): how women of Mexican heritage have improved the cultural life of the Central Valley through their attentiveness to long-standing visual and placemaking traditions. In what follows, I'll trace four elements central to the aesthetics of placemaking in the Valley: the non-human environment; the rise of an industrial raisin industry in Central Valley towns like Dinuba; the aesthetics and commercial imagery that sought to represent the Valley and its grape landscapes; and the vernacular histories and aesthetics that inspired artists like Ester Hernandez to bundle their children and return home.

### **A Journey Home, November 1980**

A young mother wakes her five-year-old son from sleep, quietly lifting him out of his pajamas and into jeans and a light sweater. Pulling away from their small house in Oakland, California, they travel west, across a still sleeping city, and merge onto the south-bound lane. A thick mist hangs above the Eastside Freeway, the portion of Interstate 80 that edges the San Francisco Bay and serves as the hub of the Bay Area transportation network.<sup>7</sup> As the sun breaks above the eastern horizon line, its light cuts across the sky, moving up and over this maze of concrete and pavement, where it stretches west across an estuary dotted with small islands and large cargo ships, and fades into the bright mouth of the Pacific Ocean. Here, at the cool edge of the morning, the Golden Gate Bridge peeks through the fog, vividly marking the confluence of river and maritime ecosystems, the point where fresh water from the Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers completes the long journey from its headwaters, meets the rough saline tide, and is pulled into to the sea.

Heading to her childhood home, this young mother's journey follows a similarly long and winding path, across the set of paved roads that flow southeast from the Bay Area to the lower San Joaquin Valley. Just south of the town of Tracy, she merges onto Interstate 5—known locally as the Westside Highway—the wide and fast moving corridor linking San Francisco and Los Angeles. This road, set in thick, black pavement, stretches long and smooth across the sparsely populated western edge of the Central Valley. Miles and miles of grassland define the view, flat and matte gold from seasonal rain. Turning east, onto Highway 152, mother and child pass through Los Banos, or *Los Baños del Arroyo*, the site of a natural spring or bath visited by the Spanish during their exploration of the valley during the early nineteenth century and used frequently by clergy from nearby Mission San Juan Bautista.<sup>8</sup> This coarse pavement is typical of

the roads found along the rural interior of the state, both narrower in its composition and with fewer safety features than the larger state and federal roads that they connect. These speed bumps, rumble strips, medians, and roadside pullouts and shoulders are not merely decorative elements, however, a fact the driver knows well, and she slows her speed as precaution she encounters a second cloud of morning fog on her journey. Driving along this thin layer of faded pavement, it is difficult to see the faintly marked metallic yellow line dividing the lanes... or, the cars and farm equipment travelling within them. Covering the valley floor from November through March, the Tule fog creates a dangerous seasonal beauty across this rural landscape.<sup>9</sup>

By late morning, when she turns south onto Highway 99, the primary route for local traffic, the fog has cleared, exposing the growing city of Fresno, with its malls, sprawling residential neighborhoods, and surrounding network of farm worker towns. Following the eastern the edge of the Sierra Nevada foothills from Red Bluff to Bakersfield, Highway 99 serves as one of the primary axes in this rural landscape. Rich soil washed down from the mountains, sitting atop what was once the ocean floor, has made this part of the Central Valley particularly fertile. Looking west from Highway 99 shows the major differences in the natural and built environments: a bit out of range from these small but important benefits of mountain erosion, the view to the right of the car window shows a drier and less fertile landscape, a sparse patchwork of old ranches and fields.

As the young boy awakens in the late morning light, he and his mother pass through the towns south of Fresno, where they soon head east on the J40 between Selma and Kingsburg, a county road also known as El Monte Way. As its name suggests, its view is a delight for sleepy eyes: long lines of orchards, fields, and vineyards stretch east to the mountain's edge, climbing first through a dense collection of California black oak and chaparral, then, up through thick



forests of mixed conifers, and across cascading slabs of smooth granite that reach into the bright blue sky that stretches above this part of the Sierra Nevada mountains.

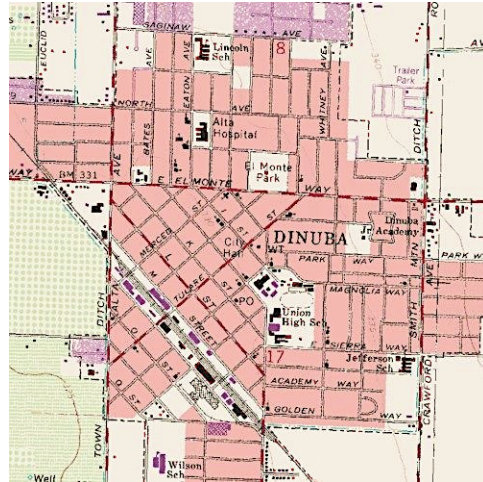


Figure 4.2. Map of Dinuba, California. Courtesy of the United States Geological Survey.

On this final leg of the journey home, the mother and young child cross the Kings River, a major tributary of the San Joaquin River named by Spanish explorers during their brief exploration of the region during the Mission era (Figure 4.2). As the woman approaches her hometown, Dinuba, she passes the Tulare County Courthouse, set ahead of an irrigation canal just along the upper edge of her old neighborhood. Pulling her car to a stop at the curb in front of 141 South P Street, she unbuckles Jacobo from his car seat, and walks up the driveway. Twenty feet of pale gray concrete lead to a handmade stone pathway lined with yellow and orange marigolds. Together, the mother and son have traversed a series of roads, moving steadily from national superhighways—Interstates 80 and 5—to regional corridors such as State Highway 99, to county roads and local streets, to the smallest scales possible—driveways and stone paths. At the end of this path are four wooden steps, leading up to a small porch. Beams, made from the local wood (and material salvaged from the surrounding vineyards), support the roof above, which is in the shape of an inverted V and set with thin sheets of aluminum. The door is set

between two square windows with dark green trim, and with Jacobo in her left arm, she turns the clear plastic knob with her right hand and enters her mother's house. Ester Hernandez is home.<sup>10</sup>

### **Two Views of the San Joaquin Valley**

Standing at 14,494 feet above sea level, Mount Whitney is the highest point in the continental United States and the focal point in the alpine landscape that looms above the San Joaquin Valley. Mount Whitney is set within the Sierra Crest, a five-hundred-mile long ridgeline that forms the thick spine of the Sierra Nevada range. As neighbor to four other peaks that top 13,000 feet, the links in this part of the mountain chain are particularly formidable.<sup>11</sup>

Like all rocks, the granite of the Sierra Crest is an aggregate of minerals, bound together during moments of intense heat, pressure, and movement. But its long cooling process has given its minerals time a relatively long time to crystalize, creating a hard, tough texture. Pale in color, granite tends to have an unassuming neutral shade of white, gray, or rose. But, when examined closely, the crystallization process of this particular mineral composition imbues the rocks with intricate patterns and a delicate sheen. Embedded with tiny pieces of translucent quartz and glittery mica crystals, dotted with dark grains of opaque hornblende, and bound by the neutral matte shades of feldspar, it takes on subtle shimmer in the light that has inspired a wide range of artists and observers.<sup>12</sup>

In 1869, for example, naturalist John Muir arrived in San Francisco and immediately set out on the first of the many walks that would take him from the San Francisco Bay and Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, across the Central Valley, and to the canyons and peaks of the Sierra Nevada near Mount Whitney. These journeys, in these mountains—"the most beautiful as I have ever beheld"—would form a cornerstone in the aestheticized imaginary of the modern environmental movement. Muir recorded the view during one of these early journeys, giving us

both an ur-text of American environmentalism and a small glimpse into the region's landscape prior to large scale agricultural production.

Looking eastward from the summit of Pacheco Pass one shining morning, a landscape was displayed that after all my wanderings still appears as the most beautiful as I have ever beheld. At my feet lay the Great Central Valley of California, level and flowery, like a lake of pure sunshine, forty or fifty miles wide, five hundred miles long, one rich furred garden of yellow Compositae. And from the eastern boundary of this vast flower-bed rose the mighty Sierra, miles in height, and so gloriously colored and so radiant, it seemed to me that the Sierra should be called, not the Nevada or Snowy Range, but the Range of Light. And after ten years of wandering and wondering in the heart of it, rejoicing in its glorious foods of light, the white beams of the morning streaming through the passes, the noonday radiance on the crystal rocks, the flush of the alpenglow, and the irised spray of countless waterfalls, it still seems above all other the Range of Light.<sup>13</sup>

At the end of the nineteenth century, when Muir began travelling extensively in the Sierra Nevada, the Central Valley would have been realizing the fruits of its first generation of large-scale agricultural production. In this location, the lower San Joaquin Valley, wheat and cotton were being grown on land that was in the process of conversion from Spanish and Mexican era use for livestock grazing. Muir was well acquainted with the American agricultural story of the Central Valley and Bay Area, first as a shepherd at the in the Yosemite foothills east of the city of Merced and later as caretaker of his wife's family's orchard estate in Martinez. Agricultural labor, however, as historian Donald Worster notes, was merely a means to fund his writing and time in observation of Sierra Nevada natural history and nearly all of Muir's writing focus on his journeys in California's wilderness and not its fields, pastures, range, or gardens.<sup>14</sup>

Muir's line of vision, standing at Pacheco Pass, moves east across the fertile Central Valley, up the foothills lightly dotted with California oak, up the thick stands of conifers, through the majestic sequoia forests, and rests on the sharp granite peaks thick with snow cover. His line is valuable to our understanding of this landscape because it thoroughly and thoughtfully covers several ecological zones and over 200 million years of geologic history. And, at sunrise, it is truly a lovely garden framing a grand mountain range, backlit along the eastern horizon.

However, his naturalist aesthetic kept him from commenting on other aspects of the scene that are essential to this story: the then-tiny village of Los Banos, the nascent raisin and citrus industry, and just to the south, to his right, the town of Dinuba. Muir has handed down to us a sense of the *real* picture: his beloved Mount Whitney, set within the towering peaks of the Sierra Crest and Great Western Divide. These mountains—not the Valley itself—comprised “the Range of Light.” Indeed, the Valley itself was the Muirian equivalent of “flyover country”—pretty enough, but something through which to pass on his way to a destination that mattered, the majestic mountains.

