

The Texas Farm Workers Union (TFWU) in Chicano Art

Originally based out of San Juan, Texas, the Texas Farmworkers Union (TFWU) was a splinter labor organization led by former United Farmworker (UFW) Treasurer-Secretary Antonio Orendain.¹ The Texas union aimed to improve farmworkers' bargaining power, living standards, and quality of life in Texas. The Union began in 1975 and ended in the 1980s (FIG.1).² While short-lived, they are most well-known for their 1977 march from Austin to Washington, D.C., to advocate for Texas Farmworkers.³

Chicano activist artists like Carlos Cortez, Amado Peña, and Luis Guerra, among others, supported the Texas Union's cause through their political graphics and uniquely captured the Texas farmworker's plight through labor landscapes, emblem recognition, and portraiture (FIGS 2-4). There is an elusive scholarly quality to activist prints, given their ephemerality, rapid circulation, and lack of study and cataloging in formal art institutions; the brief duration of this Texas union also hindered any dominant presence in Chicano labor imagery as well as their varied relationship with the UFW. The farmworker's narrative and the visualization of the archetype of the farmworker writ large are represented overwhelmingly through a United Farmworkers Union lens. Artists like Carlos Cortez, Amado Peña, and Luis Guerra represent activist artists who nimbly straddled between supporting both the UFW and the Texas Union, despite the unions' distinctive qualities, for the broader recognition of the oppressed labor forces in need.

¹ Mary Margaret McAllen Amberson, "'Better to Die on Our Feet than to Live on Our Knees': United Farm Workers and Strikes in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, 1966-1967," in *Texas Labor History*, eds. Bruce A. Glassrud and James C. Maroney (Texas A&M University, College Station, 2013), 388.

² The union's final dates range from 1982-1986. Teresa Palomo Acosta, "Texas Farm Workers Union," *Texas State Historical Association*, January 1, 1996, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/texas-farm-workers-union>.

³ United Press International, "Texas Farm Workers End March with Rally," *The New York Times*, September 6, 1977, <https://www.nytimes.com/1977/09/06/archives/texas-farm-workers-end-march-with-rally.html>.

The origins of the Texas Farmworker Union movement began in 1966 when Cesar Chavez directed Antonio Orendain to the Rio Grande Valley to “take charge organizing in Texas.”⁴ The overall response to Orendain as a UFW representative was unwelcoming from the Texas local leaders, as they did not want a Californian taking over their local causes. Nor did they wish to continue financially supporting the UFW or pursue their practice of non-violence due to the violent and turbulent interactions between farmworkers and law enforcement like the Texas Rangers.⁵

In 1969, Orendain returned to the Rio Grande Valley as a UFW representative. Yet, by his interpretation, the Union’s promise to support the Texas Farmworkers was inadequate (FIG. 5).⁶ Despite Orendain’s integration into the local Texas efforts again, Chavez relocated him to Chicago in 1974 to oversee the boycott campaign.⁷ Disgruntled with the UFW and Chavez, Orendain returned to the Rio Grande Valley overriding Chavez’s wishes in 1975.⁸ This critical rejection and the subsequent autonomous venture were part of Orendain’s efforts to organize solely for Texas farmworkers’ rights. Thus, began what is known as “the split,” where the UFW and the Texas Union were coexisting and estranged from one another.⁹ By August 1975, Orendain and his supporters defined their efforts as the Texas Farmworkers Union, TFWU. They then cataloged their actions in their magazine, *El Cuhamil*, and their radio program *la voz del campesino* (FIG. 6-7).¹⁰

⁴ Oscar J. Martínez, *Border People: Life and Society in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1994), 227.

⁵ Dennis Shirley, *Valley Interfaith and School Reform: Organizing for Power in South Texas*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 17.

⁶ Martínez, *Border People*, 231.

⁷ Timothy Paul Bowman, “What about Texas? The Forgotten Cause of Antonio Orendain and the Río Grande Valley Farm Workers, 1966-1982, (Master’s Thesis, The University of Texas at Arlington, 2005), 73.

⁸ Bowman, “What about Texas?,” 73.

⁹ Joe Holley, “The Texas Farmworkers’ Split,” *Texas Observer*, April 17, 1981, 5.

