

The SOUL *of a* POET



BY DEBRA LEVY MARTINELLI

Tomás Rivera, the brilliant writer, poet and philosopher, who would become the first Mexican-American chancellor in the University of California system, reportedly included the job of “migrant worker” on his resume. That he did so speaks to the very essence of who the University of Oklahoma alumnus was. His humble beginnings as the son of migrant farm workers informed every aspect of his short but extraordinary life.

*OU alumnus
Tomás Rivera made
the leap from migrant
worker to university
president, elevating
Chicano literature
along the way.*

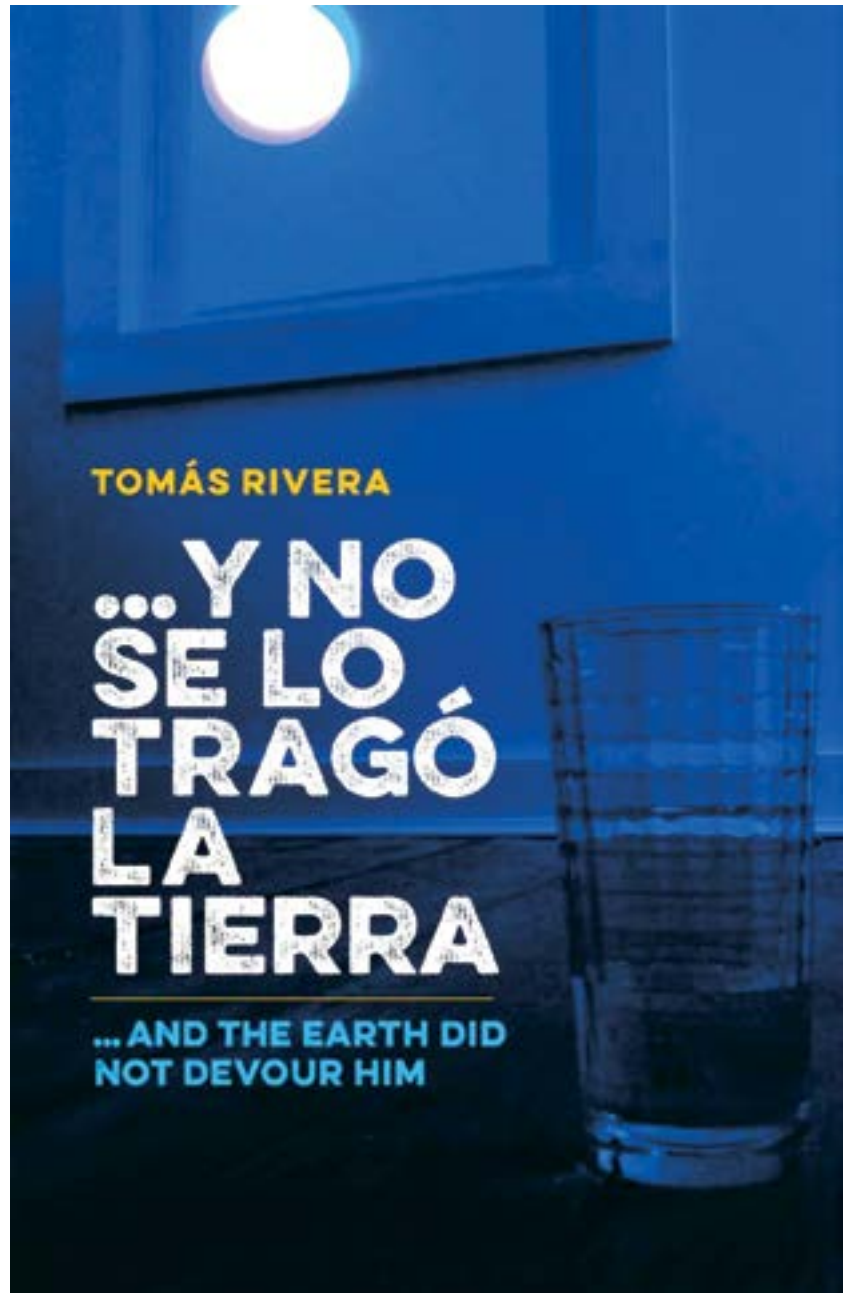
Born in 1935 in Crystal City, Texas, Rivera attended public school and in the summers he, too, worked in the fields. But he was to have a very different life from those with whom he toiled.