When Ester Hernandez made the turn from Interstate 5 to Highway 152, she occupied the same point of view—but she saw it quite differently. She took the Central Valley not as frame, but as the picture itself, the *real* thing that mattered. The glittering range of light was part of her visual vocabulary, of course, but it was qualified by the industrial grape fields, the small harvest and processing towns, and the experiences and memories clustered around her own hometown of Dinuba. Muir saw—and experienced firsthand—but did not remark on the beginnings of that landscape, though he came over the course of his career to understand the challenges, paradoxes, and cruel realities that faced the state during its rapid expansion, with its resource extraction, factories, dams, canals, and fields, all of which sustained an ever-growing population with the necessities and luxuries its climate, soil, and other natural resources provided: food, municipal water, electricity, flood management, jobs, and recreation.<sup>15</sup>

Hernandez and other Chicana/o cultural producers have seen different forms of light in the Sierra’s granite: not Muir’s diffuse and heavenly glow, but the fragmented glitter of the granitic crystalline forms themselves, sharp facets that might become the faux-jewels on a pair of jeans, or the diamond dust look of a painting on velvet. Muir, who transmuted Calvinism into a

gentle religion of nature, was always looking toward the heavens. Hernandez looked down from Pacheco Pass, toward a vision of labor, houses, roads, and water. For Dinuba sits directly below Mount Whitney; one might as easily choose to emphasize not the peak but the town, noting its vaulted position in the Valley. Surrounding it is a working landscape, a translation of the non-human environment into an agro-industrial social and cultural place, based on the raisin.

### **Dawn breaks on the raisin industry**

Though Fresno would become quite literally the face of the raisin economy, it was not the raisin, but the ash tree that would give the town its name. Sixty-five members of the *fraxinus* family make their homes in North America, a group of hardy, fast-growing trees and shrubs that prefer loamy, moist, sandy, and well-drained soils, the kinds of soils found along the banks of the Kings and San Joaquin Rivers. Noted for their elasticity, these handsome hardwoods helped fuel the initial development of the towns that began to take shape in and around the riparian forests found at the mountain's edge during the Gold Rush (1848-1850).<sup>16</sup> In fact, the ash tree would become such an important part of regional development—seen widely in the handles of farm tools, vernacular architecture like doors, handrails, and staircases—that its Spanish language name—*el fresno*—would take root as the place-name of this region's largest and most influential city and county.

The city of Fresno was founded in 1872 by the Central Pacific Railroad, but its origins—like many histories written into the places and spaces of the valley floor—can be found upriver, in a place once called Millerton. Millerton, as its name suggests, started as a mill town, twenty miles east of Fresno, along the upper San Joaquin River. The problem with hardwoods like ash, however, is that they burn hot and fast, making this late Gold Rush era town a tinder box in 1870 when a fire swept through it. Millerton was rebuilt soon thereafter, but the damage had been

done. Several floods between 1861-1862 had already placed residents and traders on edge and a more stable site for residential and commercial use was in mind.<sup>17</sup>

This peculiar combination of fire and water that sent Millerton residents downriver in search of more stable—if not higher—ground would soon be replaced by another set of tempestuous elements along the valley floor. Relocating the county seat from Millerton to Fresno in 1874 signaled an increased commitment to developing the resources more closely related to the soil and climate resources of the region, a kind of doubling-down on a bet that had been made at small-scale—but with promising results—by a few investors in the grape industry. Following the success of the wheat market—the first crop to be grown at large scale in California—these projects established that, with an initial outlay of capital to acquire access to land, water, and vines, growing grapes was not only a viable project but potentially a highly profitable one.<sup>18</sup>

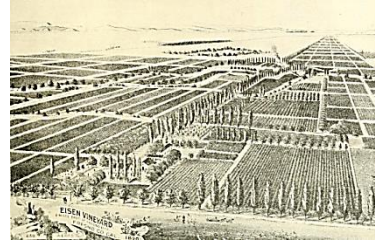
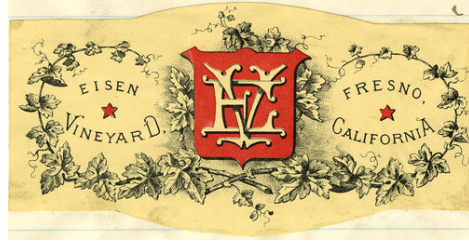
Replicating them at scale, akin to the productivity that wheat farmers had established by the end of the nineteenth century, proved far more tricky, and the story of how Fresno area vineyards became among the most profitable agricultural land in the world is as knotty and spindly as the vines themselves. But, if a good grape yield relies on a strong trestle—or infrastructure—and expert tending by seasoned hands then we might do well to look more closely into the relation between the purveyors of the early grape industry and the resources they used to support its growth. The success of this crop came nearly entirely through private investment as growers, like I.N. Parlier nearby at his estate, used their own capital (perhaps in conjunction with a few other settlers) to fund a modest initial investment in acreage that would be grown from a self-sustaining crop, to a local enterprise, and with luck, a combination of a

regional distribution of farm-grown products, local retail ventures, and expansion of real estate holdings.

The story of how a wheat town became a raisin town builds on this complex relation between people and their use of the natural and cultural resources that surround them. When the country seat moved downstream from Millerton to Fresno, grapes were being grown successfully at small scale, but growers faced instability related to water, transportation, and labor. It would take a tight-knit group of early investors to, in effect, privately fund early irrigation initiatives, solicit short-term labor, and cultivate a market for their product.

In 1851, Col. Agoston Haraszthy established Muscatel vines from seeds he procured from Malaga raisins, cultivated widely in Spain for since the late thirteenth century. Over the next decade, Col. Haraszthy would experiment with this crop, as would a few growers across the state.<sup>19</sup> By 1863 a display had been made at the California State Fair by Dr. J. Stentzel, and by 1873 a modest regional market for the product had been created in the Sacramento area by G.G Briggs at Davisville and R.B. Blowers at Woodland. These fairs and expositions were important advertising and networking sites for growers and helped generate interest and knowledge about this specialty crop.<sup>20</sup>

Through a series of savvy and fortuitous events, investments, and personalities, Fresno emerged at the heart of the area's raisin scene during the 1870s and 1880s. One part of this success was defined by the grapes themselves: the harvests of 1886 and 1887 came to be seen as the "turning point" in solidifying the region as raisin country due to the volume of production and total sales reached in those years. Climate, soil, and technology had come together, but it was no accident, despite local legend reporting that the industry had begun when a local grower accidentally left the delicate fruit on the vine too long during a particularly hot summer.



Figures 4.3. Eisen Vineyard logo, c. 1890.

Figure 4.4. The Eisen Vineyard, c. 1890.

Instead, the advanced cultivation of the raisin, at places like the Eisen Vineyard was the result of a tireless curiosity by two Swedish brothers who came to the region seeking to make their homes, and their livings, on the rich farmland. Through a collaboration between Francis—the farmer—and Gustav—trained as a doctor—they began experimenting with large, juicy Muscat grapes, seeking to improve not only the quantity of the product but the quality (Figures 4.3-4.4). Long days spent pruning, training, harvesting, curing, and eventually packing the raisins for sale were complimented by long nights writing about what was seen along the vine, an equally valuable product that Gustav would publish in 1890 as the first history—and handbook—on the California raisin.<sup>21</sup>

The book would go on to become widely influential in the raisin industry—and particularly helpful to Fresno area growers. The Eisen brothers were endlessly inspired and invigorated by the challenge of improving their work, and ultimately content to enjoy the benefits a stable water supply and modest but respected and profitable market for their goods had to offer. Indeed, growers in this era tended to hold a sense of trepidation, the feeling that somehow, in the end, their efforts—however promising—were in vain, to remain small and experimental. Not all growers were so high-minded or so worried, however. The Eisen Vineyard soon found itself in the shadows of an adjacent settlement: Martin Kearney’s Central California



Colony, the immediate precursor to the raisin industry we know and recognize today. Its late nineteenth century harvests would, in hindsight, come to define the region.

If the Eisens helped establish the raisin grape, another Fresno-area grower, A.Y. Easterby would quietly and efficiently help set the structure for irrigation. Born in England in 1818, Easterby, left at age fourteen, sailing to California in 1848, and quickly moving to the Central Valley to explore investment opportunities in the emerging agricultural industry. It was a savvy move: recognizing the need for cheap and reliable forms of irrigation and flood control, he founded the Fresno Canal and Irrigation Company in 1871, providing important early financing and design for what would become the regional watershed management plan. A few of the larger growers had created a chain of small-scale trenches that used rudimentary pumping machinery to manage the water as it followed its natural course from mountain to delta to sea. Although Easterby would quickly move on to other emerging natural resource development projects across northern and central California—he sold the company in 1874 to explore cement making and roadway building in the Santa Cruz area—his legacy in the Fresno area would remain, in large part due to his connection to an important figure in California history: Southern Pacific Railroad chairman Leyland Stanford.<sup>22</sup>

As a direct result of a tour of Easterby's ranch and its endless wheat field and canals, Stanford decided to place the Fresno Station near Easterby's Ranch, on the San Joaquin River side, with the goal of growing it into a hub of agricultural production. The Southern Pacific Station at Fresno was built in 1889, serving as a connection between San Diego, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. Grain production was on the rise and railroads were looking for opportunities to help further the expansion. The canals, privately financed, looked promising. Southern Pacific

made an initial purchase around the station, and sold small parcels around it for \$60-\$250. A town popped up almost spontaneously that summer and fall<sup>23</sup>.

But the Southern Pacific was not the only land speculator in town. Martin Theodore Kearney, who we met in Chapter Two, combined a speculative vision of land sales with an agricultural vision that focused on a transition from wheat-centered production to a landscape of raisin grape vineyards. He arrived in Fresno just as ability to grow at large scale and the will to do so from other investors took shape.