¹⁰ See *El Cuhamil* (San Juan, Tex.), The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, <https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/elcuhamil/>; “Message of La Voz Del Campesino,” from Antonio Orendain oral

Orendain focused the Texas Union on collective bargaining and led efforts to require a state agricultural labor relations board. To call public attention to the Union's goals, the Texas Farmworkers marched from their home base of San Juan to Austin. The 420-mile journey took place from February 26 to April 2, 1977 (FIG. 8).¹¹ In this monumental march, supporters carried the Texas Union's flag emblazoned with their logos. There are varying designs. Typically, the common thread is the red background and shade tree. Some designs include the shade tree encircled by a white background with some adjoining text to indicate the Texas Farmworkers Union (FIG. 9). Other designs include a Texas state outline with a black or green shade tree. I argue that the color palette and design are reinterpretations of the UFW eagle flag.

After several interviews with other artists and family members active in the union, most did not know the logo's origins. In a recent interview, Texas Union Leader Alfredo de Avila stated that Antonio Orendain designed the logo himself.¹² The shade tree included in the logo is a reference to the valuable trees that farmworkers sat under during rest in the fields. The tree design likely recalls the Texas live oak, known for its wide, horizontal spread allowing for a broad shade coverage and drought resistance.¹³ De Avila stated the *dicho* or vernacular saying, "El que a buen árbol se arrima, buena sombra le cobija (The one who gets close to a good tree, a good shade shelters him)" also inspired Orendain to craft this arboreal logo.¹⁴ The simplified

history interview with, June 22, 2015, McAllen, TX, Civil Rights in Black and Brown Interview Database, <https://crbb.tcu.edu/clips/2225/message-of-la-voz-del-campesino>, accessed February 2, 2023.

¹¹ Texas State Historical Association, "Texas farm workers begin 420-mile march to Austin: February 26th, 1977," Texas State Historical Association, <https://www.tshaonline.org/texas-day-by-day/entry/23>.

¹² Alfredo de Avila interview by the author, March 20, 2023.

¹³ Cynthia Gorney, "Texas Farm Union Walks for Right," *The Washington Post*, September 6, 1977; Bullock Museum, "Texas Farm Workers Union Flag," Bullock Museum, <https://www.thestoryoftexas.com/discover/artifacts/texas-farm-workers-union-flag>; Texas A&M Forest Service, "Trees of Texas: Live Oak," <http://texastreeid.tamu.edu/content/TreeDetails/?id=109>.

¹⁴ Alfredo de Avila interview by the author, March 20, 2023.

versions of the logo had a cloud approach to rendering the tree, with other designs emphasizing the Texas state outline more prominently (FIG. 10).

In Carlos Cortez's poster *Justicia Para Los Campesinos* (Justice for the Farmworkers), there is a landscape featuring farmworkers crouched over, tending to the fields under the Texas Union's logo. *Justicia* served as a promotional poster, most likely for the Texas Union's March for Equality in 1979 (FIG. 2).¹⁵ The perspective composition of the scene guides the viewer's eyes from the field rows to the horizon. The horizon creates a corresponding symmetrical reflection with red rising sun rays suggesting a new era or dawn of a changing moment. The titular phrase carries Cortez's signature use of exclamatory Spanish words. "Justicia para los campesinos (Justice for the Farmworkers)" acts as the overarching messaging above and below "Marchamos por la igualdad (we march for equality)" completes the visual interjections.

Texas and Yaqui artist Amado Peña demonstrated his support of the union through prints and illustrations. In his *Untitled* print, displayed at Mexic-Arte Museum, there are the characteristic anonymous Native figures he is most well-known for throughout his later career (FIG. 3). As a member of the Pascua Yaqui Tribe of Arizona, Peña infuses Native figures against landscapes of the Southwest to highlight the figure's relationship with their environment.¹⁶ Amado's early political image career had a bright heavy-stroked design, but *Untitled* carries a subdued color palette, with each figure maintaining a reflective posture characteristic of his later career style. The Texas Union flag elegantly drapes across the composition, mimicking the sinuous lines of the figure's hair and clothes while enveloping the frame for maximum emblem recognition.

