



Revisiting Tomás Rivera's ... *y no se lo tragó la tierra*:
(Everyday) Trauma and the Monomyth

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There is no life without trauma. There is no history without trauma ... Trauma as a mode of being violently halts the flow of time, fractures the self, and punctures memory and language.
(Schwab, 2010, p. 42)

Published in 1971 and the first winner of the Quinto Sol Prize for Literature, Tomás Rivera's ... *y no se lo tragó la tierra* is considered a seminal work of Chicano literature. It tells the story of migrant workers and, especially, a child in the 1950s, which Rivera was keenly familiar with since he had joined his parents as migrant farmworkers until beginning his career in education. Consisting of fourteen short stories and thirteen vignettes or anecdotes, the novel has been heavily studied, including as a novel whose structure, according to Vernon Lattin (1982), coincides with Joseph Campbell's monomythic pattern. While I do not wish to rehash Lattin's views, I do expand upon some of his ideas of the monomyth as I focus on how Rivera's coming-of-age story is rooted in everyday trauma, a notion that critics¹ have identified, but to my knowledge, none has explicitly explored. Given, however, that, according to Rolando Hinojosa-Smith (2001), psychology was Rivera's favorite subject, trauma, which largely emerges in the novel due to racial discrimination and different forms of death that the protagonist experiences vicariously, deserves examination.

Trauma

In the opening frame story to Rivera's ... *y no se lo tragó la tierra*, the omniscient narrator introduces us to an anonymous boy who is psychologically wounded. The boy struggles to remember the last year. He tells us he awakens suddenly from dreams. He struggles to differentiate the dream world from the real world. He hears unknown voices calling out to him. He cannot recall his name, he experiences fear, and he feels trapped. The narrator states, "Se dio cuenta de que siempre pensaba que pensaba y de allí no podía salir" (Rivera, 1991, p. 49). Clearly, things are not

¹ When discussing the boy's experiences in school, Emmanouilidou (2013) describes them as "a series of traumas" (p. 7) and Gallega (2000) observes that "Muchos niños chicanos abandonan la escuela cuando tienen que enfrentar este trauma diariamente" (p. 88).

all right with this child. While he repeatedly attempts to recall the lost last year, his words fail him. Being afraid, thinking erratically, struggling to recall and articulate what he knows, and feeling ensnared are all experiences that point to emotional shock and are signs he needs to get past the adverse conditions that have traumatized him. In psychology, the inability to remember events stemming from emotional shock or trauma is known as dissociative amnesia (American Psychological Association). When events are too painful, they may be blocked out until it is safe to remember. Once recalled, narratives of trauma have the ability to heal the survivor, which is the case in *...y no se lo tragó la tierra*.

Trauma may also help to understand *...y no se lo tragó la tierra*'s structure. That is, while the novel's "fragmented narration and nonlinear form... simulates the peripatetic nature and sense of displacement of the migrant experience" (Martínez, 2016, p. 706), it also imitates the fragmented and disorganized nature of narratives of trauma survivors who struggle to process traumatic episodes like other events (Crespo & Fernández-Lansac, 2016). In *...y no se lo tragó la tierra*, the boy attempts to make sense of his thoughts, memories, and responses to them by fulfilling the role of "protagonist, narrator protagonist, narrator witness or a character who overhears but does not narrate" (Olivares, 1991, p. 13). While these changes in narrative perspective can be disorienting to some readers, it is clear that Rivera is interested in showing how his protagonist shares his trauma with other Chicanos and in locating knowledge that takes the boy from loss to discovery, confusion to clarity, and harm to healing.