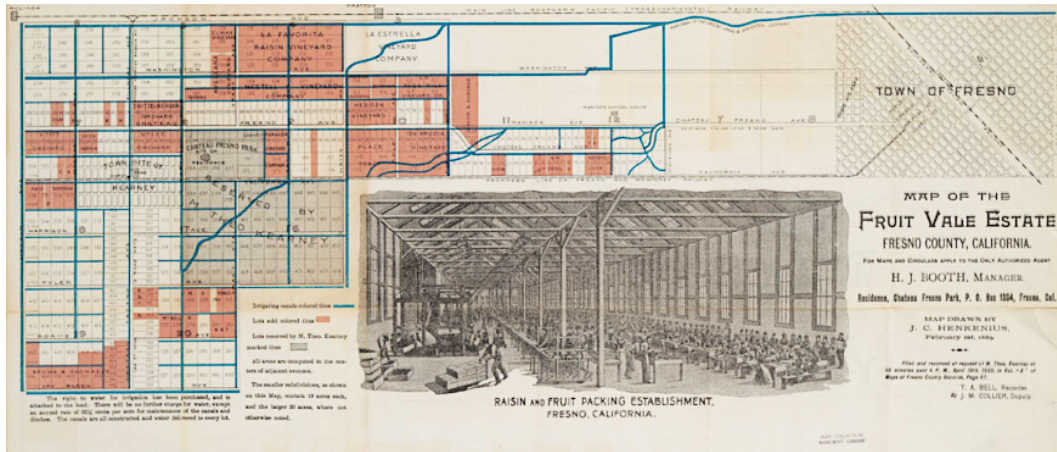


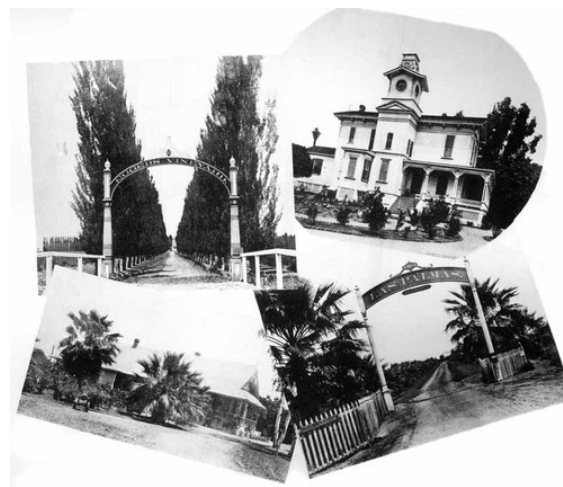
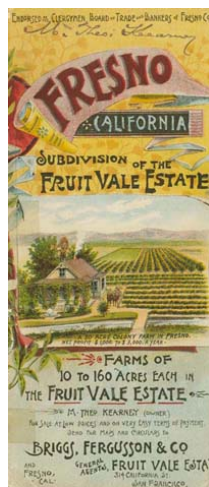
Figure 4.5. Fruit Vale Estate, The Central California Colony, c.1890



Figure 4.6. A Twenty Acre Parcel, c.1890.

Kearney began in an unusual way: cultivating a small group of investors in the Central California Colony to expand the base of growers that would provide him with the wide range of

resources needed to grow raisin grapes successfully at large-scale.<sup>24</sup> On the surface, these investors—who purchased farmland in twenty-acre parcels—were helpful in establishing raisins as the primary regional crop (Figures 4.5-4.6). Founded in 1875, the California Colony proved transformational. Raisin yields in greater Fresno grew rapidly, given the ample supply of water provided by Easterby, Kearney and other water management associates through a series of self-run canals. Land parceling, infrastructure investment, and cultivation knowledge all came together. Given the relatively quick time—two years—it takes to bring a raisin grape vine into production, it is not surprising that the area began to boom.<sup>25</sup>



Figures 4.7 Advertising the small acreage parcel, c. 1890.  
Figure 4.8. Promoting the small acreage parcel, c. 1890.

Perhaps as pivotal was Kearney’s insistence on promotional materials aimed at building interest in the venture (cultivating future farmers, if you will) and its product (consumers hungry for commodities in the relatively novel dried fruit market). Kearney—like the other growers in the industry who were working at smaller scales—was constantly challenged by the price fluctuations that emerged from this new and sometimes-unstable market, and his response was to get organized, visually (Figures 4.7-4.8). Building on the success of the early marketing materials—essentially real estate listings run in the pages of the San Francisco Chronicle, Los

Angeles Times, and major European papers—Kearney sensed that the industry could use a well-crafted set of images showing how sophisticated and profitable this rural outpost actually was. The Valley, in his campaign, offered a growing city full of all the attractions and conveniences of urban life without any of the headaches—with all the benefits of a quaint countryside estate. It was quintessential California real estate marketing. Through a series of souvenir books, pamphlets, advertisements, and letters to newspaper editors, Kearney cultivated an idea of rural sophistication featuring a barrage of images from Fresno’s sprawling downtown: Barton Opera House, the Victorian storefronts of Mariposa Street, and the mansions and gardens that lines Kearney Avenue, a grand boulevard that ran six miles from Kearney’s Fruit Vale Estate to downtown Fresno.<sup>26</sup>

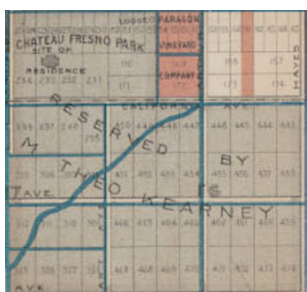


Figure 4.9. Map of Kearney’s holdings at Central California Colony, c. 1890.  
 Figure 4.10. The proposed buildings and grounds at Central California Colony, c. 1890.

During 1880s and 1890s, then, all this work—nearly a century in the making—became visible in the pages of industry publications, on an increasing number of grocery shelves and consumers’ kitchens, and along the edge of the valley floor itself as miles and miles of pale green vines and leaves arranged on long, clean rows (Figures 4.9-4.10). The industry survived and succeeded, creating in the Valley small towns like Dinuba. As in Parlier, Del Rey, Delano and other valley grape towns, skilled and unskilled labor arrived in the form of Mexicans and Mexican Americans.<sup>27</sup> They settled where they could, built communities and churches, gardens, and backroads shrines, houses and homes. They brought with them artistic traditions. They

observed the landscape—the glittering granites, the sturdy ashes, the irrigation canals, and the rows of grapes—and created their own representations. And as workers caught up in an industrializing system, they bore the costs and organized the resistances that would provide the base for farmworker strikes, pilgrimage marches, murals in farmworker housing towns and urban wall-space, and political images such as *Sun Mad*.

### A House, 1950: The Aesthetic of the Vernacular Landscape

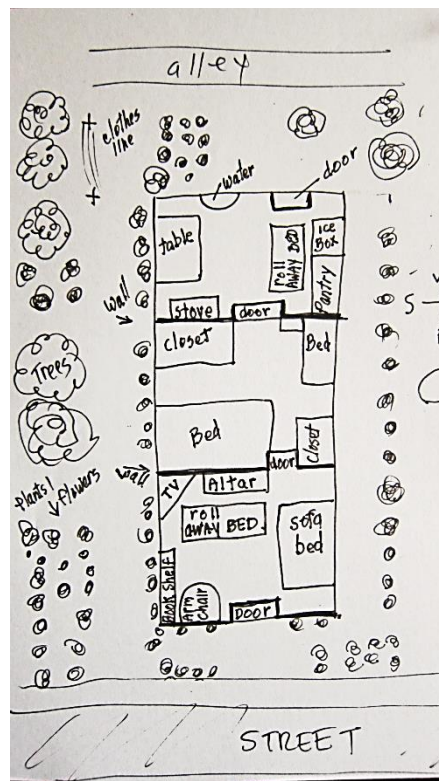


Figure 4.11. 141 South P Street in Dinuba, California. Drawing by Ester Hernandez (2014).

At sunrise in Dinuba, sunlight enters the street side of the house through three small windows and spreads across the surfaces of the front room (Figure 4.11). Back then, the night sky was dark, an inky blue dotted with white-yellow stars, distinct constellations above. Around this time—Ester Hernandez’s childhood—an increasing number of neon lit structures would rise from below, dimming the light above and re-centering it along the packing-houses, warehouses,

and truck yards that would come to define the valley during the second half of the twentieth century. Like all light, this industrial form illuminated more than the structures themselves. Their architectural features—the chutes, ladders, pipes, staircases, and electrical wire—also provide important clues that inform the viewer of these larger processes underway. Large and efficient, they speak to the relation between artificial and natural light in this landscape. The sun provides the energy to bring these crops to life and hydroelectric power plants harvests the electricity needed to light these sorting, packing, and shipment facilities.<sup>28</sup>

The house at 141 South P Street is not part of a formal factory or mill town but its architecture might suggest otherwise. Like the other modest farm worker houses in this neighborhood, the floor plan is designed along a simple rectangle plan, divided into three, wide, rooms. As day breaks over Mount Whitney, casting down the western slope of the Sierra Nevada and across the valley floor, it touches the thin glass of the square window panes along the east-facing wall of the house. Filtering through the ivory lace curtains, the early morning light travels across the front room of the house, gently touching the objects in its path. Moving across the arm chair, the fine rays of the first sun cross the floor, up and over the roll-away bed and sofa bed, and rest on the altar and television against the west-facing wall. The glassy surfaces of the television screen, picture frames, candles, and figurines create a multidirectional flow of light, reflecting it back over the roll-away bed, where it diffuses into the dimly lit room. The floral patterns of the lace curtains create shadows on the small beds, creating delicate patterns atop the bright colored quilts and pillows.<sup>29</sup>

As the sunlight intensifies, clearing the Sierra Crest, and rising high and hot above the valley, three little girls, arrayed in their beds in this single room, awaken. Their mother, Luz, had risen from her bed in the adjoining room long before, and is quietly in the kitchen preparing their



lunches for school. They will board the bus on their own, long after she has checked into her shift at the packing house. Rising early allows her to tend to her beloved garden, an intricate and lovely surrounding for the house. Watering her trees, shrubs, and flower beds takes time and care, and she often gets up before the sun to begin this daily routine.



Figure 4.12. Artist Ester Hernandez (right) pictured at her childhood home in Dinuba, California with her sister Esperanza (left). Photograph by Simon Hernandez c. 1949.

