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TOMAS RIVERA'S "... Y NO SE LO TRAGO LA TIERRA":

DISCOVERY AND APPROPRIATION OF THE CHICANO PAST

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LIKE two other Chicano novels—*Pocho* by José Antonio Villarreal and *Chicano* by Richard Vasquez¹—Tomás Rivera's "... y no se lo tragó la tierra" is the author's first published book. Unlike *Pocho* and *Chicano*, however, Rivera's book was originally written in Spanish, and it was published by a Chicano publishing house, Quinto Sol Publications²—two extra-literary facts that only upon reflection acquire significance. If Villarreal's and Vasquez' works can be said to mark the first attempts by Mexican American writers to give literary expression to the experience of La Raza, it is Rivera's book that marks a progression from those initial efforts toward the creation of a literature which, through the authentic rendering of the Chicano experience, can be considered a literature of liberation.

"... y no se lo tragó la tierra" is difficult to describe structurally. It is not a novel in the conventional sense, but then neither is it a mere collection of stories and sketches. The book contains a set of twelve thematically unified stories—symbolic of the twelve months of the year—framed by an introductory selection "El Año Perdido" and a summarizing selection "Debajo De La Casa." Preceding each of the stories except "El Año Perdido," is a brief and usually penetrating anecdote, directed backward (echoing or commenting on the thematic concerns of the preceding story) or sometimes pointed forward (prefacing the story that follows). In some instances the anecdote does not relate directly either to what immediately pre-

cedes or follows, but instead echoes or re-echoes values, motifs, themes or judgments, found elsewhere in the book. The effect is incremental. Through the reinforcement, variation, and amplification provided by the twelve stories and the thirteen anecdotes, the picture of the community is gradually filled. At the end, the entire experience is synthesized and brought to a thematic conclusion through the consciousness of the central character.

This central figure—presumably the author's alter ego—is the unnamed hero of the two frame-pieces who believed in the beginning that "aquel año se le perdió," and at the end discovers "que en realidad no había perdido nada." It may be conjectured that this central figure is the same one who moves through some of the other selections in the book. Direct and explicit identification between the characters in the stories and the central figure is of minor importance. What is of the utmost importance is that the various persons of the stories, and the experiences and the landscape of their lives, are all a very real part of the hero's past, i.e., of his being. The emphasis falls on the general experience, communal and social rather than individual and personal.

In his introduction to the book, Herminio Ríos observes that "*el pueblo* becomes the central character. It is the anonymous and collective voice of the people that we hear" (p. xvi). He is correct, and we, the readers, hear the voice of the people as the central figure hears it. Structurally this central character has

some importance as an individual; thematically, however, this importance is de-emphasized—it is no accident that he remains nameless. The experience of the book is finally a general one. Many of the selections have an uncanny emblematic tone to them; some of them—particularly the frame-pieces—emphatically invite an allegorical or a symbolic interpretation. The voice that we hear does not ring of the individually introspective, existentially or psychologically isolated and alone, but rather of the communally active and enduring. Even in the two frame selections, at the beginning and at the end, as we hear the protagonist contemplating his situation, the voice we hear is not that of an individual hero intent on discovering and expressing his own subjective reality, but of a Mexican American—a *pochó*—in the significant process of discovering and embracing representatively his community's experience and culture. The end toward which the narrative is directed is a social identity.

The hero of the frame-pieces plays no explicitly active part in the book. He serves merely as the "rememberer," the central figure—however unrealized he may appear as a rounded character—around whom Rivera weaves his thematic tapestry. At the beginning he is confused, alone, frightened and disoriented. He is the one for whom the year is lost. The succeeding twelve stories and thirteen anecdotes comprise the memory-content of the hero, *el que "veía y oía muchas cosas . . ."* (p. 1) in his effort to reclaim a part of his past. At the end of the book he is the synthesizer and commentator, the one who discovers his lost year, *el que quisiera tener "unos brazos bien grandes" para "abrazar a todos."*

The form of the book is thus cyclical. Though there is no attempt at shaping a strict correspondence between specific months and particular stories, the twelve stories in a general sense are symbolic representations of the year that the protagonist attempts to recapture. The first

story, "Los Niños No Se Aguataron" is set in early April, and the last anecdote—the last selection, that is, before "Debajo De La Casa," the final part of the frame—is set in December. This cyclical movement functions effectively to delineate the cyclical and repetitive nature of the migrant framworkers' lives as they yearly retrace the same roads to the same fields, from Texas and cotton in the winter months, to Utah, Minnesota, Iowa, and Michigan in the spring and summer. It is, therefore, appropriate that the first story, "Los Niños No Se Aguataron," treat a family already working in the Texas fields, and that the twelfth story, "Cuando Lleguemos," concern a truckful of workers as they journey north to the beet-fields of Minnesota.

