We Shall Not Be Moved/No nos moverán

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As a spiritual, “I Shall Not Be Moved” was born of the oppression, exploitation, and longing for liberation of enslaved Africans in North America. Over the past two centuries, the song has continued to express that deep longing for freedom and justice in many different voices, on several different continents, and in several different languages. It has been transmitted largely by word of mouth among members of intersecting and interlocking social justice movements, unexpectedly popping up again and again in new places in the service of new struggles throughout its history. As the song has traveled through these activist networks, it has also served to forge new links in the chain that ties activists together across time and space. To conclude my telling of the song’s history and to illustrate this point, I leave readers with five vignettes, some involving people already discussed in these pages, and others whose names appear for the first time.

Luis Corvalán was a Chilean senator and leader of the Chilean Communist Party. Committed to the building of socialism in Chile through democratic means, Corvalán was one of Salvador Allende’s most important allies in the Unidad Popular (UP) coalition that governed the country from 1970 to 1973. After the coup, Corvalán was
arrested and imprisoned in a concentration camp on Isla Dawson, in southernmost Chile, in the frigid Strait of Magellan. His son was a member of the Juventudes Comunistas (Communist Youth) and was also arrested and tortured by the Pinochet regime, dying of his injuries in exile. In 1976, Corvalán was released from prison by the dictatorship as part of a prisoner exchange involving the Soviet dissident Vladimir Bukovsky. Following his release, he traveled to Berlin, where he was given a hero’s welcome in a ceremony in the Palast der Republik on January 29, 1977, before a host of dignitaries, including Erich Honecker, the secretary general of the governing Socialist Unity Party. The ceremony included a rousing performance of “No nos moverán,” sung in Spanish by Dean Reed, a U.S. pop star who had settled in the German Democratic Republic in the early 1970s.1

Reed was born in Colorado in 1938 and moved to Hollywood as a young man to pursue an acting and singing career around the same time as such pop stars as Frankie Avalon and Fabian were becoming known. Although he never achieved the notoriety in the United States of other singers and actors of his generation, Capitol Records promoted his music in South America, and Reed became a sensation in Chile and Argentina. While touring the Southern Cone, he was horrified by the extreme poverty he saw and experienced a political conversion to socialism. Reed set up residence in Buenos Aires but frequently visited Chile and Uruguay. In Chile, he met Allende and got to know many of the exponents of the nueva canción chilena, including Víctor Jara, Ángel and Isabel Parra, and the members of Quilapayún. While performing at the annual music festival in Viña del Mar in 1971, he met Roberto Rivera Noriega and the other members of Tiemponuevo in the dressing room they shared backstage. Reed asked them about the origins of their two best-known songs, “No nos moverán” and “Hemos dicho basta.” He was surprised to learn that “No nos moverán” was from the United States, as he was unfamiliar with the song “We Shall Not Be Moved.” Rivera Noriega gave him a copy of the lyrics, and Reed later recorded both songs, first as a single in Uruguay and later on an album published in the Soviet Union. The single was recorded as a jingle for the first presidential campaign of the left-wing coalition known as the Frente Amplio, whose candidate, Liber Seregni, ran in the last free and open national elections before Uruguay’s own military coup took place in June 1973.2
Luis Corvalán spent the rest of the 1970s living in Moscow and Berlin. In 1983, he underwent plastic surgery to be able to reenter Chile clandestinely. Once back in the country, he worked tirelessly to promote a popular uprising against the Pinochet dictatorship. In 1990, shortly after the return of civilian rule, Corvalán resigned as secretary general of the Partido Comunista de Chile. He died of natural causes in 2010, at the age of ninety-three. The members of Tiemponuevo remained friendly with Dean Reed during the years they all lived in Berlin. Rivera Noriega remembers seeing him at a party of Chilean exiles there, full of alegría y comaradería (happiness and camaraderie), just a week before his mysterious drowning death in 1986.

