On its way to becoming “No nos moverán,” the song “We Shall Not Be Moved” followed several distinct routes that connected a number of widely dispersed locales at different historical junctures. The people who adapted “We Shall Not Be Moved” for use with Spanish-speaking audiences at different moments in different places appear to have done so without knowledge of one another. The rise of “No nos moverán” as a “movement” song in several different Spanish-speaking countries is, in this sense, a good illustration of Bernice Johnson Reagon’s metaphor of the “river” of U.S. African spirituals branching into many different “tributaries” only to join together again further downstream. In this chapter, I outline the principal instances in which “We Shall Not Be Moved” was translated into Spanish for use by activists in social justice movements in the United States, first in the 1930s and then again in the mid-1960s. The first time “We Shall Not Be Moved” was sung by Spanish-speaking activists appears to have taken place more than seventy years ago in a jail in San Antonio, Texas. The song continues to be sung in Spanish today by social justice activists in San Antonio, though few of them are aware of the special historical connection “No nos moverán” has to their city.
The 1938 Pecan Shellers’ Strike in San Antonio, Texas

To people in the United States, San Antonio is most famous for having been the site of an 1836 military battle at the Alamo that marked the first skirmish in the wars leading to Texas’s secession from Mexico and subsequent conquest by the United States. Following the annexation of Texas by the United States in 1848, Mexicans residing in the territory either fled across the Rio Grande or remained to live as second-class citizens in their longtime home. In the early twentieth century, these Texas Mexicans were joined by many thousands of others who migrated north of the border in search of work in U.S. farms, mines, factories, and railroads. By the 1920s, San Antonio had grown into one of the principal urban destinations for Mexican migrants as well as a major labor recruiting center for employers in other parts of the United States who sought to contract manual labor at wages considerably lower than they would have had to pay to white U.S. citizens. San Antonio came to be known as the “Mexican American cultural capital” of the United States due to its considerable Mexican population, a title it would hold until the 1960s (Arreola 1987). In addition, by this time San Antonio had also come to be known as the pecan-shelling capital of the world, due to the pecan groves that dotted the central and south Texas landscape and the availability of a racially oppressed Mexican workforce who could be tapped to shell the nuts by hand for extremely low pay (Shapiro 1952; Tenayuca and Brooks 1939; Vargas 2005).

The wages and working conditions facing the twelve thousand Mexican pecan shellers in San Antonio, the majority of them women and girls, were abysmal. They labored on a contract basis from November to March, working in approximately four hundred wooden sheds on the city’s West Side, which were poorly lit, were inadequately ventilated, and lacked indoor plumbing. Workers earned five to six cents a pound for shelled pecans and only one to four dollars a week for a six-day workweek. The principal pecan company often paid its contracted Mexican workers in kind, doling out rations of coffee, flour, rice, and beans from its commissary. When the Great Depression hit, wages plummeted, falling to as low as sixteen cents per week (figures taken from Vargas 2005: 134; see also Pecan Workers Local No. 172, 1938; Shapiro 1952; and Ybarra 1932). The archbishop of San Antonio at the time spoke of the terrible conditions suffered by the Mexican pecan
shellers, melodramatically stating that “the Negro slaves before emancipation were a thousand times better off than these poor, defenseless people” (quoted in Lambert 1938: 2).

At the end of January 1938, six to eight thousand pecan shellers walked off the job in a spontaneous strike. One of its principal leaders was a young Texas Mexican woman named Emma Tenayuca, whose brilliant oratory and Communist Party membership earned her the nickname of “La Pasionaria de Texas,” a clear reference to Dolores Ibárruri, the Spanish Communist leader made famous only a year before for her cry of “No pasarán” (“They will not pass”) in rallying Republican forces in the Spanish Civil War to the defense of Madrid during the fascist siege of the city. Soon thousands of family members and other Mexican residents of San Antonio took to the streets in support of the strikers. Seeing the opportunity to organize these workers as part of its struggles nationwide, the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America, a union affiliated with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), supported the strike through a local chapter known as the Texas Pecan Shelling Workers Union (Vargas 2005: 134–139).

