

Promoting the Legacy of Dr. Tomás Rivera with a Chicana/o Children's Book Award

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ABSTRACT. This article discusses how the Tomás Rivera Children's Book Award tries to connect to central themes of Chicana/o literature identified by Dr. Rivera. Each year, the award honors exceptional quality children's literature representing the Mexican American experience. The annual award celebrations are a time for young people to develop deep understandings of themselves and community through explorations and creations inspired by the literature and considering the themes of remembering, discovery and volition.

Key Words: Tomás Rivera, Chicana/o children's literature, community, critical multicultural

Bartolo pasaba por el pueblo por aquello de diciembre cuando tanteaba que la mayor parte de la gente había regresado de los trabajos. Siempre venía vendiendo sus poemas. Se le acababan casi para el primer día porque en los poemas se encontraban los nombres de la gente del pueblo. Y cuando los leía en voz alta era algo emocionante y serio. Recuerdo que una vez le dijo a la raza que leyeran los poemas en voz alta porque la voz era la semilla del amor en la oscuridad.

Tomás Rivera, ...y no se lo tragó la tierra

Bartolo passed through town every December when he knew that most of the people had returned from work up north. He always came by to sell his poems. By the end of the first day, they were almost sold out because the names of the people of the town appeared in the poems. And when he read them aloud it was something emotional and serious. I recall that one time he told the people to read the poems out loud because the spoken word was the seed of love in the darkness.

Tomás Rivera, ...y no se lo tragó la tierra

In the lines from the landmark novel, *...y no se lo tragó la tierra*, Dr. Tomás Rivera (1971) speaks to the power of literature that reflects a people. Bartolo, the itinerant poet in the novel was also a real person who Rivera attributed with helping to ignite his passion for Chicano/a literature. Rivera explained that the literature he was exposed to in school did not reflect his community, his language, or his life experiences. To not see yourself reflected in the texts at school, according to Rivera, functioned as a message regarding the value society placed on you and this had implications for the development of a strong and healthy identity. Rivera likened Chicano/a children's first experiences with schooling to being Columbus "discovering" America (Rivera, 1992a). He was referring to the shock of a young child who only knows the love of home and community then arriving at the institution of school and being confronted with ideologies that see her/his culture and family as having deficits and negate her/his language. These deficit ideologies are communicated in the curriculum, including the texts used in schools, as well as the pedagogy that reflects language and style of white middle-class Americans (Clark & Flores, 2016). Dr. Rivera is known, and cherished, as someone who dedicated his life to working to promote Chicano/a literature as a vehicle for the nurturing of strong and healthy identities of Mexican Americans and as a catalyst for the development of community (Olivares, 1992).

Much the way Bartolo, through his poetry for the people, developed counter narratives that stood in contrast to the published texts of the time that largely ignored or disrespected the Chicano/a community, the work of Dr. Tomás Rivera made permanent a legacy of the community. The permanence of his published stories and poetry helps communicate the strength and importance of a people, with a history, rich language, and the will to continue in the collective struggle for better futures. With his words, Dr. Rivera planted "seed[s] of love in the darkness" delivering the message, as stated in his poem *The Searchers*, that "we are not alone" (Rivera, 1990).

Were Dr. Rivera alive today, I think he would agree that there is still a long way to go in the struggle for social justice and for equity in society. In terms of the publications of texts that represent the Chicano/a experience, there is still much work to be done. Consider the publication of children's literature; these are the texts that will be used by teachers and parents to initiate children's love for reading. As has been documented by the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC), the number of children's books published each year by and about Latinx is disproportionate to the population. In 2016, less than 2% of all books published for children were by and about Latinos (CCBC, 2017). In terms of the messages being communicated to Latinx children, these statistics indicate that little improvement has been made since Dr. Rivera took up this issue in his own work. In 2017, we are still in need of Bartolos and Bartolas!

A Children's Book Award to Shine a Light

Recognizing the continued need to promote multicultural literature for children, and specifically literature that depicts the Mexican American experience, in 1995, a group of educators at Texas State University created a children's book award. The award was fittingly named for Texas State's Distinguished Alumnus, Dr. Tomás Rivera. The goal of the award is to promote quality literature that depicts the Chicano/a experience and to advocate for increased attention to issues relating to equity in publishing. A large part of the work of the committees who run the Rivera Award is dedicated to getting the award-winning books into the hands of children and teachers.