Born in 1944, Hernandez identifies herself as a former farmworker and packing house worker who developed a special interest in the cultural landscape around her home through working as a young girl in the fields with her parents during summer breaks, allowing her valuable time to earn her education, a benefit not always available to children growing up in the agricultural industry (Figure 4.12). Growing up in one house during her entire childhood—and not a series of temporary migratory dwellings—allowed her to cultivate her interests in art and the natural world that she would first take interest in through helping her mother in the garden and amid the thick, leafy vineyard rows during the harvest. In her artist statement to *Chicana Voices and Visions: A National Exhibit of Women Artists* (1983)—the first major exhibit to feature *Sun Mad*—Hernandez states that her “images are always those of *la mujer chicana* (the Chicana

woman)” in its fullest form, a kind of tribute to these overlooked contributions made by women through their agricultural labor and domestic practices.<sup>30</sup>

She also considers herself “a simple country girl” (despite decades spent living in the Bay Area), marked by her strong attachment to the fields and farm worker towns of the San Joaquin Valley. Her fondest memories include playing in ditches and canals, the last of small owner-driven irrigation as the federal and state plans took hold. The streets and alley outside her family home in Dinuba were rich with animal and plant life during her childhood in the 1940s and 1950s. Tucked away at the edge of the main county road through town, the J-40, the house was both secluded enough for the children to play but close enough to town, school, and the highway to feel a sense of connection. Hernandez recalls being absorbed in the colors, and drawing in the smooth dirt, a clay or sand-like texture that created awe-inspiring shapes and textures when it turned into hard dirt after seasonal rains. “It was smooth, like sand, because millions of years ago it was once at the bottom of the ocean.” She fell in the mud when she was three or four years old and it remains one of her earliest memories. She was “amazed by its plasticity” and was fascinated when she “saw [her] movements captured in it” and changed to hard dirt the next day.<sup>31</sup>

Most weekends her family would journey to the lower edge of the Sierra Nevada, into the Sequoia National Park and Forest near Porterville, one of the larger farmworker towns near Dinuba. She was deeply influenced by her father, a carpenter by training, a farm worker seasonally by necessity, and an amateur photographer and naturalist by instinct. He was curious about the natural world, and in capturing it on film, and the family possesses a rich archive of snapshots like these taken in and around their home in Dinuba. These experiences, “born and raised on the western slope of the Sierra Nevada in the central San Joaquin Valley of California,



an area paradoxically known for its natural beauty and ongoing farmworker struggle” helped cultivate an interest in that place—much like Dinuba itself—between nature and culture, a “beauty” that she likens to “the seed that uplifts our spirit and nourishes our souls.”<sup>32</sup>



Figure 4.13. The Hernandez family home altar. Photograph by Simon Hernandez (c. 1970).

In that house, Ester found other visual and sensual vocabularies. The lace curtains told stories of Mexican lacemaking, domestic practices with a long history; they shadows cast on the bed offered tutorials in complex pattern. Visible from the front door, the altar offered constant reminders of La Virgen and the Santos, and a long tradition of images and practices that carried Catholic Mexican faith communities back to a baroque sensibility (Figure 4.13). Next to the altar stood a television, a conduit into the popular culture of advertisement and the political news of the world. On that TV, she could have seen the projection of a flourishing postwar American economy and the hints of the culturally-based political upheavals that were to follow. Outside, her mother’s garden bespoke a long Mexican and Mexican-American tradition of aesthetic management of exterior space, of domestic plant nurture that offered solace and company to the industrial agricultural work taking place only a few blocks away. On the wall, Ester would have seen classic forms of Mexican art. The *calavera* images—satirical skeletons crafted by Jose Posada—became part of her vocabulary here, as did the extensive use of Mexican heritage

textiles, pottery, and clothing, often homemade (or modified) by her mother, aunts, and grandmother. And every morning, the light shone through the mountains—not John Muir’s light, in her experience—and through her windows, casting a distinct kind of glow on her time and place.

Placemaking, at its root, is about the materiality of belonging. Subjects form attachments to their material objects, produced in specific times and places, and these allow them to move through the past, present, and future. In the Dinuba house, belonging was made for Ester Hernandez through the domestic practices learned from Luz’s mother, Tomasa Medina, and the life she built and rebuilt along her journey from the mountains of Guanajuato, to her husband’s world in Aguascalientes, and their path through El Paso, Los Angeles, and into the lower San Joaquin Valley. These kinds of cultural influences, across time and place for three generations of the Medina-Hernandez family, are in some ways difficult to document. Very few records remain of their move from Mexico to the United States. The route they travelled, along the primary railroad lines in central Mexico and the southwest United States was typical of that generation of migrants, generating only a few photographs and stories. This modest archive creates challenges in measuring the changes they experienced over the course of their lives, offering only a few slivers of *evidence*. But we can say a few things.



Figure 4.14. Grandmother Tomasa and mother Luz (Aguascalientes, Mexico, c.1912)

Figure 4.15. Grandmother Tomasa, mother Luz, and uncle Hilario (El Paso, Texas, c.1916)

Tomasa Medina ended up in a house on Nebraska Street in Selma, California as a young mother from Aguascalientes. There, they had once lived on the town square where her husband had a carpentry school (Figures 4.14-4.15). They built a nice house where they began their family. She was from the mountains, and was an excellent gardener and seamstress. But the Revolution was raging and Aguascalientes was an important strategic center. So, she and her husband, and their three kids packed up and left, in the middle of the night. Tomasa hid everything in a dress she had sewn. They came by train, through El Paso—like most families in that day—and they continued onto Los Angeles. But they found the space too urban—even back then—and sought a more rural setting to raise their family. They found a little piece of land in Selma, on Nebraska Street, and built a beautiful home and small workshop and guest house in the back. Tomasa slept in the main house with the children, and her husband slept in the smaller house, often with a few of his brothers and nephews as they made their journey north. Eventually the workshop trained other men in carpentry, while Tomasa and her daughters built a glorious garden, and a multigenerational home that centered a small community.<sup>33</sup>



Figure 4.16-4.18. (L-R) *Mis Madres* (1986), *Cosmic Cruise* (1990), and *La Ofrenda* (1988) by Ester Hernandez.

The Selma cultural landscape—grandma’s house—can be seen in subtle detail across Hernandez’s visual production. In *Mis Madres*, Tomasa is seen cupping the moon in her left palm, as her right hand touches the shawl that drapes long across her shoulders and stretches down her right side. Stars twinkle in burst, creating blots of light in the deep blue sky. Stylized as Mother Earth, she presents a sturdy and wise presence caring for a troubled world. Much like the photographs taken of the young Tomasa as a young mother en route to what would become her new home in the Central Valley, Hernandez’s print also presents a stoic figure here, a woman who evokes a sense of otherworldly strength expressed through her seamless integration into the starlight and Earth’s glow (Figure 4.16).<sup>34</sup>

The use of oversized blots of starlight—micro explosions of light found deep in the cosmos—can be found in high use in *Cosmic Cruise*, an homage to the road trips Hernandez would enjoy with her mother and sisters along the small rural roads of their homeland (Figure 4.17). Here, we see La Virgen de Guadalupe at the wheel, with Tomasa riding by her side and Hernandez in the backseat with her mother Luz. The starlight suggests a joyride, as large, inky light spills across the sky. As Hernandez notes, "The theme is our interconnectedness with each other and the universe. The car represents movement in space, and time is represented by the

images of the women. "La Virgen de Guadalupe" (the driver) the Mexican-Indian grandmother, the modern Chicana mother and child. The Aztec moon goddess-Coyolxauqui signifies our link with the past. The print is part of my ongoing tribute to la Mujer Chicana."<sup>35</sup> Riding with these women, on this journey speaks to the explosion of cultural and aesthetic beauty a young child must surely feel riding that high, that fast, and in such esteemed company, a path ablaze in bright pink and red tones.

The night sky also features prominently in a third piece, depicting a tattoo-like body painting Hernandez did on the back of filmmaker Renee Moreno, capturing the image in two editions of *La Ofrenda*. Here, in this version, the night sky is rendered in similar deep blue shades but the stars themselves are more in constellation form, a kind of cross hatching or etching that echoes the thin lines of paint used to detail the figure of La Virgen (Figure 4.18). The picture—and experience—was inspired by Hernandez and Moreno's attendance at an arts festival held in Golden Gate Park in the early 1980s and the transposition of the Central Valley sky into the Bay Area cultural landscape speaks to the ways in which this deep memory travelled with Hernandez and continued to shape her experience in her new home far away from the long, deep blue hues of the rural night sky of her childhood.<sup>36</sup>



Figures 4.19 A family of dancers in Selma, California.

Figure 4.20. Luz Medina in Selma, California.

The deep blue hues of the night sky would not be the only childhood influence Hernandez would carry forward from her childhood into her art work. Her mother, Luz, would take a strong interest in the dancing traditions brought from their homeland in Aguascalientes and participated in local dance troupes with other Mexican heritage women in the Selma area (Figures 4.19-4.20). The buildings and grounds at Tomasa and Luis' house were comfortable, due to her facility in the garden and in domestic arts like sewing and his training as a carpenter, making their central lawn a community gather space of sorts during weekends and holidays. As historian Vicki Ruiz notes, "Mexican women's community activism is not limited to city streets," rather it takes a multitude of forms including environmental justice organizing, economic development, and arts and culture activities like the dance recitals and rehearsals hosted in the family garden at Selma.<sup>37</sup>



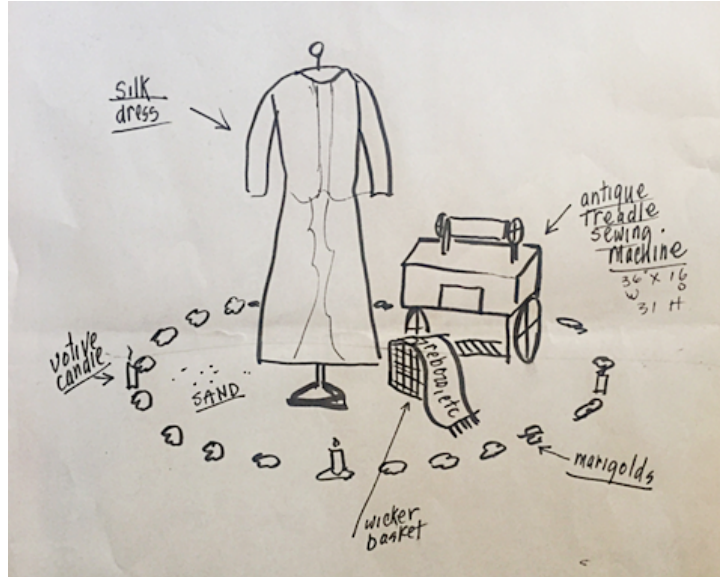


Figure 4.21. Immigrant Woman's Dress by Ester Hernandez (1997).

Figure 4.22. Immigrant Woman's Dress, revisions mock up (2016) by Ester Hernandez.