Throughout the book some tension is created between the opposing values of resignation and rebellion as the people are shown enduring the repetitive hardships of the present, and as they anticipate their future. Usually, but not always, these differing values break down along generational lines. The older people—parents and grandparents—are usually resigned to their situation as is. Theirs is a stoical, at times pessimistic, position learned after years of suffering, best expressed by the grandfather of the seventh anecdote who calls his twenty-year-old grandson "*bien estúpido*" for wishing "*que se pasaran los siguientes diez años de su vida inmediatamente para saber lo que había pasado con su vida*" (p. 81); by the older speaker of the fourth anecdote who advises the young student not to even bother with going to school, "*que al cabo de jodido no pasa uno*" (p. 37); by the father out in the fields who, in fear of being fired by the *patrón*, urges his children time after time to endure their thirst "*un ratito más*" (p. 6); and by the father who, knowing little English, and fearful of the schools, is incapable of responding to his son's plea that he accompany him to the principal's office the first day of school (p. 22). These are the parents who through years of

deprivation and all of the self-denying effects of colonialism have learned to stay in their place. Again and again in Rivera's book we see them encouraging their children to stay in school, hoping that their children might be able to escape the treadmill of migratory field labor.

The children are in many instances the victims. But so also are they the ones who question their parents' values and who rebel against a situation to which others acquiesce. There is the boy in "La Noche Estaba Plateada" who tests the superstitions of his parents and learns that the devil does not exist. The boy in ". . . y No Se Lo Tragó La Tierra" who in anger, and hatred of the suffering of his family curses an uncaring God and learns that, contradictory to what his parents have taught him, the earth does not devour anyone. There is the young man in "Cuando Lleguemos," who—in the middle of the night in a broken-down truck loaded with people on their way north—vehemently curses his life and his own stupidity: "*pinche vida, pinche vida, pinche vida, pinche vida, por pendejos, por pendejos, por pendejos. Somos una bola de pendejos. Chingueasumadre toda la pinche vida. Esta es la última vez que vengo así como una pinche bestia parado todo el camino. Nomás que lleguemos me voy a mineapolis, afuerza hallo allí algo que hacer donde no tenga que andar como un pinche huey*" (pp. 150-151). In the privacy of his anxiety, he utters a threat ("*un día de estos me la van a pelar todos*")³ which, however idle it may actually be, gains its full force and strength in juxtaposition with the mild thoughts of a concerned wife and mother. She, with child in her arms, thinks only of possibly helping her husband in the fields when they arrive.

The affirmation in this book, however, is not dependent on any final resolution of the tension created by the two differing stances of resignation and rebellion generally conceived. Rivera's work, after all, is not a simple, descriptive book of protest, but an artistically important *book*

of discovery. The question, therefore, of "proper" or "improper" responses to social conditions is a false one, inappropriate to the premises upon which the work is created. The substantial affirmation of this book rests on the reality discovered and depicted by the author. And this process of discovery is given artistic form through the use of the central character within the frame-structure of the book and the cyclical movement of the narrative.

The overall scheme of the book is laid out in the four brief paragraphs comprising the introductory selection, "El Año Perdido." There Rivera uses the language of the dream—or at least a language suggestive of a deeper reality than what is ordinarily accepted as objective fact—to suggest the sense of psychological and social disorientation in which the hero lives. The impetus is to discover the self. The origin and cause of that impetus is perhaps outside the artistic concern of Rivera's book; it is enough to state the truism that personal and social identity is never a "problem" until it is threatened. As Frantz Fanon writes, the native's affirmation of his own culture, and his attempts at recovering a usable past are symptomatic of the "realization of the danger that he is running in cutting his last moorings and of breaking adrift from his people." Unless the native moves culturally in the direction of his true self, "there will be serious psycho-affective injuries and the result will be individuals without an anchor, without a horizon, colorless, stateless—a race of angels."⁴