Police repression of the strikers was quick and brutal. Tenayuca and hundreds of other strikers, union organizers, and demonstrators were arrested and thrown en masse into the city jail. Conditions in the jail were inhumane, with as many as thirty-three women crammed into a cell built for six, making it impossible for them to sit or lie down and leading the pecan shellers’ union to refer to the San Antonio jail as “the black hole of Texas” (Pecan Workers Local No. 172, 1938: 9). In spite of the brutality of the police and the conditions in the jail, the Mexican workers and their families who participated in what had become a general uprising against white Anglo capitalist rule in the city remained jubilant in jail, even as guards turned fire hoses on them. As noted by labor historian Zaragosa Vargas (2005: 141), at night the jailed strikers kept their spirits up by singing labor songs from both the United States and Mexico. On one night in particular, two CIO organizers, Santos Vásquez and George Lambert, spent the night in jail together and helped lead their cellmates in Spanish versions of their favorite English-language union songs. Lambert recalls the scene in a 1971 interview in Dallas with historian George Green:
I remember spending one night in a cell, which was made for about six people, and there was about twenty some-odd people in there. Twenty or more of us were in there, so we couldn’t lay down. Vásquez was in there with me, and I gave him the words to a number of labor songs—the English words—and he translated them into Spanish. The only one that I can remember now was “We Shall Not Be Moved.” He had difficulty and found it almost impossible to translate the words and make some of them rhyme in Spanish. The words go “just like a tree planted by the water” and he puzzled with that for quite some time and decided that the closest translation he could get was in the Spanish words for “just like a rock that stands against the windstorm”—“como peñón que resiste el viento” [“like a boulder that resists the wind”]—instead of “just like a tree planted by the water.” We got the people in that jail singing that night! They were all packed in there. The favorite verse, and you could hear it all over the jail, was “¡Kilday está loco!” [“Kilday is nuts!”], referring to the Chief of Police, and something about Seligman [the main pecan company owner]. He wasn’t crazy, but he was a tyrant or Simon Legree² or something of that sort that was translated into Spanish.

I can no longer recall, but the jailers were trying to quiet it down. There was some talk about using the [fire] hoses on us. The inmates of the jail who had been in there for some time were all joining in—even the Anglos that were in the county jail. And, of course, nobody could sleep because it was just packed so there was just no way to sleep. These labor songs were just pouring out of there in Spanish all that night. I often wish that we had written them down at that time. We had “Solidarity [Forever].” Vásquez translated that, and we got that started, and somebody came up with some labor song from Mexico that also got into the festivities that night.


Later in life, the workers’ leader Emma Tenayuca also shared her memory of this glorious night of singing in jail in an interview with historian Zaragosa Vargas (Zaragosa Vargas, pers. comm., September 3, 2011; see also Vargas 1997).
After two months of mass meetings, confrontations with the police, and appeals to the Roosevelt administration and the courts, the strike was settled by a board of arbitration. The pecan shellers’ union was legally recognized, and the pecan companies were obliged to negotiate with it in good faith. New contracts to shellers were issued in the fall of 1938 that “provided for a closed shop, a check-off system, grievance machinery, and piece rates of seven and eight cents per pound,” considerably higher than companies had been paying on the eve of the strike (Shapiro 1952: 239). This enormous symbolic victory, not only for pecan shellers but also for the labor movement in Texas and for Mexican Americans as a people, turned out to be short-lived in material terms. Within a few years, the pecan companies in Texas mechanized shelling, displacing the Mexican women and girls whose labor they had only recently been exploiting so ruthlessly and profitably (Shapiro 1952; Vargas 2005).

Not only was the victory of the striking pecan shellers Pyrrhic; this first rendition of “No nos moverán” as a Spanish-language song disappeared following the end of the strike and the subsequent replacement of the pecan industry’s Mexican workforce by machines. In fact, there is no evidence it was ever sung again after Lambert and Vásquez taught it to their cellmates that night in the San Antonio jail. It would take almost thirty more years for the song to reemerge among Spanish-speaking activists in the United States. Interestingly, in 1939, two Mexican members of San Antonio’s Texas Pecan Shelling Workers Union attended workshops for union organizers at the Highlander Center, which had played such a prominent role in the transmission of “We Shall Not Be Moved” in both the labor and civil rights movements. The historical record shows that this was the first time that U.S. Mexicans had participated in a Highlander program, but it does not indicate whether participants sang any Spanish-language versions of labor songs (A. Horton 1989: 123, 294n47; Muñoz 1939; Oviedo 1939). Today, “No nos moverán” has nevertheless been associated retrospectively with the figure of Emma Tenayuca and the striking pecan shellers. For example, the 1979 documentary film Talkin’ Union, which details the history of activism by women workers in Texas, features the song on its soundtrack in the segment covering the 1938 strike in San Antonio (Scott and Flores 1979). When Tenayuca died in San Antonio in 1999, the scores of activists and
community members who attended her rosary spontaneously broke into a spirited rendition of the song. This moving moment was re-created in the play *An Altar for Emma* by the writer Beva Sánchez Padilla, which was performed on several occasions in San Antonio in the years following Tenayuca’s death, as recognition of her accomplishments as a pioneering Chicana feminist and labor leader grew.