Departure

In *The hero with a thousand faces*, Joseph Campbell (1949) writes that the hero's journey or the monomythic pattern is comprised of three stages: departure, initiation, and return. Each stage can be further broken down so that one often finds five incidents in the first stage although they are not all required: the call to adventure; refusing the call; encountering supernatural aid; crossing the first threshold; and entering the "belly of the whale," where the hero experiences a metaphorical death (Campbell, 1949, pp. 49-96). In Rivera's opening frame story, we learn that on more than one occasion his nameless, psychologically wounded protagonist hears a disembodied voice call out to him, but when he does a 360 degree turn in search of the voice, he finds no one. The circular motion keeps him in the same spot. As if refusing these initial calls to venture forth, it is not until the boy does only a half turn and realizes he is calling himself that his journey begins: "Y así empezó el año perdido" (Rivera, 1991, p. 49). He, like many other heroes who are also of "lowly birth and poor prospects" (Bray, 2018, p. 534), crosses thresholds. In the case of Rivera's protagonist, he crosses into his unconscious mind and recalls trauma-related tests or trials he either experienced first-hand or lived vicariously through community members.

Regarding supernatural aid, Campbell (1949) observes that "the first encounter of the hero-journey is with a protective figure (often a little old crone or old man) who provides the adventurer with amulets against the dragon forces he is about to pass" (p. 69). The mother that the reader encounters in the first anecdote can be interpreted as the hero's helper. She, as she has done before, places a glass of water under the boy's bed as a way to keep him safe. But what the mother does not know is that the child, not spirits, drinks the water. Lattin (1982) posits that the boy "does not tell his mother because he is protecting her from his loss of innocence" (p. 222), but there is more than a loss of innocence. This anecdote signals that while the boy accepts the mother's help, he opposes her spiritual and superstitious beliefs. As Juan Rodríguez (1974) asserts in his study of four stories

in the novel, Rivera “se anhela exponer, extirpar y aniquilar para siempre” (p. 17) religiosity, one of the tools those in the dominant society may use to deter Chicano progress and which can undermine mental health. Given that water also symbolizes rebirth, the boy represents a generation of Chicanos with a new mentality. He imbibes the water and thereby signals he has a helper in his mother, but he will not altogether follow her route. Instead, he rejects her superstitious ways and forges a new path forward. In short, he accepts his mother, who has the buffering capacity to prevent long-term traumatic effects by showing her desire to keep him safe but opts for self-determination and new ways of thinking about the world.

As the boy ventures forth, crossing one threshold after another, the reader witnesses him and his community members in all sorts of painful and trauma-inducing situations that will help the boy better understand himself and humankind. Some of the early painful episodes have to do with racial discrimination, which often leads to psychological symptoms. Psychologists write that “covert everyday racism in the form of microaggressions (subtle actions or verbal interactions that are dismissive, derogatory, or discriminatory...) is linked to several negative psychological symptoms” (Williams et al., 2018, p. 244). Those persons who repeatedly experience microaggressions “may... reshape [their] perception of themselves, their ethnic group, and the benevolence of the world, leading to low self-esteem, psychological distress, and even suicidal ideation” (Williams et al., 2018, p. 244). The fact that the protagonist relates several episodes of discrimination suggests he has been psychologically wounded by them. In the story “Es que duele,” the narrator-child is expelled from school after striking back at an Anglo boy who stereotyped him as a thief, a discursive conflict that threatens the image the boy has of himself. In the story “La noche buena,” a remark made by the Anglo person pursuing a Chicana mother after she accidentally leaves the retail store with unpaid goods because of a panic attack makes clear that Chicanos are regularly marked as thieves: “Here she is...these damn people, always stealing something, stealing. I’ve been watching you all along” (Rivera, 1991, p. 99). Both the boy and this mother reside in a dominant society that presumes Mexican (Americans) are criminals on the basis of their race and ethnicity. Their response to repeated microaggressions determines how psychologically wounded they will be. While the prone-to-panic-attacks mother retreats to her home and remains marginalized from the dominant society, the boy lashes out in school with anger, which “has long been identified as a component of traumatic reactions” (Novaco, 2010, p. 476) and which can help the boy deal with the psychological injury.