Tomás Rivera's metaphor for this felt sense of breaking adrift is "el año perdido." The confusion and general disorientation brought on by the sense of "aquel año [que] se le perdió" began for the protagonist

. . . cuando oía que alguien le llamaba por su nombre pero cuando volteaba la cabeza a ver quién era el que le llamaba, daba una vuelta entera y así quedaba donde mismo. Por eso nunca podía acertar ni quién le llamaba ni por qué, y

luego hasta se le olvidaba el nombre que le habian llamado. Pero sabia que él era a quien llamaban. Una vez se detuvo antes de dar la vuelta entera y le entró miedo. Se dio cuenta de que él mismo se había llamado. Y así empezó el año perdido" (p. 1).

It all begins in a confusion—and a fear—that has its source in the realization that it is he himself who has been "calling." The full implications of that realization, though, are not clearly understood by the hero until the end of the book. In his beginning confusion he thinks that he thinks, and he determines not to think, but he does nevertheless. It is his "thinking"—what Rivera describes as the hero's *seeing* and *hearing*—that the twelve stories and sketches and the thirteen anecdotes reveal. The cumulative effect is a felt sense of struggle.

"¿Por qué es que nosotros estamos aquí como enterrados en la tierra?" (p. 67) asks the young protagonist of the title story, upon hearing the moans of his father who has suffered a sunstroke in the suffocating heat of the fields. And that sets much of the tone of the book. The full-length stories, the impressionistic sketches, and the brief anecdotes that fall within the two frame pieces are quick but lasting glimpses into the lives of these characters. There is no attempt to relate them all realistically and explicitly in time and space. That only generally are they related in time and space—time, through the book's central metaphor ("el año perdido"), and in space by the fields and colonias in Texas and in the unspecified north—suggests, again, Rivera's interest in discovering and giving expression to the general and social, not the specific and individual reality. The same spirit informs all of the "framed" selections: a desperate clinging to life in the midst of deprivation and suffering, and the seemingly ever-present hope that if not for themselves, at least for their children, life will not exact such a heavy toll.

The suffering begins with childhood, as in "Los Niños No Se Aguataron," where a child is accidentally shot and killed by a

boss who, because he is paying the workers by the hour, does not want them "wasting" time drinking from the water tanks that he keeps for his cattle. The story is told from an objective and detached point of view, a technique common to many of the other stories and sketches. Rarely does Rivera-as-author intrude; hence the understanding, the judgments and the emotions must be generated out of the narrative situation itself. "Los Niños No Se Aguataron" is quite brief: it consists of an introductory paragraph, some dramatic dialogue between father and child; two brief paragraphs matter-of-factly describing the child drinking water and being killed; and at the end, another fragment of dialogue between two unidentified field-workers, inhabitants of the barrio, members of what, through the book, quickly assumes the forms of a *colonia* chorus—a collective Chicano voice that, standing at times off at a distance, describes and judges the actions that are being enacted on the stage.

In this story the chorus discusses the fate of the boss after the killing. One speaker affirms the consequences of human guilt feelings; he wants to believe that the boss almost went insane, that he is drinking heavily now and that he tried to commit suicide. The other voice denies the boss even the dignity of remorse. He wants to say: "they are such brutes that with absolute impunity they can kill us and our children." The first speaker says: "A mí se me hace que sí se volvió loco. Usted lo ha visto como anda ahora. Parece limosnero." The other voice answers, "Sí, pero es que ya no tiene dinero." And his *compadre* says "Pos sí" (p. 7).

At the end, the story does not affirm either of these two positions. The chorus's function in this sketch is to articulate the two points of view as part of the book's reality. Part of that reality—in all of its harshness and brutality—is expressed through the routinely dispassionate manner of presentation. The child is shot and "ni saltó como los venados, sólo se quedó

en el agua como un trapo sucio y el agua empezó a empaparse de sangre . . ." (p. 7). Such matter-of-fact tone outweighs paragraphs of "concerned" and "committed" prose describing "the lot of the underdogs." In this selection it succinctly intensifies the horror of the situation. In other selections this same tone adds generally to the stark quality of the lives lived by these people.

