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**“To Discover and Rediscover”: The Textualization of
Individual and Communal Memory in Tomás Rivera’s ...y
no se lo tragó la tierra/ ...And the Earth Did Not Devour Him**

Kimberly Socha
Indiana University of Pennsylvania

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Tomás Rivera’s 1971 novella *...y no se lo tragó la tierra/ ...And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* (referred to as *La Tierra* from this point forward) is concerned with the “common and the everyday” lives of mid-twentieth century Chicano migrant workers, lives that are presented as “awesome and unreal.”¹ The peripatetic, impoverished lives depicted in *La Tierra* were, indeed, quite “common” and “everyday” for Mexican-Americans of that era. However, the way in which Rivera presents this reality is not common. Although God, Satan, spirits, Santa Claus, and disembodied voices figure in this text, *La Tierra* does not offer any encounters with the supernatural. The “magic” of the novella is real and it is sinister. Although *La Tierra* is not generally discussed as a magical realist text, Rivera presents a magicorealist world via his experimentation with language; he defamiliarizes the perceived stability of discourse through four primary narrative modes to weave an unreal tapestry of voices and events that mimic the functions of memory. The experiences of the child and his community are thus lived/“discovered” outside the parameters of the text and then recounted/“rediscovered” in a seemingly illogical pattern that coalesces at the novella’s end.

Although not an historical genocide *per se*, as was the Holocaust, life for Chicano Americans in the 1940s and 50s was rife with constant death, cruelty, insanity, and transience, all of which are aptly displayed in Rivera’s 70-page novella. In a study on Holocaust literature, Robert Scholes states that “it is because reality [itself] cannot be recorded that realism is dead ... We do not imitate the world, we construct versions of it” (qtd. in Young 17). For example, in “The Children Couldn’t Wait,” a child is accidentally shot in the head because he wishes to drink water before his boss deems it time: “And the child didn’t even jump like a deer does [after being shot]. He just stayed

¹ Although he did not discuss *La Tierra* in particular, the quoted material here is used in acknowledgement of Angel Flores’ seminal essay on magical realism.

in the water like a dirty rag and the water began to turn bloody” (86-87). This is a tragedy in the vein of Auschwitz. As a Chicano writer and educator, Rivera stated that his role “would be to document that period of time [1940s and 50s], but [give] it some kind of spiritual strength or spiritual history” (Bruce-Novoa 148). As noted above, the question of how to depict tragedy has been taken up by scholars and writers such as Flores, Scholes, and Rivera; Juan Velasco adds that “historical trauma and loss complicate the representation of personal history,” a history that cannot adequately be presented via classic, Western realism (317). Realism is dead because of its inability to do what the name promises: present the *real* world, unembellished, in textual form. Thus writers, Latin American and Chicano writers in particular, turned to the genre of magical realism.

Magical realism is set in a factual world that contains fantastic elements, but it does not present the pure fantasy of groups such as the surrealists. Magical realists such as Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel García Márquez “chose to move away from some of the more restrictive tenets of surrealism and turn toward ... magical realism” (Simpkins 143). In Scott Simpkins’ discussion of magic as a supplement of realism, he makes the following distinction about an often muddy term:

Despite the various critical disagreements over the concept of magic realism, one element which does recur constantly throughout many magic realist texts, and therefore points to a unifying characteristic, is an awareness of the ineluctable lack in communication, a condition which prevents the merger of signifier and signified ... [M]agical realists use what the Russian formalists called defamiliarization to radically emphasize common elements of reality, elements that are often present but have become virtually invisible because of their familiarity. And through a process of supplemental illusions, these textual strategies seem to produce a more realistic text. (143, 145)

Magical realism, therefore, finds that fantasy resides in everyday life. Just as Scholes states, a realist text can never, under any circumstances, “imitate” reality. It is up to writers to “construct versions” of the world we live in, a world which is often threatening, mysterious, and absurd.

La Tierra attempts to show the absurdity of life through the memory of an adolescent narrator. We see how a child grapples with and processes daily life trauma while gaining insight into his subconscious. The illusive nature of dreams and their effects on reality do have a place in the magical realist novel. The narrator’s story, and his desire to have it heard, is motivated by the suffering that he and his people have undergone. His dreams are affected by this suffering; thus they become entangled with the real world. In fact, the text begins with the proposition that his waking and dream worlds have become fused:

That year was lost to him. At times he tried to remember and, just about when he thought everything was clearing up some, he would be at a loss for words. It almost always began with a dream in which he would suddenly awaken and then realize that he was really asleep. Then he wouldn’t know whether what he was thinking had happened or not. (83)

La Tierra mirrors remembrance. It offers a textual description of a psychologically-damaged ego filled with unpleasant memories. This novel is an example of the

subconscious mind at work. Trying to remember something is often a fruitless endeavor; nevertheless, the memories are still there. This focus on one child's memory stands in contradiction to the assumption that the emphasis in *La Tierra* "falls on the general experience, communal and social rather than individual and personal" (Grajeda 71). In contrast, I assert that ultimately the novella is equally concerned with the single child's experience and with those of the Chicano society. The child who narrates *La Tierra* could be any child from within the Chicano community. The fact that he goes unnamed supports the contention that he is an "everyman." Paradoxically, he is at once one and many.