The rural woman's dress would also find its way into Hernandez's work through an installation piece that places focus on the domestic elements of her grandmother's journey from Mexico and the life she would remake in Selma. Set with fine-grain sand, evoking the rich clay soil of Tomasa's garden, the work layers up and across the floor, a neatly set circle of marigolds framing the scene (Figures 4.21-4.22). A heavy chest filled with embroidered textiles—like the ones Hernandez would learn to make with these women in the Selma garden—is stacked next to the now-vintage Singer sewing machine used to make the dresses in the photograph and the installation. The large orange circles of the marigolds create complementary patterns with the small silver coins inlaid in the dress, and offset centerpiece to this composition that serves to distribute or achieve a sense of balance between the value of the process of domestic work—the sewing machine, “grown” in rich soil—and the product: a shimmering, sheer, tribute to the migrant woman's journey.<sup>38</sup>



Figures 4.23-4.24. *La Catrina Calavera* and *El Jarabe* by Jose Guadalupe Posada, c. 1910

Accessorizing the revolution was also an important part of Revolution era popular culture and was on display far beyond the Medina family. In his broadsides for Mexican political newspapers, illustrator Jose Guadalupe Posada relied extensively on sartorial elements to communicate the fissures and fault lines of the Revolution (Figures 4.23-4.24). Mexico was headed towards one of its most dramatic political, economic, and social upheavals when Posada began widely using *calavera* (skeleton/skull) imagery, a figure that would become one of his most important contributions to Mexican visual culture.<sup>39</sup>

In *Calavera Catrina*, Posada depicts an affluent woman caught between the worlds of the living and the dead. Her oversized hat, well appointed with magnificent plumes draping down from a thoughtful arrangement of flowers. Framed by the wide brim of the hat, she is set within fine hatches of the clouds. From this vaulted position, the clouds add texture, almost like a thumbprint, signaling her proximity to the living world. But with deep set shadows in her eyes and a strong, square jaw, she is caught mid laugh, directing the viewer's eye in a downward motion and stopping just at the second dark shadow within the edges of her mouth and reasserting her distance from it. The primary focal point then becomes what she is saying, or unable to say, from this middle place. It is in this liminality, a woman caught between worlds and forging her life in the places and spaces between, which makes her skeletal beauty so haunting. While the hands of the clouds reach up to touch her, she remains floating, just out of grasp.



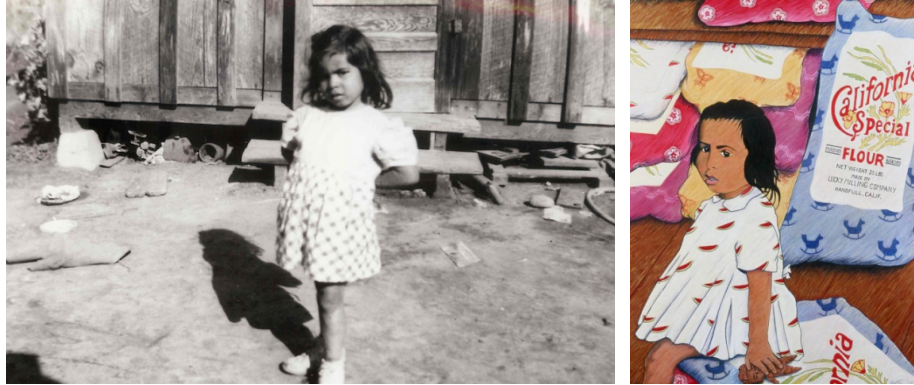


Figure 4.25. Ester Hernandez at her childhood home in Dinuba, c. 1950.

Figure 4.26. *California Special* (1988) by Ester Hernandez.

For Hernandez, these family houses—and the childhood she would enjoy in Dinuba—offer an alternative view of the rapidly industrializing countryside that was taking shape around her and her loved ones (Figure 4.25). The Selma house would be demolished in 1964 as part of the regional transportation plan, a large scale infrastructure project that would see the expansion of Highway 99 into multiple lanes. While this work would allow for a more efficient flow of traffic, relocating part of the highway from its original site in downtown Selma to an area just at the edge of town, it also destroyed the homes along Nebraska Street. Also lost in this moment of rural infrastructure “improvements” were many of the small alleys, canals, and pathways that adjoined the Selma and Dinuba houses, sites where a young artist’s creativity and imagination flourished amid the mud, stones, and plant and animal life she would see in her adventures. As seen in *California Special* (1988)—and accompanying photograph taken outside the Dinuba house—the aesthetics of commercial industry would merge with these vernacular histories in the form of a child’s dress repurposed from a cloth sack from the market in Fresno where Hernandez and her mother would drive to together (Figure 4.26). These engagements with popular culture, family story, Mexican imagery, and the vernacular world of the garden and the ditch all circled round and round the raisin industry—which, thanks to the marketing tradition inaugurated by Martin Kearney—had its own visuality. It is to that body of images we now turn.

## Making Sun Maid



Figure 4.27. Sun Maid raisins logo (1970).

The Sun Maid logo is part of a whole world of California agricultural aesthetics: fruit crates, advertisements, booster literature, calendars, and more. Ester Hernandez's *Sun Mad* *only* takes on meaning in relation to this image. Here, the rays of the sun also frame a woman offering the grape-y bounty of the land: a basket loaded down with grapes, the still-attached leaves offering evidence of fertility (Figure 4.27). These symbols—fertile and ovarian—promise an easy and continuous human and natural reproduction, a vision of pastoral harmony. The red bonnet, here, protects a bountiful white woman—not blond, one notes, but a healthy outdoorsy brunette, a tiny bit of racial ambiguity perhaps. The verbal pun in the image is obvious and commercial: “maid” for “made.” The maid stands in for reproductive making of both grapes and happy societies—and that might turn us back to the meanings visible in *Hernandez's* pun: “mad” for “maid” and “made”—and “mad” for both “angry” and “insane.” I'll return to this theme in a moment; for now it is worth remembering that, like *Sun Mad*, *Sun Maid* has a history; both are entangled in the vernacular, industrial, and cultural landscapes of the Central Valley.

Martin Kearney and his growers had a problem. They needed to create two simultaneous markets: first, Kearney needed to craft a market in land that would attract farmers—producers—to the California Colony Cooperative; and second, he needed to craft a market for dried fruit so that the coop’s commodities would produce revenue. In both cases, he understood that images, marketing, and advertising were critical, and thus set a cultural baseline for the Valley with images of pastoral settlement, gentle gardens and fields, blossoming abundance and fertility. These things became part of the visual vocabulary of everyone in the Valley, including the Mujeres Muralistas (as we saw in Chapter Two), artists like Ester Hernandez, and the public relations and advertising creators charged with creating campaigns.

In 1912, the California Associated Raisin Company embarked on its first national advertising campaign. At a large ceremony at Fresno Station, several Southern Pacific cargo containers packed with 1,250 tons of raisins left for Chicago, the central shipping center for west coast products in that period.<sup>40</sup> With a caboose decked out in promotional banners and signs, these “Raisin Trains” served as a foray into distant markets, part of a larger move in this era that helped solidify California’s role as a national agricultural leader.

While the raisin had strong global roots, early promotional efforts proved critical in raising awareness of the product—and its uses—among mainstream American consumers. Raisin growers sought the help of advertising executive E.A. Berg to help create a more recognizable brand name and image. Berg began by coining the name “Sun-Maid” in 1915, a play on the product’s natural drying process that was still implemented widely despite development of mechanized drying equipment.<sup>41</sup> The name debuted at the Panama Pacific International Exposition in 1915 in the form of a booth with young women dressed in white dresses and blue

bonnets who handed out samples and cookbooks. They won a prize for best agricultural product and got good press in the process.<sup>42</sup>

The San Francisco Exposition was a great test audience: these kinds of events and installations were global destinations in this period, and the San Francisco fair took up 635 acres at the foot of the Golden Gate Bridge, stretching from present-day Chrissy Field, along the lower edge of the Presidio, and to the Fort Mason. The Palace of Fine Arts, now underneath the Highway 101 northbound overpass is the only readily visible marker that remains.<sup>43</sup>

But the Panama Pacific Exposition was not a permanent fair and not all food markets were as adventurous or affluent as San Francisco's. Most of the pieces were in place for the raisin industry to achieve the kind of mainstream success they long sensed was possible but somehow still remained elusive. What would help solidify their presence in the American food landscape? What—or who—might help them become a household name?



Figures 4.28-4.29. The original Sun Maid model and logo (1915).

One early afternoon, eighteen year old Lorraine Collette was standing outside her parent's home in Fresno and, like so many days, was hanging clothing on the line to dry. The breeze touched the rim and sash of her red bonnet, and when the Sun-Maid director L.R. Payne passed by he knew he had seen something special: an image of natural beauty and health, much

like the young women models the company was employing as brand ambassadors at the fair in San Francisco. But the red bonnet under the bright sun seemed to sharpen the message. Payne invited Collette—and her mother as a chaperone—to San Francisco where she participated in the fair as a model (Figures 4.28-4.29). Even more important, one day soon after her arrival, she sat for a portrait that would soon make its way onto the redesigned logo and a major marketing campaign featuring the Sun Maid name and the now-iconic red and yellow box.<sup>44</sup> While the blue imagery would remain in use for the Muscat variety of grapes—a bigger, more nuanced flavored raisin—it was Collette’s image and shift to the smaller, more juicy Thompson raisin in red packaging that would elevate the raisin to its long desired status of pantry staple.

Sun-Maid launched an aggressive marketing campaign to position itself at the front of the emerging market in dried fruit. Shortly after the bonnets debuted, Sun-Maid expanded its grower membership from 6,000 to 14,000. Recruiting and retaining a strong membership was of vital interest to the organizing of Sun Maid, which was very much retained Kearney’s co-op approach to distribute financial risk.<sup>45</sup> Although the colony system was no longer in formal use and consolidation was already underway—with fewer and fewer growers controlling more and more vineyard acreage—shared financial responsibility was helpful in coordinating the message. The strategy allowed them to gain distance from other fruit in the dried market, even as it promoted this relatively new form—the shelf-stable dried product. The image Lorraine inspired—hanging clothes on the line on in a warm breeze in Fresno—would resonate widely to the audiences that would be key in elevating the brand and the product: the American consumer that would be responsible for making it a staple of the middle-class American home and the growers that were invested in it. The Sun Maid image, in other words, proved effective in solving both of Kearney’s problems: more producers, and more purchasers.