Equally stark and despairing is the lot of the parents and children in "Los Quemaditos." Hoping that one of his children will become a boxing champion and earn thousands of dollars, a father buys boxing gloves for his children and teaches them to rub alcohol on their bodies the way he saw boxers do in a movie. Alone in their shack while the parents are working in the fields, the children accidentally start a fire while playing with the boxing gloves and two of the three children are burned to death in the shack. The chorus that enters at the end provides necessary information, and dispassionately comments on the cruel irony of the burning of everything—even the children—with the exception of the boxing gloves. One speaker, in respect if not in awe of Yankee ingenuity, says "Es que esta gente sabe hacer las cosas muy bien y no les entra ni la lumbré" (p. 96).

In this story, the chorus speaks with convincing authority. Responding to a question about the parents' reaction, one of the speakers expresses an essentially tragic point of view, one that acknowledges the uncertainty of human existence and the profound sense in which one has little control over what will be: "Pues ya se les esta pasando la tristeza aunque no creo que se les olvide. Dígame usted qué más puede hacer uno. Si no sabe uno cuándo le toca, ni cómo. Pobrecitos. Pero no sabe uno" (p. 96). And the reticent "Pos no" that conclusively ends the sketch affirms that point of view as a community reality.

"La Noche Que Se Apagaron Las Luces" is a love tragedy about two young

people who are temporarily separated by their families' journeys in the migrant stream and vow to be true to one another until they return to Texas where they plan to marry. Rumors reach Ramón about Juanita's "cheating" in Minnesota, and when they meet again, they quarrel; heart-broken and in despair Ramón kills himself by grabbing onto a transformer at the electric power station. Distance and objectivity are achieved here by Rivera's focus on one tangible effect of Ramón's suicide at the power station: The lights go out throughout the community! And it is in reference to this manifestation that the community thereafter speaks of Ramón and Juanita: "Es que se querían mucho ¿no crees?" "No, pos sí" (p. 109).

The attempt to hide from a harsh reality becomes frantic among people who are continually forced to struggle for their self-hood and dignity. That attempt—as it is lived by a youth—is the subject of "Es Que Duele": a young man is expelled from school for defending himself against the physical attack of an Anglo student, and now faces the painful duty of telling his parents that he cannot return to that school. This story is written with the same kind of restraint and understatement typical of Rivera's style. The youth's experience involves the shame, anger, hatred and degradation that he is made to feel by a school nurse who forces him to undress and stand naked in her presence while being inspected, and by an Anglo American student who tells him to his face that he does not like Mexicans "because they steal" (p. 24). The main part of this story is told by a first-person narrator thinking in the present as he walks home from school the day of his expulsion. On his way home he wrestles with the problem of telling his parents who have high hopes that he will remain in school and become a telephone operator like the one who they saw as the leading character in a movie. Throughout the narrative there are brief flashbacks that fill in the context of this narrator's shame and anger, and provide

ironic point and pathos to his desperate desire to disbelieve the reality of his situation "¿Y que no me hayan expulsado?" he thinks repeatedly throughout his walk home. Reality, however, is too severe and too sharply insistent in this boy's experience to be denied. Ultimately he must accept it: "*N'ombre, sí*" (p. 27).

The children in this book, like the adults, are victimized by that which exists outside of them—the often invisible social and economic forces that govern their lives, the institutions, and the physical environment in which they live and work. But their victimization does not stop there. So also are they prey to that which is within. As the narrator of the title story says, either "los microbios nos comen o el sol nos asolea. Siempre alguna enfermedad" (p. 67). Rivera traces not only the "Chicano" and the "farmworker" contours of his characters' lives, but the universally human as well. In the fields, in the barrios, in their shacks or in the trucks moving north for the summer, the young people, particularly, are shown struggling with the "problems" inherent in their tentative moves into life generally. Of the twelve selections included within the frame, four—"La Mano En La Bolsa"; "Primera Comunión"; "La Noche Estaba Plateada"; and ". . . Y No Se Lo Tragó La Tierra"—can be described as "initiation stories."