In addition to being negatively stereotyped, the boy, new to the school, repeatedly experiences embarrassment when he is made to disrobe before the school nurse, is searched for lice, and is made to sit in a corner apart from the rest of the class. Demoralizing and painful, this is the type of trauma that “arise[s] from quieter, less obvious experiences, such as ... the marginalization of a minority child in a majority community” (Perry, 2021, p. 103). The boy reflects: “Siempre es lo mismo en estas escuelas del norte. Todos nomás mirándote de arriba a abajo. Y luego se ríen de uno y la maestra con el palito de paleta o de *ésquimo pie* buscándote piojos en la cabeza. Da vergüenza. Y luego cuando arriscan las narices. Da coraje” (Rivera, 1991, p. 58). To underscore the emotional impact of these experiences and expulsion from school, the boy refers to embarrassment eight times, fear four times, and anger three times. Distressed, he repeatedly questions whether he has really been kicked out of school for fighting and worries about his parents who care about his education and want him to become a phone operator. Unaware, however, that he has been unfairly removed from school by racist administrators, the boy’s response is not to seek justice, but to spare his parents embarrassment by hiding when his godfather, who inquires about his schooling, visits. In other words, he does not want to disappoint his family, who want more for the boy than a

backbreaking career like they have. In short, the boy lacks the knowledge and tools needed to navigate the social culture of the school and does not recognize that it is the racist views and unjust power that Anglo school officials wield that contribute to his distress and psychological pain.

In the anecdote “Faltaba una hora,” the boy learns to recognize and not accept the Anglo society’s racial discrimination. After being denied service at a barbershop and not allowed to wait outside for the movie theater to open, all because of his ethnicity and race, he realizes that he is being tacitly told he does not belong and is being denied the same rights that Anglos possess. Thus, the boy, in an agential move, goes to get his father. That is, he seeks out his support system, who can potentially help him avoid internalizing negative feelings associated with bias and microaggressions. In brief, the narrator provides evidence the boy is among the “untold numbers [who] suffer with the everyday trauma of discrimination while being denied... opportunities” (Shors, 2021, p. 20).

Initiation

The heroes of monomyths may “[be] swallowed into the unknown and... appear to [die]” (Campbell, 1949, p. 90) before they can be transformed and reborn. Rivera’s hero’s journey to the underworld or “the belly of the whale” is the world of the migrant worker, where, as he turns inward to recall the last year, he tells of all manner of death—accidental, suicidal, homicidal, natural, and casualties of war. In fact, over twenty community members die in the year the boy had forgotten and now recalls, deaths which traumatize by destabilizing one’s sense of safety and well-being.

These deaths hold lessons for the boy and his readers. Through the anecdote of the sixteen spinach pickers who die in a car accident caused by an Anglo drunk driver, they learn not only that irresponsible behavior can cause fatal events but that death can come at anytime. In the story “Los niños no se aguantaron,” where a farm owner accidentally kills a small child who desperately seeks water while toiling under an oppressive sun, the protagonist learns that “suffering begins with childhood” (Grajeda, 1979, p. 74). The notion that life can be cut short and suffering comes early is also a theme in “Los quemaditos,” a story, which like others in the novel, is based on real events² and in which two of three children who have been left home alone burn to death after an accidental fire starts while playing with rubbing alcohol and boxing gloves (A. Rodríguez, 1986, p. 80). Rooted in fatalism or the idea that actions and events are predetermined by fate or a higher power, the adults accept the suffering as inevitable: “Pues ya se les está pasando la tristeza aunque no creo que se les olvide. Dígame usted que más puede hacer uno. Si no sabe uno cuándo le toca, ni cómo. Pobrecitos. Pero no sabe uno” (Rivera, 1991, p. 88). As we will see below, the boy shuns this cultural dimension. Unlike his elders, he does not see the locus of control as external. He will be greatly pained by additional injustice of suffering and untimely death and react with rage.