By 1923, Sun Maid had revised the initial packaging, aiming for a somewhat more mature feel. It was the first in a number of revisions, ranging from a kind of Norman Rockwell look in the years surrounding the Great Depression, to a modernist twist in 1956, turning the sun's rays into more abstracted triangular forms. In 1970, the logo was updated again, producing the image we recognize today—and the one most likely on Ester Hernandez's mind when she crafted *Sun Mad*.<sup>46</sup>

Other changes were underway during those years as well. Sun Maid became a major industrial agricultural institution; today, the cooperative is the largest raisin and dried fruit processor in the entire world. As new agricultural technologies came online, Sun Maid's growers embraced them. These included mechanical technology for harvesting, chemical technologies for fertilization and pest control, and genetic technologies for grape breeding. At the same time, Dinuba became a key location in the Sun Maid empire. In 1922, the cooperative built a new three-story plant two city blocks in length, which employed as many as 250 people in its storage sheds and packing facilities. The move to open the Dinuba plant would foreshadow its eventual relocation from its world class factory in Fresno (which had only opened in 1918 and was billed as “the most modern manufacturing plant this side of Detroit), to an even larger facility nearby at Kingsburg. Outside of the traffic snarls that were already beginning to plague Highway 99 at Fresno, the Kingsburg plant would be situated in a more rural location with only a short—and uncongested—path to the highway for its delivery trucks.<sup>47</sup>

By the 1960s—just as Cesar Chavez was challenging the industry around labor issues—new revelations about the dangers of chemical technology and a heightened ecological consciousness posed another set of challenges. Rachel Carson's 1962 book *Silent Spring* offered a particular salient rallying cry for questioning pesticide use—which had become pervasive in

the Valley's grape fields and continued throughout the 1970s. It was at this long moment of turmoil—labor organizing in the fields, Chicana/o art and activism in the cities, the stirrings of the environmental movement—that Ester Hernandez made one of those journeys from the Bay Area back to Dinuba with her son in 1980.

Walking in the door of the little house at 141 South P Street, she found her mother Luz standing at the stove boiling water. “I thought that was kind of strange,” she recalled, given how hot the valley is that time of year. Her mother showed Ester a notice from the city notifying residents that the city's wells were polluted. They talked for a long time about health and justice, the first time they had ever done so. Dinuba had been contaminated with pesticides for 25 to 30 years, and she realized that she and her family “had drunk and bathed in this water.” “It kind of stayed with me, it bothered me,” remembered Ester. Though there was perhaps the urge maybe to just go back to the city and forget about it, she did not. For two years it haunted her, keeping her up at night.<sup>48</sup>

Eager to understand the extent to which Dinuba groundwater was polluted, Hernandez began researching the issue. After talking with city and state public health officials, she learned that on November 1, 1980, the City of Dinuba, California had issued a public notice to “All Consumers of the City of Dinuba Water System,” announcing that, “with the advent of cool weather, it [was] no longer necessary for the City to use the four contaminated wells.”<sup>49</sup> Further research revealed that the closing of the four polluted wells came after months of pressure by local activists and UC Berkeley environmental scientists who were concerned that the California Department of Health Service (CDHS) was not doing enough to address the larger problem of ground water contamination in the Central Valley. These advocates argued that the CDHS water rationing program implemented with the four remaining “clean” wells, encouraging residents to

purchase bottled water or boil their tap water obscured a significant fact: Dinuba, “Raisinland, U.S.A.” a predominately Chicana/o community in the Central Valley had been drinking polluted water for over 25 years.<sup>50</sup>

Hernandez knew she wanted to do a piece on the issue of pollution and the raisin industry, particularly its effects on Mexican American women, but she didn’t know what. Then, “one day I was driving back to see my mom, driving down the little country road... and, oh my God! There it is: the Sun Maid raisin signs at the edge of each vineyard. What is it? How can I unmask it? What can I say?” It bothered her that “they claimed to be natural but they’re not.” It did not take her long to recall Posada’s *calaveras* from the Revolution era, and as she researched into them, Hernandez became intrigued by how alive they were amid such death and destruction. Not surprisingly, she was also always touched by Posada’s origins in her own town of Aguascalientes, the politically engaged and artistically-inclined city in the interior that was important during the Revolution as a strategic organizing site—so much so that her family lost their carpentry workshop near the town square. “I always fantasize [that Posada] made a poster for my grandfather’s school!”<sup>51</sup>

Her family helped her assemble local news clipping about the raisin industry, Sun Maid, and water pollution issues as she developed the piece.<sup>52</sup> Research with UC Berkeley helped her learn more about the water table issues, and their researchers confirmed that the city had long known about the pollution but had not notified residents. Her political motivation came from her early work at UC Berkeley student, and one might draw a direct line back to the first piece she contributed to student newspapers, an etching-style drawing that depicted a pollution dispute regarding mercury poisoning among First Nations people in Canada. It was the first time she had



heard the term “environmental racism” and she started to feel a responsibility to pass this kind of information on to viewers.

*Sun Mad* was indeed about the outrage Hernandez felt when she learned her family had been drinking water from a polluted well. But it was also an homage to the daily life that was lived there, the aesthetics of place, work, and memory. It came together around Hernandez’s sense of personal hurt, anger and betrayal, her political coming-to-consciousness around both Chicana/o and environmental politics, a nostalgic engagement with the traditions of Mexican political art, in the form of Posada’s *calaveras*, and a strong awareness of the local environments—her house and garden and her town. The red bonnet called to mind the Okies she worked with in the fields as a young girl. And the dress has a strong resemblance to the ones her mother wore as a young woman in Selma as part of the Mexican dance troupes popular during the day, which Hernandez would later turn into an installation piece. Most of all, though, it was the fields and factories of Dinuba that generated the impetus for *Sun Mad*. In those fields, Mexican-heritage workers plied the fields, while chemical pollution seeped into their groundwater. Dinuba and Sun Maid leaders knew this and were willing to sacrifice the land, the people, and the town. Was this not enough to drive one Sun Mad?

Hernandez hand lettered the first edition, without the support of a computer or advanced drafting tools: “It was horrible, I went nuts!” And the initial response was no response at all.<sup>53</sup> She at first thought that she had made a mistake. But historian and curator Shifra Goldman included it in a national exhibit, and featured it in her writings, helping create a buzz and an engaged critical reception.<sup>54</sup> It felt to Hernandez like it was really ten years or so before the image really caught on in shows and publications. Her sense was that it was too edgy, too direct. Once it caught, though *Sun Mad* rapidly became canonical. By the 1990s, it was almost a free-

floating signifier, mobilized as a Chicano arts object, a piece of environmental critique, a bit of easy kitsch.

While it is revelatory on all these counts, *Sun Mad's* historical contexts—family history, intimate landscapes, aesthetic vocabularies, personal anger—help explain the work as a particular thing: a piece of art that reveals the Chicana/o vernacular rural landscape as aesthetic ground, inspiration, and memory. Even in the case of a cosmopolitan urbane Bay Area artist like Ester Hernandez, the rural vernacular anchors her politics and artistry—and indeed, offers a powerful way of seeing the connection between the two. When Hernandez walked out of her mother's kitchen—left behind Luz boiling water—and stepped into the garden; when she drove into and out of Dinuba; when she descended from Pacheco Pass: in each case, Sun Maid structured her life. The factory loomed above the house. The storage sheds and service roads surrounded the town. The fields stretched out below her. In a very real sense, only Ester Hernandez could have made *Sun Mad*, could have channeled the specific aesthetics, politics, energies, and experiences that produced the piece. If *Sun Mad* belongs to all, it is nonetheless a Dinuba image, a mirror of house, garden, history, field, valley.

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<sup>1</sup> The primary archive for this chapter rests on two collections of material produced by visual artist Ester Hernandez, including: 1.) the Ester Hernandez M. Hernandez Papers, M1301. Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, Calif. (and will be abbreviated EH Papers, Stanford) and 2.) photographic material and other personal effects held in the personal collection of the artist (and will be labeled EH, private collection).

<sup>2</sup> For *La Virgen de Guadalupe Defendiendo Los Derechos de Los Xicanos* (1976), see: EH Papers, Stanford (Series 1. Flat Boxes 7 and 16); *Liberdad* (1976), see: EH Papers, Stanford (Series 1. Flat Box 10 and 16);

<sup>3</sup> Among the works to detail these environmental justice and ecofeminist concerns, see: Rachel Stein, *New Perspectives on Environmental Justice: Gender, Sexuality, and Activism* (2004). Robert D. Bullard, *Unequal Protection: Environmental Justice and Communities of Color* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Press, 1994); Mary S. Pardo, *Mexican American Women Activists: Identity and Resistance in Two Los Angeles Communities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> For recent scholarship on *Sun Mad*, see: Curtis Marez, *Speculative Technologies: Farm Worker Futurism and the Hidden Histories of New Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016); Sharla Hutchison, "Recoding Consumer Culture: Ester Hernández, Helena María Viramontes, and the Farmworker Cause," *The Journal of Popular Culture*. 46 (5): 973-990; Randy J. Ontiveros, *In the Spirit of a New People: The Cultural Politics of the Chicano Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> *Sun Mad* has enjoyed display at a wide number of national and regional museums, including: Legion of Honor (San Francisco); Smithsonian American Art Museum (Washington, DC); Crocker Museum (Sacramento); the National Museum of Mexican Art (Chicago); Autry National Center (Los Angeles); Oakland Museum of California

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(Oakland); California Historical Society (San Francisco); El Museo del Barrio (New York City); Galeria de la Raza (San Francisco); the National Hispanic Cultural Center (Albuquerque); and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). Sun Mad has also been included in several major permanent collections, including: the Museum of Contemporary Native Art, Institute of American Indian Arts (Santa Fe, NM); Victoria and Albert Museum (London); the University of California Los Angeles, UCLA Chicano Art Collection (Los Angeles); Oakland Museum of California (Oakland); the Library of Congress, Permanent Collection, Prints and Photographs (Washington, DC); Cheech Marin, Chicano/a Collection (Santa Monica, CA); National Museum of Art – Smithsonian Institute (Washington, D.C.); Museo Casa Estudio Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, Permanent Collection (Mexico City); The Bronx Museum of the Arts (New York City); the Mexican Museum (San Francisco); San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (San Francisco); Museo del Barrio (New York City); the National Museum of Mexican Art (Chicago).

<sup>6</sup> For an overview, see: Steven Stoll, *The Fruits of Natural Advantage: Making the Industrial Countryside in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). For a specific account of how the grape industry took hold among early growers in the Fresno area, see: Gustavas Eisen, *The California Raisin Industry: A Practical Treatise on the Raisin Grapes, Their History, Culture, and Curing* (San Francisco: H. S. Crocker and Co. Farmer, 1890).

<sup>7</sup> Highway transportation and roadway construction enjoyed considerable coverage by state officials, offering rich detail in the work of people such as civil engineers, stone masons, policy makers in shaping California's transportation system. For the most detailed coverage, see: *California Highways and Public Works* (Sacramento: Dept. of Public Works, State of California).

<sup>8</sup> Erwin Gustav Gudde, *1,000 California Place Names; Their Origin and Meaning* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Mildred Brooke Hoover and Douglas E. Kyle, *Historic Spots in California* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1948).

<sup>9</sup> For information on the cultural landscape of the Dinuba area, as seen through a selection of local newspaper clippings and flyers collected by artist Ester Hernandez, see: EH Papers, Stanford (Series 3 Box 43, Folder 8).