Guilt and the curious mixture of good and evil in the same person are major themes in "La Mano En La Bolsa," a story about a young man who is made to feel a debilitating guilt over his innocent role in a macabre crime. A youth—the naive first-person narrator of this story—is sent by his parents to live with don Laito and doña Bone, an elderly couple in the barrio who steal in order to sell or give away: "cuando no podían venderlo a los vecinos, lo daban. Casi repartían todo" (p. 40). Understandably, the couple are well liked by the people, and have a good reputation in the community, even among the *americanos*. The narrator,

however, notices the rotten teeth that surround the gold in don Laito's mouth, and quickly begins to wonder about his hosts' goodness, for not only do they admit their stealing to him, but they even try to persuade him to join them in their pilfering. During the boy's visit, the couple murder a wetback drifter for his money and possessions, and force the boy to help them bury the body and keep their secret. At the end of the story the boy is given a ring that belonged to the murdered victim and the ring becomes a symbol of his guilt. He tries to throw it away but cannot. He wears it, "y lo peor fue que por mucho tiempo, nomás veía a algún desconocido, me metía la mano a la bolsa" (p. 42). Time compassionately repeals his "crime," but the habit of putting his hand in his pocket, he says, "me duró mucho tiempo."

Guilt is again a major theme of "Primera Comunión." On the morning of his first holy communion—after spending a restless night memorizing all his sins—the narrator, while walking to church, looks through a tailor-shop window to see what was causing the noises that he hears, and sees a naked man and woman having sexual intercourse on the floor. Torn between fear and the strange attraction to see more, he intently remains until discovered by the couple and told to go away. He cannot forget what he has seen, but neither is he willing to share his experience with his friends. He is bothered by the feeling of himself having "cometido el pecado del cuerpo" (p. 84). He keeps his "sin," even from the confessional priest, and when, after his communion, he arrives home with his padrino for the traditional sweetbread and chocolate, "se [le] hacía todo cambiado." He imagines his father and mother—and even the priest and the nun—naked on the floor. "Casi ni pude comer el pan dulce ni tomarme el chocolate," he says, "y nomás acabé y recuerdo que salí corriendo de la casa. Parecía sentirme como que me ahogaba" (p. 85). Alone outside, he recalls the scene at the tailor-shop and soon begins to

derive some pleasure from his memory, and forgets even that he had lied to the priest. Then, he says, "me sentía lo mismo que cuando había oído hablar al misionero acerca de la gracia de Dios" (p. 85). The ambiguity at the end of the story enriches its meaning. When the boy says "tenía ganas de saber más de todo. Y luego pensé que a lo mejor era lo mismo," he expresses both an extraordinary resiliency that enable him to take his experience in stride and a propensity to put aside that which is "bothersome."

"La Noche Estaba Plateada" and ". . . Y No Se Lo Tragó La Tierra" are companion pieces which represent, on one level at least, the young heroes' metaphysical rebellion and their testing of religious and superstitious notions that their elders accept.

In "La Noche Estaba Plateada," the protagonist, after hearing his parents tell of people who have summoned the devil, becomes curious and decides to see for himself whether or not the devil actually exists and in what form. He carefully plans his approach and, according to the traditional formula learned from his parents and others in the community, issues his summons. Nothing happens. "No salió nadie. Todo se veía igual. Todo estaba igual. Todo en paz. Pensó entonces que lo mejor sería maldecir al diablo. Lo hizo. Le echó todas las maldiciones que sabía en distintos tonos de voz. Hasta le echó de la madre. Pero, nada. No se apareció nada ni nadie ni cambió nada" (p. 56). The devil does not exist, he thinks; but if the devil does not exist, then neither does . . . , and at that moment he cannot follow through with the inexorable logic of his discovery. Later on, however, as he reconsiders his experience of the evening, he accepts the existential implication of his discovery: "*No hay diablo*," he thinks, "*no hay nada*. Lo único que había habido en la mota había sido su propia voz" (p. 56). And this brings him to the realization that the people whom he had heard about going insane after summoning the devil,

did so not because the devil appeared to them, but on the contrary, because he did not appear. There is nothing but one's own voice in the dark. His logic forces on him the realization of his own existential solitariness, a conclusion that has an empty sky as its premise.

