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Hispanic Values  
in Contemporary Literature  
of the Southwest

BY DR. CIDA S. CHASE

The most intense expression of the creative spirit of the Chicano movement in the middle sixties is the contemporary literature. For the most part, this literature embraces "la causa de la raza," the cause of the renewed Chicano spirit, self-identity, racial and cultural pride, but most of all faith in the future, and in the accomplishments of the Chicano people.

The present literary production of Chicanos of the Southwest is abundant, and much of it constitutes artistic literature of lasting value. Besides thematic tendencies, the great majority of these works have one aspect in common: the language. The language used by these writers presents a binary phenomenon in which linguistic symbols and syntactic structures of both Spanish and English interact in the same text, a phenomenon also known as "Caló" among writers and critics.<sup>1</sup> For these writers, Spanish and English are equally useful in communication, but many of them choose to write in Spanish for they consider this language their mother tongue and the vehicle to transmit their cultural values.

The genre in which contemporary Chicano literature has had its most valuable works from the stylistic and thematic point of view is the novel, although much good poetry and a great number of short stories are being written. Among some of the most outstanding novels written to date, one can include the following: *POCHO* (1959) by José Antonio Villarreal, which was actually published just before the Chicano movement, *THE PLUM PLUM PICKERS* (1969) by Raymond Barrio, who is truly a Latin American who resides in California and has identified with the Chicano movement, . . . *AND THE EARTH DID NOT PART* (1971) by Tomás Rivera, *BARRIO BOY* (1971) by Ernesto Galarzo, *BLESS ME ULTIMA* (1972), a most impressive work which uses New Mexico as its locale written by Rudolfo Anaya, and *PEREGRINOS DE AZTLAN* (1974) by Miguel Hernández.

It is with the work of Tomas Rivera that the Chicano novel moves into the realm of technical experimentation without abandoning "la causa de la raza." Rivera is also very representative of this new breed of writers in the United States.

. . . *AND THE EARTH DID NOT PART*, Rivera's first and most successful book, was originally written in Spanish under the title . . . *Y NO SE LO TRAGO LA TIERRA*.<sup>2</sup> It is a work conceived in the hybrid nature of some of the Latin American literature, for it does not conform to a definite genre. One can find valid arguments to classify it as a non-traditional novel, but it can also be viewed as a collection of tightly knit, impressionistic sketches and brief anecdotes about Chicano life. It constitutes at the same time a presentation of collective and indi-

vidual Chicano experiences.

Rivera, a native of Crystal City, Texas, was born and reared in the midst of a family of migrant farm workers. "Following the migrant stream from Texas to the Midwest and back, he experienced the infamously oppressive conditions (portrayed in the body of the novel) imposed upon a work force completely subject to the merciless interests of business and agriculture alike."<sup>3</sup> However, he became an educated man. He has a doctorate in Spanish literature, is very well versed in North American literature and the landmarks of European literature. At the present time he is Chancellor of the University of California at Riverside.<sup>4</sup>

Rivera's book is made up of twelve short narratives unified by recurring themes and framed at the beginning by an episode entitled "The Lost Year," and at the end by the selection "Under the House." Both selections are conceived stylistically and thematically much in the manner of Rulfo's *PEDRO PARAMO* and above all Rulfo's short story "Macario."<sup>5</sup> The entire work emphasizes a personal self-discovery and development of consciousness, but the reader is constantly made aware of the milieu in which events unfold. In order to achieve this effect, the writer has cleverly placed appropriate epigraphs preceding each one of the selections, thus creating awareness of the cultural framework.

. . . *AND THE EARTH DID NOT PART* is above all a book of self-discovery. In the initial selection, "The Lost Year," the reader becomes acquainted with a youth who is disturbed about not being able to think clearly about the events that have touched his life for a whole year. The narrator explains:

These things always began when he would hear someone call him by name. He would turn around to see who was calling, always making a complete turn, always ending in the same position and facing the same way. And that was why he could never find out who it was that was calling him, nor the reason why he was being called. He would even forget the name that he had heard.