Suffering due to premature death is not limited to accidents. The boy also recalls military casualties. The mother in “Un rezo” desperately yearns and prays for the safe return of her son from

²According to Alfonso Rodríguez (1986), several stories discussed in this paper are based on true stories that happened in Rivera’s hometown. In addition to “Los quemaditos,” which is based on the story of seven children and their mother who died in a fire and whose “relatives and neighbors were beyond consolation” (p. 80), the anecdote about the spinach pickers relates to Rivera’s father, who “lost his life in an accident returning home from the spinach fields” (p. 80), and Ramon’s suicide in “La noche que se apagaron las luces” corresponds to the attempted suicide of a man who caused a blackout after throwing himself against an electric plant transformer during a dance hall intermission (p. 80).

the Korean War. This is a woman traumatized by lack of news about the whereabouts of her son. Unless the reader accepts that the psychic visited by a mother in the anecdote preceding this story is correct when she states the son is alive, one wonders whether he is or might be dead like Chuy, the deceased soldier in “El retrato.” Regardless, the boy learns war is another phenomenon that causes an early death and suffering in his community. He and his people recognize safety can elude them both at home and abroad. When further considering the story “El retrato,” where parents are scammed out of money and the only adult photo of their son Chuy, the reader and the boy come to understand there are people who do not honor and respect Chicanos who have sacrificed their lives for their country. He is aware that even in death Chicanos are used by greedy manipulative persons. Chicanos are vulnerable.

In addition to recalling the Chicano young men fighting and dying overseas, the boy remembers Ramón, the young man in “La noche que se apagaron las luces” who is back home struggling with an internal war that leads to his suicide: Ramón and his girlfriend, Juanita, agree to a long-distance relationship while she migrates to Michigan with her parents for work, but upon her return Ramón is distraught to hear rumors that the woman he hoped to marry has been unfaithful. Grajeda (1979) observes that this story is related to distance and objectivity. That is, unlike the mother’s prayer in “Un rezo,” which is full of despairing pleading to a higher power, the emotional detachment, and the use of the matter-of-fact tone in “La noche que se apagaron las luces” to tell of Ramón’s suicide by electrocution heightens rather than shrouds the grief experienced by the boy and his community and can be viewed as a method of self-protection from trauma.

Traumatizing to the boy are not only the deaths by accident, war, and suicide but also murder. In “La mano en la bolsa,” another story based on an actual experience Rivera had (Hinojosa-Smith, 2001, p. 92) and one that makes the reader wonder whether Rivera is among those authors who “turn intuitively to writing as a way of confronting and surviving trauma suffered in their own lives” (Robinett, 2007, p. 291), the boy’s parents call upon don Hilario and doña Bonifacia as helpers to care for their son so he can finish his final weeks of school while the parents toil elsewhere. But don Hilario and doña Bonifacia are the last people who should be fully trusted. According to the boy, don Hilario and doña Bonifacia are known to be both good and bad, suggesting they have the potential to serve as mentors who guide the hero in a coming-of-age story toward growth and maturity. In fact, their names Hilario (meaning *cheerful*) and Bonifacia (meaning *good fate*) intimate that the boy will have a positive experience with them. Ironically, he does not. The couple veers towards evil, aligning themselves with the monsters that heroes often encounter on their journey to adulthood. They traumatize the naïve boy as he is forced to undergo one test after another while living with them. He must learn to survive on spoiled food. He sleeps in a dark junk-filled and decrepit room that causes him fear and keeps him awake at night. He must endure short-lived tranquility due to the startle response caused by a menacing doña Bonifacia: “...siempre cuando estaba más en paz me asustaba doña Bone. Me apretaba por detrás y se reía y yo hasta saltaba de susto” (Rivera, 1991, p. 65). Furthermore, he is made to work at all hours. Life with the couple is filled with trauma-inducing challenges he must overcome.