The hero-narrator of ". . . Y No Se Lo Tragó La Tierra" tests God's existence, not in the deliberate manner in which the protagonist of the preceding story attempts to verify the devil's existence, but in the full passion of his hatred, protesting against and cursing a God who would allow the illness and the death of his aunt and uncle, the suffering of their children, the illness of his own father and the fate of his small brothers and sisters who seem destined to feed the earth and sun "sin ninguna esperanza de nada." Frustrated by his own powerlessness "to do anything," he is incapable of taking solace in his mother's religion, refuses to resign himself to the will of God, and rebels against the notion that there is no rest for them until death. He finds, that is, his humanity on this side of the weariness, despair and hatred which he feels. Having been conditioned by historical and cultural forces, however, he is at first incapable of seriously considering the absence of any transcendent and determinant final cause. After his father suffers a sunstroke in the fields, he reviles his mother for clamoring for the mercy of God. He says "¿Qué se gana, mamá, con andar haciendo eso? ¿A poco cree que le ayudó mucho a mi tío y a mi tía? . . . si Dios no se acuerda de uno. . . . A Dios le importa poco de uno los pobres" (p. 67). But at this point his subservience and dependence—wrought out of fear—prohibit him from cursing God and especially from considering His absence. "Yo creo que ni hay . . .," he begins, but cannot go on with this thought: "No, mejor no decirlo, a lo mejor empeora papá" (p. 67).

The next day his nine-year-old brother has a sunstroke, and as the protagonist carries him home from the fields he cries

in despair and out of anger and hatred. At every moment of the emotion that he feels he draws from it his humanity. Without knowing when, he starts to swear; y "lo que dijo lo había tenido ganas de decir desde hacía mucho tiempo" (p. 70). Un-thinkingly he curses God and immediately "al hacerlo sintió el miedo infundido por los años y por sus padres" (p. 70). He imagines the earth opening and swallowing him—but nothing happens! Instead, he begins to feel the solidity of the ground: "Se sintió andando por la tierra bien apretada, más apretada que nunca" (p. 70). His discovery is existential and—in the context of his former despair, dependence, and sense of powerlessness—it is affirmative. Recognizing the emptiness of the heavens he does not fall into the despair of the existential anti-hero who finds himself in the midst of a meaningless and absurd universe. Rivera's character embraces his freedom, and that very evening experiences a sense of peace—and detachment—"que nunca había sentido antes." The following day, as he leaves for work, he feels himself, for the first time in his life, "capaz de hacer y deshacer cualquier cosa que él quisiera" (p. 70).

La mujer y la madre are at the center of traditional Chicano culture. Though in many ways *la madre* is subservient to the father, she remains the nucleus and the predominant mainstay of the *familia*. This importance is reflected by her omnipresence in Rivera's book. Her presence is felt throughout the work. In the majority of the selections she exists in the background, particularized only to the extent that she is placed in her concrete social and cultural milieu. She is the typical Mexican mother caring for her family, gossiping with her *comadres*, hoping for her children, and praying—incessantly—in the background. It is, particularly in her representation in this work that the detachment of the author's point of view wavers, and the book borders on the maudlin.

"Un Rezo" and "La Noche Buena" are the only two selections in which the mother emerges from the background to play the major role in the narrative. "Un Rezo" is simply that: a first-person narrative rendering of a mother's personal and remarkably concrete prayer to God and *La Virgen de Guadalupe* that her son the soldier be protected from the bullets of the communist Koreans. In "La Noche Buena," the mother plays a more active role. She persuades her husband that this Christmas they get store-bought gifts for their children so that they do not continue to ask why *Santo Clos* never brings *them* any gifts. She leaves the seclusion of her house and timidly undertakes a short excursion to the local Kress. She becomes lost, confused, is accused of stealing and finally collapses in the midst of the crowd and noise (a repetition of a similar experience she had previously in Wilmar, Minnesota). Back in the safety of her home, she worries that she is insane, and that they will confine her in an asylum, away from her children. Yet life goes on, the story says, and the people accommodate themselves to their condition. In one sentence—another example of Rivera's mastery of the meaningful small touch—the author tells what it means to be among the dispossessed: the children have another Christmas without presents, and after awhile, Rivera writes, "no preguntaron nada" (p. 125).