The tales in *La Tierra* are a "social construct that [emerge] through the linguistically circumscribed interaction of the individual, the community, and the material world" (Berlin 489). Therefore, it is impossible to divorce the magicorealist world from the sociopolitical/material world that it springs from. In *Magical Realism: Social Context and Discourse*, María-Elena Angulo notes that "[s]ince the means of literature is language and language is a social phenomenon, sociohistorical conditions can never be disregarded" (48). Angulo's 1995 study echoes M.M. Bakhtin's classic assertion that "[f]orm and content in discourse are one ... [V]erbal discourse is a social phenomenon—social throughout its entire range and in each and every of its factors, from the sound image to the furthest reaches of abstract meaning" (259). The Chicano writer cannot help but be aware of the diminutive place of his/her people in American society. Therefore, it is not surprising that the traditional Western European expository novel will not suffice as an expressive avenue.

This refusal of Western logic declares rationality an illusion. After all, it is Western (capitalist) rationality that is responsible for the extremely harsh working and living conditions represented in *La Tierra*. In essence, the novel is "part of an economic superstructure, demonstrating the ideology of society ... Form reflects the condition of the society in which it appears[;] in societies that are undergoing change, form tends to be experimental and radical" (Frederickson). The Chicano society in *La Tierra* is consistently inconsistent, hence paradoxical passages such as the following: "When we arrive ... the real truth is that I'm tired of arriving. Arriving and leaving, it's the same thing because we no sooner arrive and ... I really should say when we don't arrive because that's the real truth. We never arrive" (145). Realities such as this, according to the magical realist, are best expressed in "experimental and radical" forms.

La Tierra depicts the unrepentant exploitation of cheap labor by American bosses, which includes the use of children and the infirm. Less obviously, we see the characters succumbing to this cultural hegemony via their roles as consumers. "The Night Before Christmas" begins by declaring that "Christmas Eve was approaching and the barrage of commercials, music and Christmas cheer over the radio and the blare of announcements over the loud speakers on top of the stationwagon advertising movies ... resounded and seemed to draw it closer" (130). Doña Maria is compelled to respond to this consumerist "barrage" and forces herself to visit a department store. She explains to her husband that times are changing, the children "see so many things" that they want to possess; gone are the days when one could make his/her "own toys ... out of clay ..." (131). Rivera shows that Chicano laborers are victims of a double oppression, as "slave labor" and as consumers who then support an economic structure built upon that labor.

Although the term would have been unfamiliar during the 1940s and 50s, Doña Maria suffers from a panic attack/anxiety disorder. As a poor woman attempting to navigate the commercial landscape of the city, she is in an unviable situation. Hence, once inside the store the “noise and pushing of the crowd was worse ... Her anxiety soared. All she wanted to do was leave but she couldn’t find the doors anywhere, only stacks and stacks of merchandise and people crowded against one another” (133). This excerpt offers a critique of capitalism while also showing the ways in which the real world can be as horrific as any nightmare. In this case, the nightmare springs from a material-obsessed culture. The tradition of children making their own toys is replaced with the American urge to consume. Hence, Doña Maria is victim of a trend resulting from acculturation. Basically, psychological disorders can occur when those “firmly enmeshed in Mexican culture ... are exposed to conflicting values of the new [American] culture but are not equipped with the knowledge and resources required to obtain the goals valued in the new culture” (Burnam, et al. 90). Panic attacks and phobias are high of the list of disorders resulting from acculturation. Rivera takes this phenomena and “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 [and his family and community live]” (Grajeda 73).