¹⁵ *El Cuhamil*, "March 11th: The March for Equality Reaches Austin, Texas," *El Cuhamil*, March 1, 1979, Vol. V-No. 5, 1.

¹⁶ Peña Gallery, "Biography: Amado Maurilio Peña, Jr.," <https://penagallery.com/about/>.

Peña's contribution to the Texas Union was significant, but it is evident among the Texas Union materials that Austin artist Luis Guerra was the de facto official artist based on his *Hasta La Gloria* (To Glory) print's frequent use by the Texas Union (FIG. 4).¹⁷ Initially, Guerra caught the Texas Union's interest after his designs for the Raza Unida Party candidates Ramsey Muniz for governor and Armando Gutierrez for state representative in 1974.¹⁸ Three years later, Guerra received word from Texan Union organizer, Rosa Cuéllar, to commemorate an upcoming march in poster form.¹⁹ The Union had completed several treks to the Austin capitol to advocate for their legislation, but this prospective 1977 march was a national pilgrimage to Washington, D.C.²⁰ The march began on June 18, 1977, with approximately 25-45 participants.²¹ Union leader Orendain wanted to make a public splash with this march to demand support for the Texas Farmworkers from then-President Jimmy Carter.

Hasta La Gloria has a visual narrative offering an ethnographic glimpse into the marchers. On the left, the hooded figure is Rita Martinez, a woman Guerra recalls as being very shy, followed by Julio Oreño, who the artist remembers vividly due to his physical endurance and his ability to not only keep up with the marchers but would run ahead to hand out *El Cuahamil* newspapers across the communities they passed; Maria Salas, the woman holding an apple, was a bruja/witch/curandera, that Guerra said always had a bag of "potions" that she wielded, where the contents changed throughout the march. And leading in the front is Claudio Ramirez wielding the Marian image of Our Lady of San Juan del Valle.²²

¹⁷ Luis Guerra interview by the author, February 26, 2023

¹⁸ Luis Guerra interview by the author, February 26, 2023

¹⁹ Luis Guerra interview by the author, February 26, 2023

²⁰ *El Cuahamil*, "The TFW to Washington," *El Cuahamil*, March 1, 1979, Vol. 111 No. 11, 1.

²¹ There are various citations for the number of supporters in the march, ranging from 25- 45. See Gorney, "Texas Farm Union Walks," 1977; Bowman, "What about Texas?," 107; United Press International, "Texas Farm Workers End," *The New York Times*, 1977.

²¹ Bowman, "What about Texas?," 73.

²² Luis Guerra interview by the author, February 26, 2023.

In the *Hasta la Gloria* print, the remaining figures are Jose Rodriguez leading the group pushing out of the compositional frame. Strategically, Guerra places Union leader Orendain and his wife in the back row of figures. Unlike dominant reflections of farmworkers being led by the likes of Cesar Chavez or Dolores Huerta, Orendain appears as an almost secondary figure. Guerra spoke of this compositional choice saying, “Antonio (Orendain) led but didn’t lead from the front.”²³

After Guerra walked with the marchers, he developed the print at Austin Community College studios using donated paper, creating an edition of 150 prints. TFWU supporters then transported the edition to D.C. to coincide with the farmworkers marching into the city.²⁴ The march collected several supporters along the way, and varying sources cite anywhere from “400-10,000” that eventually joined the last leg of the walk that ended at the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.²⁵ Despite their efforts, President Jimmy Carter refused to meet with the farmworkers. According to some sources, they cite Cesar Chavez’s intervention with the President as the reason for this refusal. The marchers eventually met with Labor Secretary Ray Marshall and Vice President Mondale.²⁶

The Texas Farmworkers Union started as a splinter group from the UFW and was a brief labor organization lasting approximately under a decade. The legacy and impact of the Union did not reach the campaign boycott successes of the UFW through labor contracts and legislation. However, the Texas Union did not have comparable resources or federal or state political

²³ Luis Guerra interview by the author, February 26, 2023

²⁴ Luis Guerra interview by the author, February 26, 2023

²⁵ United Press International, “Texas Farm Workers,” *The New York Times*, 1977; Cynthia Gorney, “Texas Farm Union Walks for Right,” *The Washington Post*, September 6, 1977; Bullock Museum; “Obituary for Antonio “Tony” Orendain, 2016, <https://www.memorialfuneral.com/memorials/antonio-tony--orendain/2475133/obituary.php>.