Rivera has a clear eye for the cruel ironies of life. In the world which his characters inhabit, people are often victimized by the very hopes that they nurture, hopes that spring from the positions in life which they endure. In such a world, attempts at alleviating one's situation often serve merely to reinforce one's deprivation. In such a world even anger is preempted. This is the theme of "El Retrato," one of the better stories in Rivera's book. The door-to-door salesmen from San Antonio—those who thrive on the innocence and misfortune of the powerless—converge on the barrio like

vultures when the people arrive from the north with a few dollars in their pockets. In this story it is the portrait salesman who promises Don Mateo that "solamente por treinta pesitos," (paid immediately), they can enlarge—and, in color, inlay—the photograph of his son, who is missing in action in the war, so that he looks "como que está vivo."

Don Mateo and the others in the barrio who have been "sold" wait week-after-week for their portraits. As they wait, they hopefully rationalize the delay that gives them intimations of having been duped. The community speaks:

"—Ya mero nos traen los retratos, ¿no cree?"
 "—Yo creo que sí, es que es trabajo muy fino. Se lleva más tiempo. Buen trabajo que hace esa gente. ¿Se fijó cómo parecían que estaban vivos los retratos?"

"—No, sí, sí hacen muy buen trabajo. Ni quien se lo quite. Pero, fijese que ya tienen más de un mes que pasaron por aquí."

"—Sí, pero de aquí se fueron levantando retratos por todo el pueblerío hasta San Antonio, de seguro. Y se tardarán un poco más."

"—Es cierto. Es cierto." (p. 138)

The photographs that the people had given the salesman are finally found dissolving in a tunnel leading to the dump, and Don Mateo, in full anger, goes to San Antonio to search out the salesman who took the only picture he had of his son. He finds the salesman and forces him, upon threats of violence, to do the inlaid enlargement of his son. "Tuvo que hacerlo de memoria," Don Mateo tells his neighbors afterward. "Con miedo, yo creo uno es capaz de todo," he explains as he shows off the finished portrait of his son. Justice is done. Don Mateo receives what he paid for. "¿Usted dirá? ¿Cómo se ve m'ijo?" he asks the admiring *compadre*: "Pues, yo la mera verdad ya no me acuerdo cómo era Chuy. Pero ya se estaba, entre más y más, pareciéndose a usted, ¿verdad?" Complacently and with some pride, Don Mateo says "Sí. Yo creo que sí. Es lo que me dice la gente ahora. Que Chuy, entre más y más, se iba a parecer a mí y que se estaba pareciendo a mí. Ahí está el retrato. Como

quien dice, somos la misma cosa" (p. 139).

In their simplicity and in the powerlessness of their impoverishment, Rivera's characters live by illusions that acquire the force of necessity. Halfheartedly one of Rivera's characters says "Yo creo que siempre lo mejor es tener esperanzas" (p. 125), and—in its various forms—that precisely is the attitude that informs the people's lives throughout the book. In "Cuando Llegemos" these *esperanzas* are emphatically represented through the thoughts of the various characters who find themselves stranded in the middle of the night in a broken-down truck going north for the season. In the privacy of the night, each of the characters is encouraged by the hope that when they arrive things will be "better" for them. The hopes and the dreams that Rivera depicts are indeed those of the oppressed. There is the anticipation of the experienced, which reality has distilled down to a modest "a ver si consigo una cama buena para mi vieja, ya le molestan mucho los riñones. Nomás que no nos vaya a tocar un gallinero como el del año pasado con piso de cemento" (p. 152). And there is the radical resolve of youth, to escape altogether the rat-trap of the dispossessed.

THE IMPACT OF RIVERA'S BOOK is cumulative. Though the sketches and stories can be read individually and out of context, it is as particular parts of a whole which is greater than the sum of its parts that Rivera's work can best be understood and appreciated. All of the experiences, the characters, the themes, and judgments contained in the twelve selections and the thirteen anecdotes are finally summarized and "fixed" into a context by the consciousness of the central character of the book, who reappears in the concluding selection, "Debajo De La Casa"—the piece that in combination with the introductory selection, "El Año Perdido," constitutes the finished frame of the work.

In "Debajo De La Casa" the collective voice of the community is predominant,

but now it speaks explicitly to, and through, the central character—the *pocho*. Throughout the book the voices have been the cumulative result of what the *pocho* brings up out of the depths of his memory, but so readily do the stories and sketches acquire an independent life of their own, that the fact that they constitute mere elements of the protagonist's "lost year" is forgotten. At the end, the reader is reminded of the literary device being used, and, like the *pocho*, he is brought full circle to the beginning—but now with the accumulated experience rendered by the voices through the book. There is, in other words, an analogy between the reader's experience and the protagonist's.