Once he stopped himself before completing the turn, and he became afraid. He found out that he had been calling himself. That was the way the lost year began.<sup>6</sup> The realization that he is calling himself frightens and disorients the boy even more; he decides not to think, but nevertheless he thinks and his thoughts and recollections are the source of the book. Throughout the incoming selections, he is going to think and see with the eyes of his mind himself, his family, his community, and his milieu. At the end the youth has arrived at a re-evaluation of himself; he likes himself for what he is; he loves his community and his

culture, and he achieves self-liberation and independence from unfounded fears. Rivera very skillfully gives the reader the impression that the boy has experienced a re-birth. In the last selection entitled "Under the House," one sees the character hiding comfortably in a dark, warm, secure place where it is peaceful. Upon being found out by other youths, he comes out feeling that he has recaptured what was missing from his past experiences. This is how it is explained:

He had discovered something. To discover and to rediscover and synthesize. To relate this entity with that entity, and that entity with still another, and finally relating everything with everything else. That was what he had to do, that was all. And he became even happier.

The boy becomes aware that he has rich cultural resources, resources permeated with suffering but endowed with strength.

There is much suffering in . . . AND THE EARTH DID NOT PART. It is through his own suffering and the suffering of others that the main character is able to come to terms with himself and his Chicano reality. Hardships begin early for the Chicano, and this is a theme which runs through several of the selections.

The episode entitled "The Children Were the Victims" presents the reader with children working in the fields along with their parents. The heat of the summer is great and the workers are not allowed to waste time going for drinks of water. The Anglo rancher comes periodically to give them water, but the intervals become unbearable for the children, and the cattle tank is a great temptation for them. The writer reveals the situation through a dialogue between father and child:

"I'm very thirsty, father. Will the boss be here soon? "I think so. Can't you hold out any longer?" "Well, I don't know. I feel my throat very dry. Do you think he'll come soon? Shall I go the water tank?"<sup>7</sup>

As a result of approaching the cattle tank, the child is shot dead accidentally by the land owner who only intended to frighten him away from the tank.

In "The Children Were the Victims," the reader is also made aware of tensions between Anglos and Chicanos. This is implicit in a dialogue among several unidentified members of the group of workers who comment some of the details of the tragic accident. The rancher has been acquitted, but he has lost his land and become an alcoholic. In the midst of the dialogue one hears:

"You wouldn't believe it, compadre, but I really think he went crazy. You've seen the state he's in nowadays. He looks like a beggar."

"Sure, but it's only because he doesn't have money any more."

"I guess you're right."<sup>8</sup>

The Chicanos think the Anglo owner incapable of feeling remorse about the tragedy. Racial tension is also seen in other sections of the book such as the epigraph that depicts a boy being refused a haircut,<sup>9</sup> and a selection that presents a boy insulted racially by other children.<sup>10</sup>

The latter event is revealed in the selection "It Is Painful" which is essentially an interior monologue. A son of migrant fruit pickers is expelled from school as a result of a fight he had with some boys at school who cornered him in the restroom. On the way home he reflects upon the degrading events that he has suffered in school, such as when he was forced to stand naked before the school nurse and had his head inspected for lice. But what tortures him the most is having to disappoint his parents and godfather with his expulsion from school. All through the selection the boy tries to convince himself that the painful event did not take place, but immediately he realizes that it did happen. The reader nears over and over like a refrain:

"Maybe they didn't expel me. Sure, man, they did. What if they didn't? Sure they did. What am I going to tell them?"<sup>11</sup>

The thought that his parents' dream of seeing him become somebody, like a telephone operator, stays with the character throughout the entire selection. Rivera's book emphasizes through recurring themes that migrant workers encourage their children to stay in school; education is the only avenue to get out of the treadmill of migrant labor.

The protagonist of . . . AND THE EARTH DID NOT PART achieves self-liberation and self-determination through challenging fear brought about by local folk tales and through contemplating suffering. In the selection entitled "It was a Silvery Night," after hearing his parents talk about people who have become insane because the devil has appeared to them, the boy decides to summon the devil. He plans very carefully his confrontation with Lucifer, and spends an entire day pondering the best way to do it. Exactly at midnight, under the light of the moon, he goes out of the house and for a moment wonders how to address him, devil?, Pingo?, Chamuco?, Lucifer?, Satan?<sup>12</sup> After trying unsuccessfully to summon the devil, the boy comes to the realization that he does not exist. If some people have lost their mind, it is because he has not appeared, not because he has appeared to them. This is how he reacts:

But if there is no devil, then there is no . . . No, I'd better not say it.<sup>13</sup>

Out of this experience comes a most serious realization for the youth, but he is not frightened by it. The narrator reveals that everything is clear to him and he is beginning to discover his own existential loneliness without despair.