As a field secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and a founding member of the Freedom Singers, Bernice Johnson Reagon played an indispensable role in establishing “We Shall Not Be Moved” as one of the key “freedom songs” of the African American civil rights movement. Raised in rural Georgia, she cut her teeth as an activist in the struggle to desegregate her hometown of Albany. Then, as a member of the Freedom Singers, she traveled widely throughout the United States and Canada, spreading the “good news” of the movement. In the 1970s, she completed a doctorate in U.S. history at Howard University in Washington, D.C., writing a pioneering dissertation about the importance of song in the civil rights movement. Also in the 1970s, she founded the women’s a capella vocal ensemble Sweet Honey in the Rock, dedicated to spreading a black feminist message of social justice throughout the African diaspora. In 1974, she founded the Program in Black American Culture at the Smithsonian Institution, which she directed until 1993, and where she established her reputation as a leading scholar of African American music. Sweet Honey in the Rock has performed worldwide and continues to make music today, although Reagon retired as the group’s musical director in 2004.

As a scholar of the African diaspora and a committed social justice activist, Dr. Johnson Reagon had developed a global vision of culture and politics by the 1970s. Increasingly, the songs she wrote brought international issues together with matters of civil rights in
the United States. One of the clearest examples of this integration, and the most relevant for the purposes of this book, is her song “Chile, Your Waters Run Red through Soweto,” written in 1979 and appearing on Sweet Honey in the Rock’s 1981 album Good News. In the song, Reagon links the concurrent struggles for justice and liberation in Chile and South Africa with the battle to free ten young black desegregation activists in Wilmington, North Carolina, who were unjustly jailed in 1971 for a crime they did not commit. In the song, she first calls attention to the shared oppressions of Chileans and South Africans, declaring that “the hands that choked the spirit of Allende” were the same hands that pulled the triggers on the guns that killed children protesting apartheid on the streets of the Soweto township. Next, she extends the metaphor by declaring that the hands that oppressed Chileans and South Africans were the same “hands of oppression” that jailed and killed African American dissidents and rebels in the U.S. South, such as those in Wilmington. In the final verse, Reagon reaches back further into history, linking the massacre of Chileans and South Africans with the 1898 massacre of dozens of black citizens of Wilmington by white supremacist death squads that overthrew the town’s biracial coalition government. The song ends with the plaintive cry that “the waters of Chile fill the banks of Cape Fear,” the name of the river into which the bodies of the victims of the Wilmington massacre were tossed.

The death of Nelson Mandela at age ninety-five in December 2013 prompted a worldwide outpouring of praise for the hero of South African blacks’ victorious struggle against apartheid. In Washington, D.C., a mix of hundreds of civil rights activists and official dignitaries attended a memorial service in the National Cathedral in his honor that was organized by the South African embassy. Among the many performers who sang and played music in homage to Mandela were the current members of Sweet Honey in the Rock, the same women’s a cappella ensemble that Bernice Johnson Reagon founded in the 1970s. One of the songs they performed as part of a “civil rights medley” was a rafter-shaking rendition of “We Shall Not Be Moved.”
Although we do not know for certain whether Mandela ever heard or sang the song himself, given his long imprisonment on Robben Island, we do know that “We Shall Not Be Moved” was an important piece in the repertoire sung by black South Africans and their white and “coloured” allies in their long struggle to end apartheid.8

In 2008, the South African poet Diana Ferrus told researcher Omotayo Jolaosha that she and fellow anti-apartheid activists had learned the song “We Shall Not Be Moved” from Joan Baez’s version of it as “No nos moverán” from her Gracias a la vida album and adapted it to their own purposes, denouncing the killing of black children and the razing of black homes in the 1970s and 1980s:

No, no, we shall not be moved
No, no, we shall not be moved
We’re not afraid, we’re fighting for our children
We shall not be moved
Let them kill our children, we shall not be moved . . .
Let them take our houses, we shall not be moved.9

On May 1, 2012, in Fresno, California, hundreds of activists, including many agricultural workers, gathered for a May Day march for worker and immigrant rights. At the end of the march, people gathered in Courthouse Park downtown for a rally, which included the performance of songs by El Coro del Pueblo (The People’s Choir), a mixed group of Chicana/o and Mexican singers and musicians. The song they chose to end their program was the Chilean anthem “El pueblo unido jamás será vencido” (“The People United Will Never Be Defeated”), led rously by their director, Patricia Wells Solórzano.10