By the end of the first week together, don Hilario and doña Bonifacia increase their demands and illegal behavior. They attempt to mold the boy into their criminal ways by asking him to steal as they are accustomed to do: “Una vez hasta querían que me calara a robarme un saco de harina de cinco libras. ¿Te imaginas? Yo tenía miedo y además no era justo. Don Laito nomás se reía y me decía que no tenía *eguis*” (Rivera, 1991, p. 65). Understanding and honoring that his parents have sacrificed wages to pay the couple to provide room and board, the taunted and traumatized boy does not steal. Though he has a moral compass, he has no recourse but to bear the

cruelty of this amoral and inhumane couple. Increasing the intensity of the trials the boy must face, don Hilario and doña Bonificia make him an accessory to murder. Not only does the boy unwittingly dig the grave destined for the “mojadito” the couple killed, but he is sent to his dark room after dinner where he unwittingly lies on the bloody deceased man. The horror does not stop there. After experiencing the scare of his life, the boy is forced to help bury the corpse and threatened by the sadistic couple to not say a word about the murder or they will accuse him of killing the stranger. While underscoring how traumatic an experience the death of the “mojadito” is for him, the boy makes clear that it is his parents and not the criminal couple who help him get through the nightmarish world and remain a good child: “Tenía mucho miedo pero como quiera lo eché al pozo. ...Y todo lo que quería yo era que se acabara la escuela para que vinieran por mí. Las dos semanas que faltaban se me pasaron muy despacio. Yo creía que se me iba a pasar el susto o que me podía olvidar, pero nada” (Rivera, 1991, p. 66). When his parents come for him, they observe that he is very thin and looked “como que estaba enfermo de susto” (Rivera, 1991, p. 67), but they do not inquire about his sickly appearance, and the boy stays silent about his experiences. The shame, guilt, and trauma are too great and remain undisclosed.

Unlike in the traditional coming-of-age story, the knowledge the boy gains from his experience with the couple does not entail regeneration. On the contrary, it is disheartened knowledge; it is confirming that not all people are good, that there are Chicanos in his community who are wicked and add to the suffering of others. Though the boy can learn from these traumatizing individuals, they are not adults to be emulated.

As mentioned earlier, it is common for the mentor or helper to give the hero a protective item for the journey. Since the boy’s parents perceive and contract don Hilario and doña Bonificia as caretakers, the ring the couple gives the boy some months later can be seen as both an amulet and a weapon. However, having belonged to the murdered man, the ring has the potential to retraumatize the boy rather than to protect him from further psychological damage. The couple use the ring in a power play so they can continue with their illicit ways. As perpetrators of a traumatic event who threaten the boy not to say a word about the murder, they engage “[s]ecrecy and silence [as their] first line of defense” (Herman, 1997, p. 8). Thus, much like on the day his parents picked him up at the murderous couple’s house when he was unwilling or unable to vocalize his horrific experiences, instead agreeing with his parents that the couple were so good, the boy hides his trauma and postpones his healing process. Whether still experiencing guilt and shame or simply fearing for his own life, the boy has not undone himself of his trauma.

Death from natural causes is the final form of death to consider. The boy speaks of the aunt and uncle who died of tuberculosis and family members who fall seriously ill. Told about in the title story “... y no se lo tragó la tierra” these deaths and illnesses cause him to hate and become angry for multiple reasons. At first, it is because the deaths cause his mother to cry. Then the anger intensifies both when he hears his father moan as he lies in pain from sunstroke and when the prayers, candles, and scapularies used to heal him are of no avail. Trauma expert R. Janoff-Bulman (2004) observes, “In the face of their traumatic experience, survivors are not simply interested in understanding why it happened, but why it happened to them in particular” (p. 33). This is precisely what the boy experiences; he questions why bad things happen to good people like him and his family: “Ya me canso de pensar. ¿Por qué? ¿Por qué usted? ¿Por qué papá? ¿Por qué mi tío? ¿Por qué mi tía? ¿Por qué sus niños? ¿Dígame usted por que? ¿Por qué nosotros nomás enterrados en la tierra como animales sin ningunas esperanzas de nada?” (Rivera, 1991, p. 75). Vulnerable and having lost his sense of safety and security, the boy “empieza a disputar no solamente los poderes sino hasta la existencia de un Dios” (J. Rodriguez, 1974, p. 21). Shattered is his belief that “who we