An interesting footnote to the song’s connections to San Antonio and Mexico is that by the time of 1938 pecan shellers’ strike, the legendary country music band the Carter Family had begun wintering in San Antonio. They did so in part due to the city’s proximity to the Mexican border, where an enterprising U.S. entrepreneur and quack-physician named Brinkley had begun to broadcast country music continent-wide from a radio studio in Ciudad Acuña, Coahuila (see Fowler and Crawford 2002). The Carter Family did not have to travel to Mexico to perform their songs for Brinkley’s radio station. Instead, they recorded songs on acetates known as “transcription disks” that Brinkley would transport across the border to his Mexican studio. In 1939, one of the numbers they recorded in San Antonio for broadcast from Ciudad Acuña was their rendition of the gospel tune “I Shall Not Be Moved” (Kahn 1996: 214). In spite of this Tex-Mex connection, no Spanish-language version of the spiritual comparable to the translation of “We Shall Not Be Moved” seems to have emerged, given the racial segregation of the times and the Carter Family’s and Brinkley’s disengaged visitor status in the city and state. It is possible, however, that the Carter Family witnessed some of the demonstrations in support of the Mexican pecan shellers during their winter 1938 stay in the city. Much later, June Carter, a member of a younger generation of Carters, would marry the country singer Johnny Cash, who himself recorded “I Shall Not Be Moved” several times during his long career.

**The Struggle of Chicanos in the Fields and in the Cities**

Although there were some important connections between the U.S. labor movement and the African American civil rights movement in both political and cultural terms, the struggle for the rights of farmworkers that bloomed in the 1960s and early 1970s combined demands for the rights of workers and for civil rights in a creative
new way. Moreover, the United Farm Workers (UFW) movement, under the leadership of César Chávez, Dolores Huerta, and others, paid special attention to cultural work, both in terms of claiming Mexican religious and cultural iconography (see Bardacke 2011 and Watt 2010) and in making extensive use of theater and song in its organizing efforts. Furthermore, as detailed by David Gutiérrez (1995), the Chicano civil rights movement as a whole considered the farmworker movement to be emblematic of the struggles of Chicanos as an oppressed people in the United States.

In the mid-1960s, El Teatro Campesino (The Farmworker’s Theater) emerged as the UFW’s principal vehicle for movement culture, raising the consciousness of field workers through its bilingual plays and skits (actos), lifting the spirits of UFW members at meetings and on the picket lines, and serving as the UFW’s cultural ambassadors to the rest of the Chicano community and activists in other social justice movements (Broyles-González 1994). The two young activists who founded Teatro Campesino, Agustín Lira and Luis Valdez, were familiar with the English-language repertoires of both the U.S. labor movement and the African American civil rights movements. Together, with the encouragement of Chávez, they set about developing Spanish-language versions of the songs that they could use in the farmworker movement. Lira shares this remembrance of creating Spanish renditions of the songs during the famous strike against grape growers in Delano, California, which began in 1966:

In Delano during the early years of the strike it was Luis [Valdez] and myself who translated the civil rights songs from English to Spanish. Of course this didn’t take very long composition-wise because the songs are very simple, but effective—the mark of good songs. What took longer was getting the music, the chord structures to the songs. In those days I had my hands full with Mexican music since I had only played the guitar in rock and roll bands before then. My practical knowledge of chord structures then was nil, so I bummed from one guitar player to another, stealing as much as I could retain. Luckily for me, Delano was a magnet for artists; musicians came from everywhere, and I drained as much as I could from everyone. The songs . . . were played
everywhere imaginable, including burials. (Agustín Lira, pers. comm., September 3, 2011)

Luis Valdez, Lira’s collaborator, adds the following details about their translation of “No nos moverán”:

As I recall, “No nos moverán” was a direct lift from the Civil Rights Movement. I began marching for civil rights at San Jose State in 1958, so I was pretty well acquainted with “We Shall Not Be Moved.” It was one of the songs I regularly heard at demonstrations all over the San Francisco Bay Area, together with “Solidarity Forever.” One of the first things Augie [Lira] and I did as we began to work together was translate old labor and civil rights songs into Spanish; sometimes on César’s [Chávez’s] suggestion, most often on our own initiative. The verses of “No nos moverán” were fairly fluid as I recall, subject to change according to our circumstances. . . . In 1967, when the Teatro performed at Howard University in Washington DC [the nation’s most prominent African American university] on our first national tour, we sang “Nosotros venceremos” [“We Shall Overcome”] and “No nos moverán” specifically to underscore our solidarity with the civil rights movement. Now that I think about it, another Spanish version of the song was circulating with slightly different words, “Fuertes, fuertes, fuertes somos ya” [“Strong, strong, we’re already strong”] instead of “No, no, no nos moverán.” In any case, the song is still viable. It is still part of the song book of El Teatro Campesino, which remains active after 46 years. (Luis Valdez, pers. comm., September 7, 2011)