Thus, although there is only one voice in *La Tierra*, the reader of this novella is very much in tune with the social discourse of the Chicano community of migrant workers in mid-century America. While *La Tierra* does not qualify as autobiography, it shares elements with that genre:

The intersection of the experiential knowledge of the particular [the unnamed narrator] and the mythical and historical traditions of the community refuses and transcends an oversimplification of the autobiographical act as “confession” ... The total Self recognizes the multiplicity of voices created in these works as a way of breaking away from the imprisonment of the small “I.” (Velasco 328)

Consequently, *La Tierra* is social discourse in its purest form—via the memories of a child who is trying to come to terms with his “total Self.” He is not confessing; he is remembering. While the unnamed narrator is not Rivera *per se*, the child serves as the author’s “object,” a “focal point for heteroglot voices among which his own must also sound” (Bakhtin 278). Accordingly, we are provided with scraps of adult conversation that the young psyche can remember, although not always understand. He does not attempt to interpret or make connections in this pastiche of memory, that task is left to the reader. At the start of *La Tierra*, the child is a *tabula rasa*: “his mind would go blank and he would fall asleep” (83). It is those in his environment—father, mother, siblings, teachers, classmates, neighbors—who fill in the blanks. He picks up these cues “before falling asleep[, when] he saw and heard many things ... ” (83). *La Tierra* reveals what he has put together after processing those bits of information.

La Tierra is “*realismo maravilloso*” through its use of “innovative narrative technique and linguistic experimentation” to “elucidate social problems of race, class and gender” (Angulo xi). Rivera’s narrative technique is manifest in four main modes: 1.) the first person narrator, 2.) the secondary voice of the first person narrator (presented in italics), 3.) direct quotations from disembodied voices, and 4.) third person narration.

Each of these strains represents the boy's attempt to understand his environment and they all serve very different functions in the novella, functions tied into his ability to process data. "It's That It Hurts" offers a prime example of these first three strains which are, of course, all part of the same memory. The vignette opens as if the reader has interrupted the boy in the middle of his thoughts: "It hurts a lot. That's why I hit him ... Maybe they didn't expel me from school. Maybe it ain't so, after all. Maybe it's not. *Sure it is!*" (92). This italicized voice "speaks" eight times as we follow the child throughout the story that unfolds; it is his logic attempting to force reality upon the situation. His narration vacillates between exposition regarding that day's school events and then back to the immediate present as he walks home. He states, "Then when it was my turn to read, I couldn't. I could hear myself. And I could hear that no words were coming out ... The cemetery isn't scary at all" (93). This shift in focus, along with the inner (italicized) dialogue shows the child's hesitancy to accept the reality of his expulsion from school.

The "it" of the title, and that which hurts the boy, is never conclusively revealed. The most obvious answer would be the cruel commentary uttered by the boy's white classmate: "Hey, Mex ... I don't like Mexicans because they steal" (93). However, this disembodied dialogue comes a full eight paragraphs after the first. The memories that fall in between are more telling. Our journey through his thoughts reveals additional causes of his anger, all of which are expressed via incorporeal snippets of discourse about various topics: his father's refusal to go into school with him on the first day of classes, the nurse taking him out of class to remove lice from his head, looking for food in a trash dump, hearing the janitor blame him for the fight with one of "our [anglo] boys," and pressure to please his father by becoming a telephone operator. In other words, everything hurts. Life hurts. The other boy calling our narrator a thief is merely what sends him over the edge in this particular case. It is only through these unstable forms of discourse that the truth can be revealed.²

Nine of the passages in *La Tierra* are strictly third person accounts with none of the other three narrative modes present. Aside from similarity of voice, each marks a moment of clarity or change for either the narrator or his community members. Again, their brevity is related to the functions of memory. They are fleeting stories that the child has heard but that do not necessarily affect him personally; the lessons learned, however, do relate to him and to all Chicanos. The only possible exceptions are the second two anecdotes.³ The first uses third person to distance the child from the guilt he feels for deceiving his mother; the second marks a painful rite of passage in which the child learns that he is "marked" due to his race. The former begins by revealing "that every night he would drink the glass of water that [his mother] left under the bed for the spirits" (85). In the morning she would assume that the spirits, not her child, had "drank the water." While he is compelled to tell her the truth, he realizes that doing so could very well shake the beliefs that keep her grounded in an unjust society. Hence, he decides to "wait and tell her when he [grows up]" (85). He must continue to deceive the

² Brooke Fredericksen notes the following quotation from Raymond Williams, "Periods of major transition between social systems are commonly marked by the emergence of radically new forms." She applies this comment to Rivera as author, noting that he "was living and writing in a turbulent period ... during the 1960s and 1970s, and his narrative was shaped in relation to the world around him."

³ The first passage is "The Lost Year," which was discussed above.

loving mother who is trying to protect him from evil. The next third person story ends with this important statement: "Then it all became clear to him and he went home to get his father" (103). The boy's epiphany comes with the realization that the barber won't cut his hair because he is Mexican. In fact, he isn't even allowed to stand in front of the theater near the barber's shop. The pain resulting from this life-altering moment of insight requires the distance that comes with a third-person telling of the tale.