are and how we act determine what happens to us: If we are good people (justice) and we engage in appropriately precautionary behaviors (control), bad things will not happen to us” (Janoff-Bulman, 2004, p. 33). When his nine-year old brother also falls prey to heatstroke, rage emerges, and the boy lashes out against God. This uncontrollable anger is to be expected since “when trauma strikes... rage is one of the most common responses to this onslaught” (Lemos, 2015, p. 106). Anger and rage are connected to perceived threats to one’s life and person. Rivera understands that the “‘survival mode’ activates ‘anger schemas’ that control one’s response to threatening situations” (Lemos, 2015, p. 106). The boy recognizes that migrant work can and does unjustly threaten the lives of his loved ones and his own.

Coming at the center of the novel, “...y no se lo tragó la tierra” is a critical story in the hero’s journey; it represents “the deepest point of descent where the hero in a monomyth normally achieves an apotheosis” (Lattin, 1982, p. 224) or that “moment in his life when he achieve[s] illumination” (Campbell, 1949, p. 259). If in “La noche estaba plateada” the boy goes looking for and “cuestiona el poder misterioso del demonio” (J. Rodriguez, 1974, p. 19) and concludes that there is no devil to fear, then in “...y no se lo tragó la tierra” the boy loses fear of cursing God. Provoked by untimely deaths and life-threatening illness that affect him and his loved ones, the boy blasphemes in a defiant act that transforms him. His apotheosis consists of knowing he does not need to fear his parents’ God, a realization that brings him peace: “Tenía una paz que nunca había sentido antes. Le parecía que se había separado de todo. Ya no le preocupaba ni su papá ni su hermano. Todo lo que esperaba era el nuevo día, la frescura de la mañana” (Rivera, 1991, p. 77). The boy relaxes and recharges before going on to complete his journey, recalling the lost year until he returns to the present.

Return

The final stage of the hero’s journey is his return to the everyday world. The boy comes out from the darkness underneath the house, where he has been recalling the past year, and moves into the light, symbolizing a rebirth. When the woman who owns the house sees him, she immediately identifies him as a child with mental health issues: “Primero la mama, y ahora éste. Se estará volviendo loco. Yo creo que se le está yendo la mente. Está perdiendo los años” (Rivera, 1991, p. 117). The boy, however, disagrees. He smiles and is thrilled that he has been able to “[e]ncontrar y reencontrar y juntar” (Rivera, 1991, p. 117). Through recounting a narrative of trauma, the boy, who is no longer confused and pained, “learns the way, identifies resources, and gains knowledge that will steer him true and inform his return” (Bray, 2018, p. 538). When he reaches his home, perches himself in a tree, and waves his arm back and forth “para que [el alguien imaginado] viera que él sabía que estaba allí” (Rivera, 1991, p. 220), he signals that he is resilient and ready to engage with the world around him with newfound knowledge. He has developed a sense of self-efficacy and a strong ethnic identity that will serve him well. In short, like other heroes on the journey to growth, understanding, and maturity, the boy has passed a series of tests to come of age and experienced a number of deaths before he emerges having reached a new level of consciousness, a new way of seeing and being in the world. Or, as Janoff-Bulman (2004) writes of victims of trauma, “powerful negative consequences of trauma—pain and suffering, the recognition of increased vulnerability, and the related acknowledgment of meaningless and arbitrary loss—serve as catalysts for posttraumatic growth” (34). In sum, the boy’s painful experiences allow him to grow as an individual while recognizing that he is part of a Chicano community.

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