For an account of how highways came to shape how American cities would look, feel, and function, see: Eric Avila, *The Folklore of the Freeway: Race and Revolt in the Modernist City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014) and Raúl Villa, *Barrio Logos: Space and Place in Urban Chicano Literature and Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> See: Ester Hernandez (artist) interview with the author, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> For more on the geology of the Sierra Nevada, see: Francis P. Farquhar, *History of the Sierra Nevada* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Hill, Mary. 2006. *Geology of the Sierra Nevada*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

<sup>13</sup> John Muir, *The Yosemite*, 1912, p.6.

<sup>14</sup> For more on Muir's journeys in and between the Bay Area, Central Valley, and Sierra Nevada, see: Donald Worster, *A Passion for Nature: The Life of John Muir* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> See, for example: William B. Bull, *Alluvial Fans and Near-surface Subsidence in Western Fresno County, California* (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Office, 1964); R. W. Page and R. A. LeBlanc, *Geology, Hydrology, and Water Quality in the Fresno Area, California* (Menlo Park, California: U.S. Dept. of the Interior, Geological Survey, Water Resources Division, 1969).

<sup>16</sup> For more on this region's natural and cultural history, see: Ramón A. Gutiérrez and Richard J. Orsi. *Contested Eden: California Before the Gold Rush* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

<sup>17</sup> See: Mildred Brooke Hoover and Douglas E. Kyle, "Millerton" in *Historic Spots in California* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1948), p. 95.

<sup>18</sup> For more on the origins of how wheat became the first crop to be successfully grown at large scale in California, see: Coit A. Suneson and Fred N. Briggs, *Wheat Production in California* (Berkeley, California: Agricultural Experiment Station, 1941); for more on how wheat fit into the larger set of agricultural initiatives during this period, particularly through labor contracting, see: Cletus E. Daniel, *Bitter Harvest, a History of California Farmworkers, 1870-1941* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1981).

<sup>19</sup> Lawrence James Jelinek, "Property of Every Kind": Ranching and Farming during the Gold-Rush Era" in *A Golden State: Mining and Economic Development in Gold Rush California*, eds. James J. Rawls and Richard J. Orsi (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 244-246.

<sup>20</sup> Gustav Eisen, *The Raisin Industry: A Practical Treatise on Raisin Grapes, their History, Culture, and Curing* (San Francisco: H.S. Crocker and Co., 1890), pp.38-40.

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<sup>21</sup> Gustav Eisen, *The Raisin Industry: A Practical Treatise on Raisin Grapes, their History, Culture, and Curing* (San Francisco: H.S. Crocker and Co., 1890). For more on the problem of water, either too much or too little, has long shaped human-Earth relations in the Central Valley. For more on how federal and national concerns contributed to the making of the California landscape, see: Donald J. Pisani, *Water and American Government the Reclamation Bureau, National Water Policy, and the West, 1902-1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Norris Hundley, *Water and the West: The Colorado River Compact and the Politics of Water in the American West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009). For more on the practical concerns faced by civil engineers, water management specialists, and policy makers, see: Thomas V. Cech, *Principles of Water Resources: History, Development, Management, and Policy* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2010).

<sup>22</sup> For more on the Easterby's role in the regional irrigation plan, see: United States. Office of Irrigation Inquiry. *Report on Irrigation, Volumes 1-2*, pp. 91-92; For more on Stanford's role in regional development through the railroad, see extensive coverage of his presence in: Richard White, *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America* (New York: WW Norton & Co.), 2012; Richard J. Orsi, *Sunset Limited: The Southern Pacific Railroad and the Development of the American West, 1850-1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

<sup>23</sup> For an overview of the larger strategies underway during this period of railroad and irrigation construction, see: R.H. Smith, *Towns Along The Tracks: Railroad Strategy And Town Promotion In The San Joaquin Valley, California*.

<sup>24</sup> Martin Theodore Kearney, *M. Theo Kearney's Fresno County, California, and the Evolution of the Fruit Vale Estate*. (Fresno, California: Fresno City and County Historical Society), 1980 (Reproduction of 1904 edition).

<sup>25</sup> R.B. Marshall, *Irrigation of Twelve Million Acres in the Valley of California* (Sacramento: California State Irrigation Association), 1920; Gerald R Ogden, *Agricultural Land Use And Wildlife In the San Joaquin Valley, 1769-1930: an Overview* (Sacramento, Calif.: U.S. Bureau of Reclamation), 1988.

<sup>26</sup> For an excellent account of Kearney's development of the Central California Colony, see: John Panter, "Central California Colony: 'Marvel of the Desert'" in *Fresno Past and Present: The Journal of the Fresno City and County Historical Society*, Vol.36, No.2 (Summer 1994).

<sup>27</sup> For the origins of these larger migration and labor struggles in California farm labor during this period, see: Cletus E. Daniel, *Bitter Harvest: A History of California Farmworkers, 1870-1941* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1981; Camille Guerin-Gonzales, *Mexican Workers and American Dreams: Immigration, Repatriation, and California Farm Labor, 1900-1939* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press).

<sup>28</sup> In *Artificial Love: A Story of Machines and Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003), Paul Shepherd argues that the sculptural qualities of these buildings and machines—and the relation its workers and neighbors develop with them—provide important clues into individual and community values and desire. For more on how these relationships shaped an earlier generation of industry, or, how "the mill resembles a meeting house" in New England, see: John R. Stilgoe, *Common Landscape of America, 1580-1845* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), pp. 324-333.

<sup>29</sup> Ester Hernandez (artist) interview with author regarding the hand drawn floor plan for her childhood home in Dinuba, California, September 28, 2014. One item Hernandez clarified that is missing from the drawing is a small "rasquache" shed built by her father Simon to store his tools and his wife Luz's gardening supplies. Following critic Tomas Frausto-Ybarra's Chicana/o aesthetic sensibility, *rasquachismo*, or a "something out of nothing" quality, this informal feature of their everyday built environment—that was remembered fondly by Hernandez—might imagined as an example of Chicana/o placemaking, where something as simple as the memory of a tiny shed placed behind a small farm worked house several decades in the past could evoke a deeply held set of cultural memories about what it felt like to be in that backyard, during that time and place.

<sup>30</sup> See: Shifra M. Goldman, *Chicana Voices & Visions: A National Exhibit of Women Artists: 27 artists from Arizona, California, Colorado, Michigan, New Mexico, and Texas* (Venice, California: Social and Public Arts Resource Center, December 3, 1983 to January 21, 1984).

<sup>31</sup> Ester Hernandez (artist) interview with author, November 21, 2010.

<sup>32</sup> Ester Hernandez, artist statement, *Transformations: The Art of Ester Hernandez* exhibit, MACLA San Jose Center for Latino Arts, San Jose, California, 1998.

<sup>33</sup> Ester Hernandez (artist) interview with author, November 21, 2010.

<sup>34</sup> For discussion of her early connections to the lower San Joaquin Valley landscape, particularly the night sky, see: Ester Hernandez, keynote address, *Daughters of the Shaking Earth: Bay Area Latina Artists and the Environment* symposium, San Francisco, California, La Galeria de la Raza, May 12, 2012. A version of the print is in the permanent collection of the Library of Congress and can be viewed at: <https://www.loc.gov/item/2004666495/>

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<sup>35</sup> A version of *Cosmic Cruise* (1990), along with accompanying notes, can be found at: California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives, Dept of Special Collections, Donald Davidson Library, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA (CEMA 3).

<sup>36</sup> *La Ofrenda* (1988), Ester Hernandez Papers, Stanford Special Collections, Map Folder 12.

<sup>37</sup> Ruíz, Vicki. 2000. "Claiming Public Space at Work, Church, and Neighborhood" in *Las obreras: Chicana politics of work and family* (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Publications), pp. 13-40. For an overview of this wider effort to bring the everyday stories of Mexican heritage women into wider view, see: Ruíz, Vicki. 2008. *From Out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in Twentieth-Century America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press). For an account of how Mexican heritage gardens and yards had shaped migrant vernacular landscapes, see: Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, *Paradise Transplanted: Migration and the Making of California Gardens* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016). For a comprehensive overview of garden aesthetics, architecture, and cultural practices, see: Francis, Mark, and Randolph T. Hester, *The Meaning of Gardens: Idea, Place, and Action* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press) and Michael Leslie and John Dixon Hunt, *A Cultural History of Gardens* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2016).

<sup>38</sup> For more on the spiritual dimensions of this installation, see: Laura E. Pérez, *Chicana Art: The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetic Altarities* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007) p. 57. And, for an account of how this piece fits into the larger tradition of Chicana home altars, see: Amalia Mesa-Bains, *Imagenes E Historias/Images and Histories: Chicana Altar-Inspired Art*, Catalogue, Constance Cortez, ed. Tufts University, Medford, MA, 1999.

<sup>39</sup> For more on Posada's work, see: Diane Helen Miliotes and José Guadalupe Posada, *José Guadalupe Posada and the Mexican broadside = José Guadalupe Posada y la hoja volante mexicana* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2006); Patrick Frank and José Guadalupe Posada, *Posada's broadsheets: Mexican Popular Imagery, 1890-1910* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998); Thomas Gretton. "Posada and the 'Popular': Commodities and Social Constructs in Mexico before the Revolution" in *Oxford Art Journal* 17, no. 2 (1994): 32-47. For more on the uses of this imagery in Latina/o America, see: Regina M. Marchi, *Day of the Dead in the USA: The Migration and Transformation of a Cultural Phenomenon* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2009).

<sup>40</sup> Anna L., Palecek, Gary H. Marshburn, and Barry F. Kriebel, *Sun-Maid Raisins & Dried Fruits: Serving American Families & the World since 1912* (London: DK), p.58.

<sup>41</sup> Campbell, D. (2013). The face of the 'franchise'. *Rural Cooperatives*, 80(4), p.16.

<sup>42</sup> "The Exhibits at San Francisco Awarded the Highest Honors," *Sun Maid Herald*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (August 1915), p.12.

<sup>43</sup> For more on the history and cultural significance of the Panama-Pacific Expo, including its extensive buildings and grounds, see: Abigail M. Markwyn, *Empress San Francisco: The Pacific Rim, the Great West, and California at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2014); Laura A. Ackley, *San Francisco's Jewel City: The Panama-Pacific International Exposition of 1915* (Berkeley: Heyday Press, 2015).

<sup>44</sup> Larsen, Dave. "Raisin Girl Memories Sweeten with Age." *Los Angeles Times*, May 16, 1982, p.F1; Russ Parsons Russ, "Raisin Maiden," *Los Angeles Times*, Nov 21, 1993, p.19.

