

# The Tale of The Raza

by Luis Valdez



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

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

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

That we Mexicans speak of ourselves as a "race" is the biggest contradiction of them all. The *conquistadores*, of course, mated with their Indian women with customary abandon, creating a nation of bewildered half-breeds in countless shapes, colors and sizes. Unlike our fathers and mothers, unlike each other, we *mestizos* solved the problem with poetic license and called ourselves *la raza*. A Mexican's first loyalty — when one of us is threatened by strangers from the outside — is to that race. Either we recognize our total unity on the basis of *raza*, or the ghosts of a 100,000 feuding Indian tribes, bloods and mores will come back to haunt us.

Just 50 years ago the Revolution of 1910 unleashed such a terrible social upheaval that it took 10 years of insane slaughter to calm the ghosts of the past. The Revolution took Mexico from the hands of New World Spaniards (who in turn were selling it to American and British inter-

ests) and gave it, for the first time and at the price of a million murders, to the Mexicans.

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

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

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

Our *campesinos*, the farm-working *raza*, find it difficult to participate in this alien North-American country. The acculturated Mexican-Americans in the cities, *ex-raza*, find it easier. They have solved their Mexican contradictions with a pungent dose of Americanism, and are more concerned with status, money and bad breath than with their ultimate destiny. In a generation or two they will melt into the American pot and be no more. But the farmworking *raza* will not disappear so easily.



THE PILGRIMAGE TO SACRAMENTO was no mere publicity trick. The *raza* has a tradition of migrations, starting from the legend of the founding of Mexico. Nezahualcoyotl, a great Indian leader, advised his primitive *Chichimecas*, forerunners of the Aztecs, to begin a march to the south. In that march, he prophesied, the children would age and the old would die, but their grandchildren would come to a great lake. In that lake they would find an eagle devouring a serpent, and on that spot, they would begin to build a great nation. The nation was Aztec Mexico, and the eagle and the serpent are the symbols of the *patria*. They are emblazoned on the Mexican flag, which the marchers took to Sacramento with pride.

Then there is the other type of migration. When the migrant farm laborer followed the crops, he was only reacting to the way he saw the American *raza*: no unity, no representation, no roots. The pilgrimage was a truly religious act, a rejection of our past in this country and a symbol of our unity and new direction. It is of no lasting significance that Governor Brown was not at the Capitol to greet us. The unity of thousands of *raza* on the Capitol steps was reason enough for our march. Under the name of HUELGA we had created a Mexican-American *patria*, and Cesar Chavez was our first *Presidente*.

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

The route of the pilgrimage was planned so that the *Huelga* could reach all the farmworkers of the San Joaquin Valley. Dependent as we were on each farmworking town for food and shelter, we knew the *raza* would not turn us down. "*Mi casa es suya*," is the precept of Mexican hospitality: "My house is yours."

The Virgin of Guadalupe was the first hint to farmworkers that the pilgrimage implied social revolution. During the Mexican Revolution, the peasant armies of Emiliano Zapata carried her standard, not only because they sought her divine protection, but because she symbolized the Mexico of the poor and humble. It was a simple Mexican Indian, Juan Diego, who first saw her in a vision at Guadalupe. Beautifully dark and Indian in feature, she was the New World version of the Mother of Christ. Even though some of her worshippers in Mexico still identify her with Tonatzin, an Aztec goddess, she is a

Catholic saint of Indian creation — a Mexican. The people's response was immediate and reverent. They joined the march by the thousands, falling in line behind her standard. To the Catholic hypocrites against the pilgrimage and strike the Virgin said *Huelga!*

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

There were also political rallies in the smallest towns of the San Joaquin Valley. Sometimes they were the biggest things that had ever happened in town. Every meeting included a reading of El Plan de Delano, a "plan of liberation" for all farmworkers in the language of the picket line: ". . . our path travels through a valley well known to all Mexican farmworkers. We know all of these towns . . . because along this very same road, in this very same valley, the Mexican race has sacrificed itself for the last 100 years . . . This is the beginning of a social movement in fact and not in pronouncements . . . We shall unite . . . We shall strike . . . Our PILGRIMAGE is the MATCH that will light our cause for all farmworkers to see what is happening here, so that they may do as we have done . . . VIVA LA CAUSE! VIVA LA HUELGA!"

The rallies were like religious revivals. At each new town, they were waiting to greet us and offer us their best — mariachis, embraces, words of encouragement for the strike, prayers, rosaries, sweet cakes, fruit and iced tea. Hundreds walked, ran or drove up to the march and donated what little money they could afford. The countless gestures of sympathy and solidarity was like nothing the *raza* had ever seen.

THE NFWA IS A RADICAL union because it started, and continues to grow, as a community organization. Its store, cafeteria, clinic, garage, newspaper and weekly meeting have established a sense of community the Delano farmworker will not relinquish. After years of isolation in the *barrios* of Great Valley slum towns like Delano, after years of living in labor camps and ranches at the mercy and caprice of growers and contractors, the Mexican-American farmworker is developing his own ideas about living in the United States.

For millions of farmworkers, from the Mexicans and Philipinos of the West to the Afro-Americans of the South, the United States has come to a social, political and cultural impasse. Listen to these people, and you will hear the first murmurings of revolution.