For the latter, the total experience is ultimately regenerative and affirmative, capped as it is by his realization that rather than losing anything, "Había encontrado. Encontrar y reencontrar y juntar. Relacionar esto con esto, eso con aquello, todo con todo. Eso era. Eso era todo. Y le dio más gusto" (p. 169).

As a "book of discovery," "... y no se lo tragó la tierra" is a variation on the *Bildungsroman*, for the focus of Rivera's work is not on the forging of the individual, peculiar and subjective identity; it is rather informed by a concern for the development of a social and collective self-identification. It is not the particular and idiosyncratic which is revealed but the general and the typical. The characters in the *pocho*'s recoverable past—the *pelado* father, the Mexican revolutionary grandfather, the devout mother, the *gachupin* priest, the kindly Cuquita who is everyone's grandmother, the quarreling lovers, the exploitative *patrón*, as well as all the *comadres*, *compadres*, and *padrinos*—all are recognizable not through personal quirks in their particular character, but rather because they assume—at least within the context of the Chicano experience—archetypal dimensions.

In including "los nombres de la gente del pueblo" (p. 163), Rivera's book—like

Bartolo's poems performs the significant function of discovering and ultimately appropriating and embracing the past in all of its sometimes painful authenticity. The importance of looking closely and hard at the colonial experience of the *pocho* is assumed. The first step in the *pocho*'s liberation begins with an understanding of his position within a social and economic context. Presumably it is the kind of understanding—however felt or perceived—that leads the *pocho* of Rivera's book, as well as the author himself, towards the re-identification with that which is his own, i.e., with himself as a member of a people. The movement in the book is inward collectively toward an understanding of the barrio experience as it is—in its pain and in all of its suffering, assuredly, but also in its essential sense of strength, vitality and human celebration.

The language of Rivera's book—the Spanish idiom unique to the Chicano cultural and historical experience—is of no slight importance. It serves, not only to identify the audience that Rivera must have originally had in mind, but so also does it reinforce the immediacy and authenticity of the experience. The language of the book, therefore, legitimizes itself as the essence of the cultural past being embraced. The non-committal reticence of the *compadres*' "pos sí," and "pos no"; the strong, even coarse and vital, phrases unique to the *colonia* experience, like "para acabarla de fregar" ("to boot"), "el que le entra parejito" ("he who really knows how to work"), "Hijo, está caro, oiga" ("hey, that is expensive"), and "Qué padre se mira éste" ("this is really fine-looking")—all of this ultimately constitutes, con "los nombres de la gente del pueblo," la voz que (como dice Bartolo), es "la semilla del amor en la oscuridad" (p. 163).

There are, finally, some comparisons between Rivera's literary effort and the efforts of his fictional character in the framepieces of the book. Besides being a significant artistic effort within the

Chicano Renaissance, ". . . y no se lo tragó la tierra" performs a valuable function in that it uses "the past with the intention of opening the future, as an invitation to action and a basis for hope."⁵ Criticism of Rivera's work because it does not more directly perform the function of social protest is short-sighted. The reality discovered and depicted by this author contributes to the Chicano act of self-discovery in a manner more profoundly effective, aesthetically as well as socially, than more explicit literature of protest. The vitality of the Chicano social movement depends on the development of a deep understanding of Chicano reality. Rivera contributes notably to this end.

NOTES

¹*Pocho* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1959); *Chicano* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1970).

²Tomás Rivera, ". . . y no se lo tragó la tierra" (Berkeley: Quinto Sol Publications, 1971). Rivera's book was awarded the first Premio Quinto Sol, National Chicano Literary Award for 1969-70. In its bilingual edition (1971), the English translation was done by Herminio Rios C., "in collaboration with the author, with assistance by Octavio I. Romano-V." Quotations cited in this essay are from the original Spanish.

³As in all translations, much of the cultural connotation is diminished or altogether lost in the English version of this book. The translation of the threat and the curse above is extraordinarily mild sounding compared to the original. There simply is no English "equivalent" for *pinche*, *chinguesasu madre*, or to *me la van a pelar*.

⁴Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1968), pp. 217-18.

⁵Fanon, p. 232.

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