In his comments to the authors of an essay accompanying a 2005 recording of UFW songs by the movement’s activist musicians, Lira shares the following recollection of hearing a record of black civil rights movement “freedom songs” for the first time while working with the union in Delano:

I walked into the pink house [union headquarters] in Delano one day, and I remember hearing a record on the record player.
It was a black group, a gospel group. I think that they were called the Freedom Singers. I remember hearing them singing those songs—it was a chorus—all of those voices, singing together. It was very powerful. They were all movement songs. We just took those songs and started translating them into Spanish. They were songs that a whole group of people could sing. I think that we actually got a chance later to hook up with that group, and sing with them. (quoted in Peterson and Scott 2005: 17)

These Spanish lyrics written by Lira and Valdez have become the standard version of “No nos moverán” in the United States:

- **No, no no, no nos moverán**  
  No, no, no, they will not move us
- **Como un árbol firme junto al río**  
  Like a tree firmly next to the river
- **No nos moverán**  
  They will not move us
- **Unidos en la lucha . . .**  
  United in the struggle . . .
- **Unidos en la huelga . . .**  
  United in the strike . . .
- **Etcétera**  
  Et cetera

The song was sung routinely by UFW activists at their union meetings, on picket lines, and during their epic strike against California grape growers (see Heisley 1983; López 1995; Peterson and Scott 2005; United Farm Workers of America 1975). Several farm worker and Chicano movement versions of the song were recorded, circulated, and widely listened to by Spanish-speaking activists (see, for example, Rolas de Aztlán 2005 and United Farm Workers of America 1976).

The importance of “No nos moverán” in the farmworker movement and among Chicanos more generally was underscored by its prominent inclusion in *Cesar Chavez*, the 2014 Hollywood movie about Chávez’s life directed by Mexican actor and filmmaker Diego Luna. Thirty-five minutes into the film, Chávez and other UFW members are in the orchards of the San Joaquin Valley in California, where they approach fruit pickers to try to convince them to join the UFW’s strike against growers. Along a dirt road at the edge of the
orchard, a *conjunto* (Tex-Mex) band with *bajo sexto* (twelve-stringed Mexican bass guitar), upright bass, and accordion sing, “¡Firmes estaremos, no nos moverán!” (“We will be firm!”) as picketers shout “¡Viva la huelga!” (“Long live the strike!”) and “¡Viva César Chávez!” while waving the red UFW flag emblazoned with its famous águila azteca (Mexican eagle). Moments later the picketers are nearly run over by a tractor speeding toward them. Chávez has the picketers bunch together in a group to protect themselves, only to have the men on the tractor spray them with tear gas or some kind of pesticide, leaving the picketers coughing and rubbing their burning eyes as the men on the tractor tear away down the road.8

Dolores Huerta, who along with Chávez was one of the founders and principal leaders of the UFW, remembers that music played an essential part in winning the union’s famous five-year strike against grape growers in Delano, California. Singing led by Valdez, Lira, and others in the movement was a staple of the strikers’ weekly Friday night meetings, which served as much as a celebration of their comradery as a time to plan strike actions and conduct union business. Huerta, who continues to be active in a variety of labor, civil rights, and women’s struggles in the United States today, recognizes “No nos moverán” as being an especially important song in the farmworker movement:

We sang “No nos moverán” every day. It was a song that was in our repertoire and we sang it every single day. Because we were on those picket lines from early morning till late in the evening and we had to keep our spirits up on the picket lines. And one way that we kept our spirits up on the picket lines was to sing these songs. . . . You know, when you’re talking about a strike going on for five years—that was a long time to be on strike! Music was extremely important to keeping people from getting discouraged. “No nos moverán” symbolized the spirit that we had and that we needed to maintain. To keep people strong and let them know that eventually we’re going to win as long as we don’t give up. That was one of the most important things, and I always liked to quote César on that. César always said, “You’ll always win if you don’t give up. The only time we lose is when we give up.” So “No nos
moverán” pretty much symbolizes that saying. When you put the song in that context, it gives it a lot more meaning. It was our battle cry, so to speak. We are on strike and we are not going to give up until we win. And we did! (Dolores Huerta, telephone interview with author, February 11, 2014)9

