

From poverty to power: the inspiring story of tomas rivera

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For most twenty-first century teenagers, Texas in the mid-1900's was simply a barren land peppered with cowboys and rodeos. Perhaps a few would take the time to include a few slaves and cotton plantations into their interpretations of the state's rich history. However, this rather myopic preconception of the Lone Star State leaves little room to factor in the thousands of impoverished men, women, and children who put in just as much, if not more effort to make our state as habitable as it is today: the Latino migrant farm workers. These farmers' living situation was just as pitiful as that of the slaves; although the Latinos were not anyone's property, their harsh lifestyle of moving from plantation to plantation offered little time to appreciate their freedom. In a personal interview, recent Mexican immigrant Elizabeth Nino declared, " No one deserves to live that way.

" Nino, who has a close connection to this grueling lifestyle since she has a family member who works as a migrant farmer, believes " more people need to realize how they lucky they are " (Nino). One would hardly expect someone from such humble beginnings to receive a decent education, much less go on to earn a degree at a prominent state university and pave a path for his fellow migrant workers to attain scholarly success. Astonishingly, Chicano author, poet, and educator Tomas Rivera was able to do all this and much more through sheer willpower and an unrelenting desire to prove the stereotypes about his background wrong. A true Texan at heart, Rivera was born to parents Florencio and Josefa on December 22nd, 1935 in Crystal City, Texas, an agricultural region appropriately called " The Winter Garden" (Lattin). As was custom, Rivera was expected to follow in his parents' footsteps and spend his life doing the bidding of American ranchers as a

migrant farm worker, but Rivera had bigger aspirations. In an interview with Juan D.

Bruce-Novoa, Rivera firmly stated, “ When people asked what I wanted to be, I’d tell them a writer. They were surprised or indifferent. If people don’t read, what is a writer?”(Bruce-Novoa, *Chicano Authors: Inquiry by Interview*, 1980). His early years were indistinguishable from those of an average Chicano boy, and included a lifestyle characteristic of nomadic culture. Due to the constant migration in respect to the season and crop of certain areas, it was difficult for Rivera to receive a proper grade school education. Though the task at hand seems nearly impossible for today’s teens, who live incredibly luxuriously in comparison to our subject, Rivera was able to balance school and work, and graduated in Crystal City High School in Texas in 1954 (*After the Rain: Tomas Rivera, the Legacy and Life*).

Against all odds, Rivera went on to graduate with a degree in English from the Southwest Texas State University in 1958. Following this momentous achievement, Rivera ardently pursued a career as an English teacher, but was unable to find work due to harsh racism (*Heath Anthology of American Literature Tomas Rivera*). These few years were critical to Rivera’s legacy; though the immediate effects of his rejection were clearly harmful, the racism he faced instilled in him a desire to fight the injustice and change the misconception that someone of Chicano descent was unable to do more than farm work. Though Rivera himself went on to become much more than a migrant farmer, his early memories of working in the fields with his family and being on the receiving end of a slew of racist comments provided the

basis for many of his acclaimed poems and stories. It soon became clear that Rivera's dedication to education stretched farther than himself; his persistence paid off and he eventually received work as a high school teacher and continued in this line of work for several years to come. His years as a teacher also saw the end of his bachelor years; Rivera soon became the loving husband of Concepcion (Concha) Garza and caring father of daughters Ileana and Irasema and son Javier.

Rivera, being the master of balance that he was, was once again able to pursue higher studies while earning a steady income and supporting a growing family. The renowned author graduated from the University of Oklahoma in 1969 with both a Ph. D. in Romance Languages and Literature, as well as a M. A. in Spanish literature (Lattin).