The remaining six vignettes continue the pattern of seemingly simple tales from the community that are of much greater import. For example, a minister promises the boy's community members that "some man would be coming to teach them manual skills so that they would no longer have to work just in the fields" (107). However, their dreams are dashed when the man runs off with the minister's wife. Next, a grandfather paralyzed by stroke is informed by his grandson that "what he most wanted was for the next ten years to pass by immediately" (113). His grandfather's reaction, calling him "stupid," does not make sense to the grandson until he is thirty. In the next tale, a teacher is surprised that a student donates his button for a poster on the button industry. She knows that he took the button off "the only shirt [he] had"; she feels "the intensity of the child's desire and this was what surprised her most of all" (119). There is also a lovely description of a wedding and a sad tale about the deaths of Chicano spinach pickers after their truck collides with a drunken "Anglo" woman's car (123 and 129). Finally, there is the story of the priest who blesses people's "cars and trucks at five dollars each" before they "left for up north" (135). He uses the money to visit family in Spain and is confused when the townspeople put "crosses, lines, and con safe symbols" on the thank you cards that his family sent back with him (135). Each of these disparate stories teach important life lessons about trust and hope, aging, passion, love, death, and faith, respectively. They are tales from the community that the boy has heard, and possibly learned from, without the benefit of direct experience.

Each of the twenty-seven stories in *La Tierra* utilizes either one or more of Rivera's narrative styles, but "Hand in His Pocket" is one in which style is most clearly linked to the tenor of the story. This first person narration is not a confession in that the speaker does not feel guilt for the murder he has witnessed. Rather, the telling shows the very human desire to reveal our trauma as a method of overcoming it.⁴ While the whole novella can be classified as a "telling," "Hand in His Pocket" is more personal to the narrator due to the presence of an unidentified audience. There are references to a particular addressee (or addressees) from within the community. He begins by asking, "Remember Don Laíto and Doña Bone? That's what everyone called them but their names were Don Hilario and Doña Bonifacia. Don't you remember?" (98). We can assume that the narrator is still fairly young at the time of this story due to the simplicity of the statement, "At first I liked it [living with them] but then later on I didn't" (98). There is also the sense that the trauma is somewhat fresh due to this eager plea to his audience, "And then ... I'll tell you something ... but please don't tell anyone" (100). He is still very much afraid of them. In contrast, time is noticeably lacking from many of the other stories in *La Tierra*. There is no sense of from what point in his life the narrator is revealing his stories. "Hand in His Pocket" shakes this stability and offers a sense of

⁴ This need to tell is related to a project that Juan Velasco writes about in his 2004 essay; he discusses "the related aspects of cultural forgetting and remembering of trauma to the use of technologies of autobiography through which to represent the personal/collective meanings of loss" (317).

urgency in the narration. He *must* tell someone of his trauma, even at the risk of retribution.

The story is also significant for the same reasons that the nine passages above are significant; it explicates a moment of great insight for the boy. There are layers to this story that are slowly removed to reveal the reality behind an initially tolerable situation. At first the couple is nice; they smile and laugh. But then they feed the boy rotten meat and he learns that they “stole a lot of things: food, liquor, clothes, cigarettes, even meat” (99). It turns out that the delicious sweetbreads they bake are corrupted with Don Laíto’s sweat: “He would start sweating as he kneaded the dough. But it was when he would stick his hands under his arms and then keep kneading the dough that made me the sickest” (99). But the scaring and teasing of the boy is nothing compared to their forcing his complicity in the murder of a “wetback” with whom Doña Bone has sex with for money. He reveals, “When it got real dark they made me help them drag him out and throw him into the hole that I myself had dug. As for me, I didn’t really want to but then they told me that they would tell the police that I had killed him” (100-101). They end by giving him a ring that will forever represent his perceived complicity: “And the worst was that for a long time, as soon as I would see a stranger, I’d slip my hand into my pocket. That habit stayed with me for a long time” (101). Of course, “long time” is an ambiguous statement, but it raises issues of chronology.