In an interview a year before his death in 1993, Chávez himself testified to the importance to the farmworker movement of the cultural work done by Teatro Campesino, including its singing of “No nos moverán”:

Well, it helped with the workers. . . . It was street theater. . . . [I]t was able to deal with three important things. One was just deal with . . . like we’re here to stay. You know, [Luis Valdez] came out and sang “Viva la Huelga” [“Long Live the Strike”] and “No nos moverán” and that stuff—great! The other thing he was able to ridicule . . . growers . . . which was great. Not attack them. But ridicule . . . [t]hen deal with the internal problems we had about the strikebreakers or being afraid. . . . Oh the Friday night meetings would be jammed with people . . . because even though we were losing the strike . . . they’re still coming because the teatro was there. (César Chávez, interview with Luis Torres, April 20, 1992, quoted in Rosales 1996: 136)

By the latter half of the 1960s, the famous folk singer Joan Baez, whose father was a Mexican immigrant, began lending her voice to the farmworker cause, giving benefit concerts and singing at rallies, on picket lines, and at member funerals, much as she had done for the African American civil rights movement (Chatfield 2004; KPBS Radio 2010; United Farm Workers of America 1975). Baez was so well known and appreciated by farmworker activists at the time that the union’s newspaper, El Malcriado, published a reader’s effusive poem written in her honor in its December 29, 1966, issue (Meza 1966). She would already have been familiar with “We Shall Not Be Moved” as an English-language freedom song, having in fact sung from the same stage at the legendary 1963 March on Washington where the Freedom Singers performed the song for tens of thousands of march-
Baez presumably learned Lira and Valdez’s Spanish rendition of the song through her contact with the farmworker movement. It is not surprising, therefore, that when she recorded her first album of Spanish-language songs in 1974, “No nos moverán” was featured prominently. What was surprising, perhaps, was how she imaginatively linked the song with the cultural expressions and struggles of the rest of Latin America by reciting verses from the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda’s famous poem “Las Alturas de Machu Picchu” in the song’s introduction. Here perhaps Baez was unwittingly channeling Neruda’s indirect connection to the song through the figure of Paul Robeson. In the 1950s, Neruda commissioned a studio recording of the Chilean song “Canto a la pampa” (“Song to the Plain”) from Robeson, whose right to perform in Peekskill, New York, as discussed in Chapter 3, had been defended by unionists singing “We Shall Not Be Moved.” At the same time, Baez was already thinking about Chile when she recorded the album the year following the military’s takeover of the country. Indeed, the album’s title, Gracias a la vida (Thanks to Life), comes from the most famous song written by Violeta Parra, the “godmother” of the Chilean new song movement, and also includes a cover of Víctor Jara’s song “Te recuerdo, Amanda” (“I Remember You, Amanda”).

Later, when she visited Chile on a human rights mission in 1981, Baez led the women of the Agrupación de Familiares de los Detenidos Desaparecidos (Organization of Family Members of the Detained and Disappeared) in a spontaneous rendition of the song, a moment that was captured in the documentary There but for Fortune: Joan Baez in Latin America (First Run Icarus Films 1983). Interestingly, although these Chilean women clearly were familiar with the song, they did not appear to know the lyrics of the refrain—“como un árbol firme junto al río” (“like a tree firmly next to the river”)—that Baez sang, with the women smiling and humming most of the song except the line “no nos moverán” itself. Surely, this was because they were instead familiar with Tiemponuevo’s lyrics, “y él que no crea que haga la prueba” (“let he who does not believe it put it to the test”). Thirty-three years later, in March 2014, Baez returned to Chile to perform for the first time since her 1981 human rights visit. She performed two nearly sold-out concerts at the Teatro Caupolicán in Santiago, leading the audience in a rendition of “No nos moverán” on both
evenings as her final encore. On the first evening, she sang the refrain with most of the audience enthusiastically singing with her the initial “no, no, no nos moverán” only to have them drop out when she completed the refrain with the lyrics “como un árbol firme junto al río.” On subsequent refrains, she motioned for the audience to sing it on their own, which they did, even more enthusiastically: “y él que no crea que haga la prueba.” On the second night, she did not bother to sing “como un árbol” at all, enjoying listening to the audience sing the Chilean refrain from the outset. Baez has sung the song many times in the Spanish-speaking world, but to no greater applause than when she sang it on a television program in Madrid, performing in Spain for the first time in her career following the death of Francisco Franco, the fascist military dictator who had ruled the country with an iron fist for four decades. In the next chapter, I explore how the song traveled to Spain and gained popularity as an antifascist protest anthem.