²⁶ Joe Holley, “The Texas Farmworkers’ Split,” 5.

support. In an interview with PBS at the 1977 march to the capitol, Texas Union organizer Claudio Ramirez says the primary objective for such demonstrations was “to raise the consciousness level of the people in Texas so they could understand the needs for organizing a union in Texas.”²⁷ The ultimate objective was to share the plight of the unthinkable, unsanitary conditions and economic poverty that plagued farmworker communities. Artists played a significant role in capturing the historic marches and memorializing the Union’s critical players while continuing their own radical artistic approach to representing labor equality. These Texas activist artworks represent a crucial moment in Texas labor and graphic arts account that needs further integration into the broader history of farmworker imagery that extends beyond the UFW.

²⁷ “The MacNeil/Lehrer Report; Texas Farm Workers,” 1977-04-04, National Records and Archives Administration, American Archive of Public Broadcasting (GBH and the Library of Congress), Boston, MA and Washington, DC, accessed May 29, 2023, <http://americanarchive.org/catalog/cpb-aacip-507-xk84j0bx6z>.

Figures

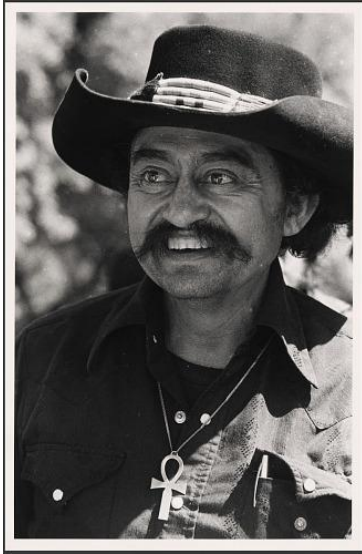


Fig. 1. Alan Pogue, Antonio Orendain, 1979, photograph, Image: 26.7 × 17.2 cm (10 1/2 × 6 3/4"), Sheet: 35.6 × 27.8 cm (14 × 10 15/16"), National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; gift of Gilberto Cárdenas Collection of Latino Art © Alan Pogue



Fig. 2. Carlos Cortez, *Justicia Para Los Campesinos*, 1979, linocut on paper. Courtesy of the Center for the Study of Political Graphics.



Fig. 3. Amado Peña, *Untitled*, 1981, screenprint on paper. Courtesy of Gilberto Cárdenas.



Fig. 4. Luis Guerra, *Hasta la Gloria*, 1977, screenprint on paper, overall: 17 1/2 × 22 1/2 in. (44.5 × 57.2 cm), Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Frank K. Ribelin Endowment, 2019.43.1, ©1977, Luis Guerra.



Fig. 5. Unknown photographer, "Antonio Orendain, Rachel Orendain, and César Chávez." *El Malcriado* Vol. 3 No. 4 (Delano California, April 15-30, 1969), 13.



Fig. 6. *El Cuhamil*, Vol. 5, no. 5, (San Juan, Tex., 1979), 1. UTRGV Digital Library, The University of Texas - Rio Grande Valley. Accessed via <http://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/elcuhamil>.



Fig. 7. *El Cuhamil*, Vol. 5, no. 3, 1979 (San Juan, Tex., 1979), 5. UTRGV Digital Library, The University of Texas - Rio Grande Valley. Accessed via <http://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/elcuhamil>.



Fig. 8. Angela de Hoyos, "Line of protesters walking during the 1977 Texas Farm Workers Union protest," Recovering the US Hispanic Literary Heritage Digital Collections, accessed February 8, 2023, <http://usldhrecovery.uh.edu/items/show/1974>.



Fig. 9. *Texas Farm Workers Union flag, 1977.* Courtesy Texas Farm Workers Union Collection, Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection, The University of Texas at Austin.



Fig. 10. Norma Ramirez (@ClaudioRamirez), “Me and Joseph Orendain (Antonio's youngest son),” Facebook photo, April 20, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/364160729224/photos/pb.100031961602150.-2207520000./10154209065734225/?type=3>.