Rivera's valuable experiences as both a teacher and student strengthened his belief that education is the key to success, especially where his fellow Chicanos, who rarely received more than a grade school education at the time, were concerned. He has extensively written on the vitality of schooling and the following quote aptly sums the gist of his points: " A high quality education provided at all levels for the Hispanic communities will ensure stronger individuals, and in turn, a stronger community"(Bruce-Novoa, Chicano Authors: Inquiry by Interview, 1980). One can presume that Rivera was not the type of person to be content with watching those around him suffer while gaining scholarly success for himself. A memorial letter from the University of California, on behalf of the Regents, states that he had " a strong voice in both the nation and the community in recognizing that our

youth is a resource beyond measure” (Lattin). Though originally a mere farm worker among thousands, Rivera surmounted an innumerable amount of obstacles to forever leave a legacy on Chicano culture and actively encourage others with similar backgrounds to do so as well.

The years following Rivera’s graduation in 1969 saw the creation of some of his most extolled novels, short stories, and poems (*The Expanding Cannon*). Surprisingly, the renowned author has very few literary books to his name; his diminutive repertoire was enough to establish him as one of the most talented and influential Latino authors in history. None of his works have received as much critical acclaim as his 1971 semi-autobiography, *... y no se lo trago la tierra* (*And the Earth Did Not Devour Him*).

The strict, tight prose and limited vocabulary of this novel starkly contrast the book’s unconstrained poignancy; the juxtaposition leaves the reader empathizing with the migrant famers’ incredible tough lives and feeling all the more in awe of Rivera for accomplishing so much against all odds. The Premio Quinto Sol Literacy Award winning novel is made up of a collection of vignettes that chronicle several aspects of migratory life. The novel, which has since been translated into English numerous times, is told from the perspective of a migrant farm worker and details several seemingly unconnected stories from the anonymous child’s “Lost Year”. The tales all come together to form an unforgettable novel that flawlessly captures the injustice and harsh conditions faced by the Latino workers. When asked to give his own personal insight on the story, Rivera responded, “ In.

.. Tierra...

I wrote about [the life of] the migrant worker in [the] ten year period [between 1945 and 1955].... I began to see that my role..

. would be to document that period of time, but giving it some kind of spiritual strength or spiritual history” (Bruce-Novoa, *Chicano Authors: Inquiry by Interview*, 1980: 148). Though the plot of the novel may seem harmless enough, ...y no se lo trago la tierra (*And the Earth Did Not Devour Him*) has been on the receiving end of just as much slander as laudation (Banned Books Awareness). Protective parents believe that “ any possible value is lost with offensive language”(Baldassaro). However, a personal interview with Elizabeth Nino proved that most Latinos believe that these concerned parents’ worries are unfounded and that “ most children hear worse words at school. All .

.. y no se lo trago la tierra does is show the reality of life as a migrant farm worker”(Nino). The harsh reality Nino mentions is proven to be much more alarming than one might think; some of the vignettes from Rivera’s novel leave the reader wondering how it was possible for the farmers to survive this way and face such racism. For example, “ It’s That It Hurts” focuses on how the young narrator was on the verge of expulsion from school because of racism and consequent violence (Rivera 70).

According to Nino, such occurrences were to be expected at the time; much credit should be given to Rivera for giving this persecuted minority a voice in their community. Never before had a Mexican-American held positions of such authority in respected institutions such as Sam Houston State University, the University of Texas at El Paso, and the University of California, <https://assignbuster.com/from-poverty-to-power-the-inspiring-story-of-tomas-rivera/>

Riverside (After the Rain: Tomas Rivera, the Legacy and Life). The multi-talented author set a precedent for Chicanos all across America to follow; he proved that their heritage was not a hindrance and that it was something worth embracing. Though Rivera himself passed away on May 16th, 1984, evidence of his legacy and impressive accomplishments can be seen all over Texas. Several of today's most prestigious universities and awards have been named after him, not to mention all the additional buildings, plazas, and learning centers that have taken on the moniker.

It's fair to say that Rivera can be considered the Martin Luther King Jr. of Latinos; he had a vision of an America where his fellow Latinos had adequate access to post-secondary education and opportunities to succeed. In the words of Elizabeth Nino, "being a Latino should mean being someone proud of your heritage" (Nino). Works Cited "After the Rain: Tomas Rivera, the Legacy and Life - UCTV - University of California Television." After the Rain: Tomas Rivera, the Legacy and Life - UCTV - University of California Television. N.

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