Over the last 21 years, the Tomás Rivera Award has recognized exceptional work of authors and illustrators of picture books as well as YA novels. The list of winners (see riverabookaward.org) is a resource for teachers, parents, and for children. The works represented in this curated collection have been vetted by educators and scholars of Chicano/a literature who are looking specifically for evidence of how the works reflect the spirit and values of Dr. Rivera. Notions of quality taken up by Rivera Award committees relate to artistic quality in general, however, they do not stop here. Specifically, members of the Rivera Award committees are looking for how the books being considered relate to themes Dr. Rivera identified as vital for Chicano/a literature. Some of these themes include: remembering, discovery, volition, and community. Each of these themes is present in Rivera's book, *...y no se lo tragó la tierra*. It's as if Rivera wrote this novel to function both as literature and also as a guide-map for community development.

The theme of "remembering" for Rivera related to connecting to history. This history, of the Chicano/a community, has been devalued by racist institutions of society. Chicana/o history has not been part of official curriculums in schools and is mostly absent or misrepresented in mainstream published texts. Remembering is important for the maintenance and development of peoples from any culture. However, cultures that are marginalized in a society may not have "official" means (such as textbooks in schools) for maintaining a critical-historical perspective. In the opening of the book, *...y no se lo tragó la tierra*, Rivera depicts a child who cannot remember the past year. Over the course of the book, the memories flood back and the reader experiences the multi-voiced memories of the boy through the words and actions of members of his community. Through remembering, identities can be developed in healthy ways that instill pride and connections to others.

Discovery, like remembering, relates to identity. The active search for meaning and connections of people leads to the discovery of community. In *...y no se lo tragó la tierra*, the child-protagonist may symbolize the community when he has forgotten the previous year. It is not until he is away from the school, in fact he isolates himself under a house, that he is able to remember the voices and experiences of the year. Through the act of remembering he begins to discover himself and his community. Not all of the events and experiences are happy, there is tragedy and struggle too. He discovers his reality and embraces it through the act of remembering. In literature, this discovery can function as a model for the community and can lead individuals to unite in the quest for empowerment.

Volition, which is also commonly referred to as agency, relates to the power to realize change in the world. Rivera was concerned that people who are marginalized and severed from a strong community, often feel alienation and can lose a sense of agency. The protagonist from ...y no se lo tragó la tierra forgot the year, then he remembered it and discovered himself in his community. This act lead him to actively climb out from under the house where he was hiding. He was filled with a huge sense of love for his community and he felt the desire to hug everyone. He then climbs a tree and holds up his hand to wave to someone in the distance. This act, crawling out from the darkness—loving others—and waving, can be a symbol for the agency, or volition, of a community that embraces remembering and discovery. Literature can serve as a guide regarding acting as change agents and in this sense can be empowering (Clark & Flores, 2016).

Chicano/a literature, for Rivera, was an act of self-determination by the community. In other words, through the literature, Chicano/as can define themselves rather than accepting the misrepresentations (or erasure) of the community that abound in mainstream media, official schooling, and texts published by others. Incorporating themes of remembering, discovery and volition into a literature by and about Chicano/as, for Rivera, was vital for the establishment of a strong and healthy community.

The Tomás Rivera Children's Book Award works hard to maintain the legacy of Dr. Rivera by ensuring that the literature that wins contain elements that reflect the values and themes identified by Rivera. The themes of remembering, discovery, volition and community remain important and connect the Rivera Award to advocacy work that is done with young people around the award celebrations each year.

As mentioned earlier, one of the major goals of the Rivera Award is to get the award-winning books into the hands of children, teachers and parents. However, the Rivera Award does not stop at getting the books to the children. It is important to the Rivera Award committees that children, and their teachers, have opportunities to connect to the literature and to share their own work inspired by their studies of the winning authors and illustrators. By providing a platform for children to share their own work that connects to award-winning books, the Rivera Award hopes to promote community and agency (or “volition” to use Rivera's language). Each year, children and young adults are invited to share the stage with the Rivera Award winners. Children who have used language and other mediums of representation, share their work as authors, illustrators, play-writes, musicians, historians. The children-artists-authors-creators are treated as valued members of the community who indeed have stories, ideas, and dreams that are worthy of publication. When children see themselves as creators, they are agents of change. When they draw on collective “remembering” and “discovery” to fuel their creations, they are taking up positions as Chicana/o authors and illustrators. When they draw inspiration from quality Chicana/o literature to develop their own voices, they are figuratively stepping into the texts of the award-winning books and getting mentorship from Chicano/a artists that came before them. The Rivera Award hopes that this effort parallels what Dr. Rivera would want for the children. This act, that is supported by a public state university and sanctioned by public schools, stands in

stark contrast to the deficit-oriented experiences Dr. Rivera decried from when he was a child in school. The following section will provide a few examples of the types of work that children have done over the years to connect to the winning texts of the Rivera Award.