Wells Solórzano grew up in California’s Imperial Valley on the border with Mexico. She became active in the farmworker movement in 1975 while studying at California State University at Northridge. Several years later, she moved to Mexico City to study Mexican and world history at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma. For many years, she has been a member of the musical ensemble Alma (Soul) and co-director of Teatro de la Tierra in Fresno, California.11 Her
principal collaborator in both Alma and Teatro de la Tierra has been Agustín Lira, co-founder of the United Farm Workers’ (UFW’s) Teatro Campesino and who, with Luis Valdez, penned one of the first Spanish versions of “We Shall Not Be Moved.” In 2007, Wells Solórzano and Lira produced a play with Teatro de la Tierra titled *A Yellow Rose from Texas: Emma Tenayuca*, based on their research about the woman who led the 1938 pecan shellers’ strike in San Antonio. The play opens with a group of women walking onto the stage in a single-file line, singing “No nos moverán.” In February 2014, Lira and Wells Solórzano performed the song in Alma’s concert with Chilean singer Lichi Fuentes in a chapel on the Trinity University campus in San Antonio, Texas. Also on the program that evening was Chicana feminist historian Antonia Castañeda, who linked Chilean and Chicano political struggles and talked about Chicana/o artists’ and activists’ support of the Chilean resistance to the Pinochet dictatorship in the 1970s and 1980s.

In November 2010, Castañeda participated in a sit-in at the San Antonio office of Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison to pressure the politician to support legislation (the so-called Dream Act) that would allow undocumented youth to remain in the United States legally and pursue university studies. As police arrived to arrest the protestors and end the nine-hour occupation of the senator’s office, Castañeda and community activist María Antonietta Berriozabal led students in singing “No nos moverán” in Spanish and English to affirm the spirit of resistance of this struggle and its connection to those that came before. Both women were also among the many people singing the song years earlier at Emma Tenayuca’s rosary.

In September 2011, the Occupy Wall Street movement erupted in New York, seemingly from nowhere. By October, the movement had gained tens of thousands of adherents and had spread to many other cities around the United States. It was drawing worldwide attention, mirroring the expression of mass indignation by protesters in Cairo, Tunis, Madrid, and Santiago. On Friday, October 21, Pete Seeger, then ninety-two years old, participated in a benefit concert in Manhattan for Clearwater, the environmental organization he founded
in 1969 to demand the cleanup of the heavily polluted Hudson River. At the end of the concert, Seeger and fellow performers—including Woody Guthrie’s son Arlo and Bernice Reagon’s daughter Toshi—joined a crowd of more than one thousand Occupy protesters who were waiting outside for them. Pete traded his banjo for two canes and marched several miles with the peaceful crowd to Columbus Circle, as his fellow marchers sang “We Shall Not Be Moved” and other songs he had made famous during his seventy-year career as an activist and musician.  

Seeger died peacefully in his sleep on January 27, 2014, in a hospital in Manhattan. The day before Seeger died, Peter Yarrow, of the famed folk trio Peter, Paul, and Mary, went straight from the airport to visit him in the hospital. Yarrow had just returned from the West Bank town of Ramallah, where he had been attending a gathering of activists promoting peace between Palestine and Israel and had led participants in singing several of Seeger’s most famous songs, including “If I Had a Hammer.” When he arrived, Yarrow found Seeger surrounded by friends and family, who were standing at his bedside singing to him. Here is an excerpt of Yarrow’s account of his last visit with his old friend and mentor:

> When I had first entered Pete’s room, I had quickly unpacked my guitar and then waited for the loveliest of songs to be finished by one of Pete’s extended family. Then I started to sing a subdued but still gently defiant (if that be possible) version of “We Shall Not Be Moved.” We all crowded around Pete, singing this old Union Song together, with friends on each side of the bed holding his hands. We sang that song for perhaps 7 or 8 minutes, with many verses about “young and old together,” “black and white together,” “gay and straight together,” “the union is behind us,” “no more poison fracking,” on and on. Slowly the strength and beauty of the singing began to carry us all with it as we felt each other’s hearts unite, all of us singing directly to Pete, and beginning to ride on the sweetness of the sound we were making together. . . . I left feeling really peaceful and complete, with a feeling that Pete was, as he has always been, deep inside me. I also knew, though Pete would
have been shy to acknowledge it, that there are thousands of
(as Mary called our trio) “Seeger’s Raiders” who will carry on
with Pete in their hearts, sharing the great gift of his music
and his truly giving, uncompromising, pure spirit still reso-
nating within us all.\textsuperscript{14}

Pete Seeger will never again sing “We Shall Not Moved” on this
green, round earth, but others of us surely will, and for the same rea-
sons he did. It is just a question of where and how soon.