Although the action in “Hand in His Pocket” is believable, there is a fairy tale quality to it that further shows the novella as an example of magical realism. Namely, children are often presented as victims in Western fairy tales. In Maria M. Tartar’s *Off with Their Heads!: Fairy Tales and the Culture of Childhood*, she notes that “[d]isobedience is generally a function of curiosity and stubbornness in the behavioral calculus of most folktale collections, and both vices are repeatedly singled out for punishment in cautionary tales” (25). In this case, the child is not disobedient or stubborn. He is actually very compliant and generally agrees to do everything his hosts asks of him. He even eats their disgusting food because he “didn’t want to hurt their feelings” or “seem ungrateful” (98). Despite his obedience, he is consistently punished by the “witches” of this fairly tale, Don Laíto and Doña Bone. Hence, he here represents the Chicano community at large; they work hard and do as they are told, but they are still ill treated.

The cacophony of voices that resound throughout *La Tierra* come together in the concluding chapter “Under the House.” Here Rivera combines third person narration with extracts from the child’s memory. In essence, this story provides a summary of the whole work and shows us how the boy has processed his “lost year.” The majority of the narration is in first person, but taken from memory. These memories are revealed as random voices that provide further insight into the year that he has just recounted. The transition between these twenty-three memories-as-voices are indicated by ellipses. As the boy sits “under the house,” he is pummeled by snatches of dialogue. For example, “Get out of there! Get away from that goddamn window! Go away! Go away ...” relates back to his stumbling upon a sexual tryst in “First Communion” (149); “[y]ou think that was how they were burned? It’s just hard to believe” comes from his memory of the García children burning up in “The Little Burnt Victims” (150); “[t]hose people who sell those portraits don’t come around here anymore. Don Mateo gave them a good scare” is from “The Portrait,” in which the town is tricked into giving money to a scam artist

(151). The barrage of voices continue to mimic how memory works. Memory does not unfold as an expository novel with a beginning, middle, and end. Rather, it comes in flashes and via disembodied voices that remind us of people and events. “Under the House” shows Rivera’s mastery at experimenting with language as a mode of the personal and cultural remembering that is so treasured by the Chicano community.

The end of Rivera’s novella is highly ambiguous, but it does offer a sense of chronology and closure. Throughout the text, and even on the back book jacket, we are told that a child is speaking to us. Only “Hand in His Pocket” alludes to the speaker’s possible distance from events. It is generally assumed that “The Lost Year” should be taken literally, that the reader is learning of one year in a child’s life. However, considering Rivera’s mastery of language, I want to offer an alternate interpretation and propose that the events of his life have driven the unnamed speaker to insanity. There are two main clues that the person speaking in “Under the House” is a man and not a child—although he very well may be a man who still thinks like a child. First, the children who see him shout, “Mami, mami, there’s a man under the house! Mami, mami, mami, hurry, come here, there’s a man here, there’s a man here!” (151). When he does step out a woman states, “That poor family. First the mother and now him. He must be losing his mind. He’s losing track of the years” (152). She refers to his mother’s breakdown after visiting the department store, and assumes that he is following suit. The fact that he is losing track of time indicates that, perhaps, he has lost more than a year and has become stuck in the role of a child. Finally, *La Tierra* ends with the narrator climbing a tree and waving to an imagined person on the horizon so that “the other could see that he knew he was there” (152). He hasn’t successfully found his “Self,” so he continues to search for the “other.” Sadly, such consequences often result from trauma. As much as one would hope that rebirth can come from acts of remembering and telling, sometimes the reality is much darker.

La Tierra is at once one story and multiple stories. It is intensely personal to the unnamed narrator while also presenting communal experiences. In other words, it is paradoxical via its ability to represent the particular and the general. The world is not a stable place, and the nomadic lives of migrant workers emphasize this reality. Rivera attempts to characterize life’s instability by playing with the very tools—words—that we use to describe it. What is Rivera’s intended goal? Ramón Saldívar notes that in “Rivera’s view life can be stabilized only after we have experienced its instability” (83). We can imagine that this is Rivera’s hope for the Chicano community, a group plagued by instability:

“When we arrive, when we arrive, the real truth is that I’m tired of arriving. Arriving and leaving, it’s the same thing because we no sooner arrive and ... the real truth of the matter ... I’m tired of arriving. I should really say when we don’t arrive because that’s the real truth. We never arrive.

“When we arrive, when we arrive ... “ (145).

Typical forms of exposition—take the Victorian novel as an example—are not able to aptly express the migrant worker’s life. The beginning, middle, tidy ending schema fails to depict lives that seem to have no end or, at the very least, never seem to get anywhere. Thus, I now return to Scott Simpkin’s assertion that the one thing all magical realist writers have in common is the use of “defamiliarization to radically emphasize

common elements of reality" (145). In *La Tierra*, Rivera successfully defamiliarizes the two *most* common elements of reality: language, the very way that human beings communicate with each other, and memory, the way in which the individual, either successfully or not, attempts to develop his/her sense of "Self."

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