Illustrative Examples from the Rivera Award

The following examples provide a glimpse into the work that children do each year to celebrate the winning texts of the Tomás Rivera Book Award. The celebration goes beyond the celebration of one, or two, great books. The celebration attempts to connect the books to a larger sense of community and a collective effort to develop agency, pride, and the development of strong voices for change.

Remembering: Kids Representing Paintings of Diego Rivera



In response to two winning books about Mexican Muralist Diego Rivera, children created tableaux of famous paintings by the artist. For each painting that they embodied, the children

wrote scripts based on their research. They made the paintings “come alive” as they discussed the significance of each painting as if they were the characters Diego Rivera depicted in the artwork.

Discovery: Stepping inside of Books



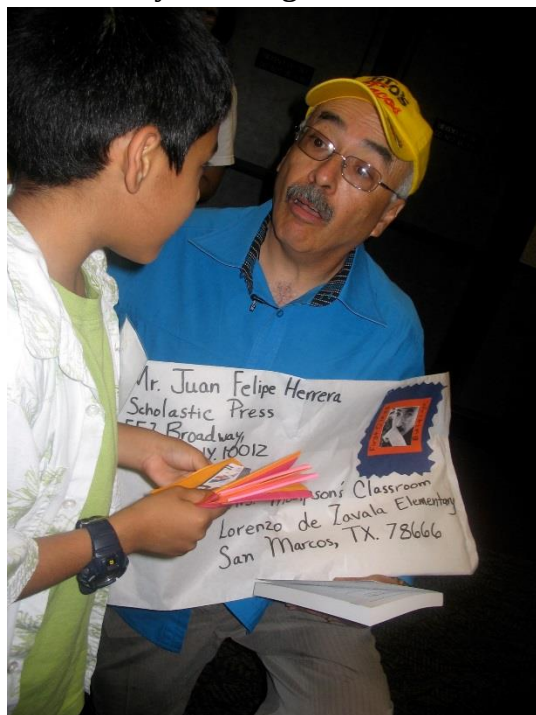
Children “step inside” of the winning books figuratively when they read the work. When they see themselves, their communities, and their life experiences depicted, the books can be thought of as “mirrors.” This is an important concept for multicultural children’s literature. In the above pictures, children literally step inside of award-winning books. The top image is a scene from *What Can You Do with a Paleta?* by Carmen Tafolla (author) and Magaly Morales (illustrator). The bottom image shows children depicting a scene from *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote* by Duncan Tonatiuh.

Volition: A Parade Representing Winning Books



For the 20th anniversary of the Rivera Award, the celebrations began with a parade. The parade included children from local schools who studied and represented different Rivera Award-winning books for the parade. The parade was led by the mayor of San Marcos, the Dean of the College of Education and a giant puppet depicting a Texas State student reading *...y no se lo tragó la tierra*. Since the 20th anniversary happened in 2016, the parade was also a nod to the Teatro Campesino, who celebrated a 50th anniversary that same year. The symbolism of having the mayor and the Dean of a major university was important to the Rivera Award. The mayor had officially decreed the day “Tomás Rivera Day” for the City of San Marcos. The school districts showed up in force with students from pre-kindergarten through high school who were depicting the winning books. This is the type of institutional support for Chicano/a literature that we believe is necessary for building healthy communities.

Community: Sharing work with award-winning authors/illustrators



Children who create work inspired by their studies of award-winning literature have opportunity to share their work with the authors and illustrators. In the top picture, a student shares his original poetry with Juan Felipe Herrera. In the bottom picture, a student shares a picture book she authored and illustrated with Magaly Morales.

The Tomás Rivera Children's Book Award hopes to make an impact on the lives of young people, especially young Chicana/o children who deserve to see themselves reflected in the pages of books and in their school curricula. The award works hard, in the face of a broader publishing landscape that provides stark examples of Chicana/o literature, to get quality literature

into the hands of children. However, it is not enough to simply get the books into children's hands. The books must be read and officially sanctioned by schools. Educators, and other adults, need to provide mentorship and help children mediate the works within the broader society that continues to promote racist narratives that are disrespectful and/or erase the Chicano/a experience from institutional texts (for example in schooling and media). Through the exploration of themes identified by Dr. Tomás Rivera, such as remembering, discovery, volition, and community, the Rivera Award hopes to keep alive the legacy of Dr. Rivera and to promote a new generation of young people who benefit from the fruits of love that flourish when the Bartolos and Bartolas of the world plant their seeds and others help to fertilize them so they may grow healthy.

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