<sup>45</sup> The rapid rise from experimental or hobby vineyards during the early days of the Central California Colony to the consolidation of the industry through the formation of the power Sun-Maid Cooperative plays visually for member growers in the pages of the Sun Maid Herald. Like the later Associate Grower, advertisements promoting locally produced farm equipment, fertilizers, and building materials, a kind of complement to the popular recipe books intended for the domestic market. See for example: *Sun-Maid Herald* (Fresno, California: Sun-Maid Raisin Growers, 1915-1920).

<sup>46</sup> Anna L., Palecek, Gary H. Marshburn, and Barry F. Kriebel, *Sun-Maid Raisins & Dried Fruits: Serving American Families & the World since 1912* (London: DK), p.59.

<sup>47</sup> "Sun Maid Growers To Operate Buildings At Dinuba And Yuba City," *Madera Mercury*, Number 134, 1 September 1922; "Sun-Maid Closes Old Fresno Plant," *Madera Tribune*, Number 62, 11 August 1966.

<sup>48</sup> This notice can be found, along with the phone calls, newspaper clippings, another other research she would collect over the two years it would take her to complete the piece can be found in the EH Papers, Stanford (Series 4, Box 45, Folder 10).

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> See: EH Papers, Stanford (Series 4, Box 43, Folder 8).

<sup>51</sup> See: Ester Hernandez (artist) interview with the author, 2010.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusion



Figure 5.1. A roadside memorial, Del Rey, California (2016). Photograph by Jennifer Garcia Peacock.

Brightly colored flowers—some silk, some fresh—decorate a memorial set at the vineyard’s edge. Jars, pitchers, and buckets hold many of the arrangements gathered at the base of a cross, diffusing into a loose knit of candles and small solar powered lamps. A small pinwheel spins atop a wreath made of carnations and roses, adding aural texture to this rural working soundscape. An irrigation canal divides the golden vineyard soil, stretching back towards the Sierra Nevada foothills and Kings River tributary from which it emerged. Taken in late summer, the air in this scene is hot and moist, filled with a light steam from the burst of plant life that is nearing harvest.

Just out of view—behind the photographer’s lens—is a stop sign marking the junction between East American Way and Del Rey Avenue, a corridor home to four large packing houses. All day, trucks pull in and trucks pull out, making the intersection dangerous for local traffic. A stop sign does little to control traffic of this volume—particularly during when the opaque clouds of Tule fog roll in—and so shrines like this one, unfortunately, repeat far too frequently along the back roads of the lower San Joaquin Valley. They remind passers by that the relation between land, labor, and market is fraught with dangers.

Also out of view, tucked away between the packing houses and a couple of storefronts just a few blocks away, is the remnant of Antonio Bernal’s mural from 1968. Long abandoned, only the peeling edges of the whitewashed wall remains on the building, which is itself no longer in use. Typical of the small towns in the “grape belt,” Del Rey is an odd mix of cramped residential neighborhoods, overflowing with informal housing units squeezed between and behind small houses and trailers, and underutilized city centers; only a few small stores and restaurants exist, as residents are drawn to bigger (and cheaper) retailers that line Highway 99 in suburban Fresno.

Del Rey, in this image, becomes both a record of the past and an indicator of present and future relations between Chicana/os and their cultural landscape. Bernal’s mural might be seen to capture a particular way of looking at Chicano/a history—as a bold parade, mostly of men, from noble pasts—Mexican revolutionaries, 1960s organizers—into brighter futures. If Bernal’s mural sat in Del Rey, many others—and much of the discussion—reside in the cities. The rural is always already present in Chicano/a history, but it appears in cameo moments mostly, while the brighter lights belong in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Denver, San Diego, even Chicago. Rurality is a baseline, a shared cultural trope (if not necessarily a memory), the remnants of a

structure of feeling. What this dissertation has endeavored to demonstrate is that the rural locations of the Central Valley are far more than that: they offer the wellsprings for the critical intertwining of Chicano/a art and politics, which are based in rural memory, to be sure, but as importantly in the daily relation between rural labor, long traditions of vernacular cultural expression, and the experience and knowledge of rural environments. Out of these things come many of the particular claims and expressions of the Chicano/a movement. They take their meanings from ongoing rural vernacular artistic expressions: the calling up of a *calavera* or mural tradition; the neo-baroque glitter that joins Sierra granite with Spanish ornament; the women's dresses, family workshops, and quiet gardens; the *Virgen* and the roadside (or fieldside) shrine.

As environmental justice scholars have shown, the people and places of the lower San Joaquin Valley have endured a decades-long public health and environmental crisis, a problem that recent studies suggest is only intensifying. Water pollution, air pollution, and light pollution are most acute in greater Fresno, and particularly its surrounding towns like Del Rey, Parlier, Delano and unincorporated areas like East Porterville where industrial scale agricultural production is at its most productive and destructive. On most days now, in the early twenty first century, the rolling hills of the Coast Range and Sierra Nevada are barely visible—as in the photo here—taking us further and further away from the explosive displays of color found in John Muir's wildflowers.

Environmental historians and landscape geographers have offered remarkable accounts of the industrialization of agricultural in the valley, which required the domestication of both land and workers. From flexible labor pools of busted miners to *Californio* refugees to desperate Okies to Bracero workers to Mexican immigrants, the control over labor has been central to the



control over the land and its transformation into the world's largest industrial agricultural zone. Economic and industrial analyses, however, have often remained firmly grounded in materialist history. While they have indeed been attentive to questions of race formation, they have paid relatively little attention to cultural and arts production, to the vernacular world, to the more variegated work experience of women. In these chapters, I've sought to show how aesthetics both emerges out of the experience of work in the rural environment *and* how it becomes a critical element in the organizing around labor equity and fairness issues.

Historians of visual arts have certainly spent their time and energy on the Valley, most notably in the near-obsessive interest in the Farm Services Administration photographs. Likewise, mainline art historians have been interested in California as a site where modernism lingered and transformed in regional terms—not like those of the Midwestern regionalists of the 1930s, but through quiet traditions—not isolated, exactly, but reflective of California's own particular sensibilities, visible in parallel through its literary traditions. Neither body of work, however, has linked the landscape with practices of visual representation visible in works by Richard Diebenkorn, Wayne Thiebaud, or others. In this dissertation—while not stretching to a direct comparison to those artists—I've tried to show the ways that landscape and visual aesthetics are completely connected. More to the point, I've argued that land is known through labor, and that a distinct aesthetic emerges, not from the eye of the academic modernist, but from the vernacular expression of working families—and even more to the point, from those families able to mobilize long traditions of Mexican heritage imagemaking. From these sources come murals, marches, drama, and political/familial statements like Ester Hernandez's *Sun Mad*.

These sources also produce roadside shrines, rich not only with meaning, but with aesthetic beauty. Looking to the vernacular landscape for cultural information becomes

particularly urgent in a small shrine set up at the vineyard's edge. It speaks well to the insistence of beauty and cultural memory in unlikely places and spaces. These uses of dramatic color, shape, pattern, repetition, and texture call attention to stories that might otherwise be overlooked because they are in plain sight, or because they evade the categories we have used—Chicano/a, art, work, environment, gender—to make sense of the world of the Central Valley and its surroundings. This shrine—like so many of the other images, performances, and memories found in this dissertation—calls on us to see things anew, in terms of a rural vernacular aesthetic, borne of land, labor, and history, productive and representational of a critical political moment.

Across these chapters, I have also sought to bring nuance to depictions of a wide range of rural subjects, beginning with the farm worker, a major recurring figure in Chicana/o visual culture. In chapter one, “Delano: Chicana/o Activism, Pilgrimage, and Rural Visual Culture,” I argued that the symbol of the farm worker took on two key forms during the Grape Strike (1965-1970): the feisty, satirical version seen in the pages and stages of the early movement visual culture, and the more somber, penitent version put forward along the pilgrim trail during the march. These dual representations allowed the NFWA—and later the UFW—a wider reach in their visual message, an move that helped them attract both the farm workers they were seeking to organize and the allies in and beyond the Central Valley that would help make the Grape Strike a success.

In chapter two, “Parlier: Murals and the Chicana/o Vernacular Landscape,” I explored the the *soldadera* figure—a long celebrated but thinly drawn heroine of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920)—found at the front of the Del Rey mural and as a larger-than-life secondary focal point in the mural at Parlier. The *soldadera* is particularly helpful in understanding the social and political changes taking place, and I used her appearance in these works produced along the

civil rights era “grape belt” as a point of departure to examine the women-led aesthetic resistance that took place in the small farmworker town of Parlier during the 1970s. I connected her appearance in the mural at Del Rey to the wider representation of rural women in Mexican heritage visual culture and identify the legacy of a feminine, and sometimes feminist, presence in arts based resistance movements.

Finally, in chapter three, “Dinuba: Chicana/o Printmaking in the Home of the Raisin Industry,” I revisited the image of the farm worker, this time pictured as a Posada-inspired *calavera* in Ester Hernandez’s *Sun Mad* (1982). Well dressed with the bountiful harvest in hand, Hernandez’s representation disrupts the idyllic rural scene made ubiquitous by the Sun Maid raisin logo. A closer look—provided though a tour of the rise of raisin industry and laborers such as the Hernandez family—revealed an even more pointed critique of this part of the agricultural sector, which has long relied on the delicate yet highly efficient work of the women who fill its packing houses. Part visual history, part biography, this chapter demonstrated the ways that the raisin industry dramatically reshaped the landscape over just a few short decades at the turn of the century, and how women like Tomasa Medina and Luz Hernandez made more subtle but culturally meaningful interventions to their built environments through their home gardens and domestic displays.

While John Muir’s wildflowers were surely long gone from along Highway 162 by the time Hernandez began travelling the route as a student at UC Berkeley in the 1970s—and later on trips home with her young son Jacobo—her devotion to visually articulating what often goes unseen, unheard along these rural roads that line the base of Mount Whitney serves as an important example of the ways Mexican heritage people, particularly women, have experienced the sweeping changes that shaped their cultural landscapes during the twentieth century. These

contributions, while relatively humble in their production, are rich with environmental knowledge, and serve as an outstanding record of how Chicana/os experienced and represented their environmental relationships in California's Great Central Valley. Taken together, they help explain an entangled history, one in which labor resistance, ethnic politics, the land itself, and the meanings embedded in aesthetic traditions and new cultural imaginings came together at a crucial moment in history, with consequences that continue to shape the lives and lands of this place.

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