After graduating from high school in 1954, Rivera earned a bachelor's degree in English with minors in Spanish, history and education, and a master's degree in educational administration from what is now Texas State University. He taught in public schools and at Southwest Texas Junior College before moving with his wife and family to Norman in 1966 to pursue a doctorate at OU. He received his Ph.D. in romance languages and literature in 1969.

"Like a lot of first-generation Mexican Americans, Rivera felt saved by education," says Robert con Davis-Undiano, OU Presidential Professor of English, Neustadt Professor, director of the Latinx Program, who devoted a chapter to Rivera in his award-winning 2017 book, *Mestizos Come Home!: Making and Claiming Mexican American Identity*. "Being a part of the migrant stream, he was struck by the heroic, dignified people around him who were enacting the character of the Americas – that notion of people traveling and searching for some special truth.

"He saw a unique opportunity to tell that story anew, this time from the perspective of a mix of Native culture and European culture that, like Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and others before him, illustrated the opportunity in America for social justice. Rivera was quintessentially American."

Rivera's career took him from OU to Sam Houston State University, where he was an associate professor until 1971, when he joined the faculty of the University of Texas at San



Tomás Rivera's most famous work is the novel, *Y No Se Lo Trago La Tierra* or *And the Earth Did Not Devour Him*, which won the Premio Quinto Sol prize for literature in 1970. The novel centers around a community of South Texan Mexican-American migrant farm workers during the late 1940s and early 1950s

Antonio as a professor of Spanish and later served as associate dean and vice president. He became the executive vice president of the University of Texas at El Paso in 1978. The following year, he became chancellor of the University of California, Riverside – the first Mexican-American chancellor in the University of California system – a position he held until his death in 1984 at age 48.

As he rose to the top in academia, Rivera continued to write novels, poetry, short fiction and essays. By the early 1970s, he and such other Chicano writers as Rudolfo Anaya, Miguel Méndez and Rolando Hinojosa had opened the doors to these

new voices and forms of expression previously unseen in American literature.

In his 1971 novella *y no se lo tragó la tierra* (and the earth did not devour him), Rivera recounted the migrant worker experience through the eyes of a young Mexican-American boy who must shape his identity in an environment of exploitation, discrimination and abject poverty. The book won the first award for Chicano literature, the Premio Quinto Sol, and was adapted into the 1994

film *And the Earth Did Not Swallow Him*. The compilation of his writing, *Tomás Rivera: The Complete Works*, was published in 1995, 11 years after his death.

By all accounts, Rivera was captivated by OU and returned often. In 1974, as part of a Chicano Literature Symposium, he presented “Chicano Literature: Fiesta of the Living,” which was published in the Summer 1975 issue of *Books Abroad*, which was renamed *World Literature Today* in 1977.

He noted at the time that he had lived the roots of Chicano literature all his life, but it was a life that for the most part had known no literature to represent it.

“For me the literary experience is one of total communion, an awesome awareness of the ‘other,’ of one’s potential self,” he explains. “I have come to recognize my ‘other’ in Chicano literature, but by this I do not mean to say that I find or reflect or faithfully render the Chicano experience. As a matter of fact, I would hope that what I write goes further. To claim that my own writing is representative of the Chicano experience is not my intention. Rather, I should like to focus on Chicano writing as a ritual of immortality, of awe in the face of the ‘other’ – a ritual of the living, in a sense, a fiesta of the living.”

Rivera spoke of his transformative and enduring connection to OU when he again returned to the university in 1980, this time as the honoree at OU’s Celebrating Diversity in Graduate Education symposium. “[My wife] Concha and I raised our children among the graduate student housing [at OU], around all these buildings, and walked mile after mile through these halls,” he said. “Days at a time we had no money, no credit, but we had many friends – students and professors. We imbued ourselves with a spirit here that was exhilarating. There was competition but there was fairness; there was frustra-



The Rivera family moved to Norman in 1966 so Tomás could begin his doctoral program at the University of Oklahoma. With their father are, from left, Irasema, Javier and Ileana.

tion but there was the joy of discovery; there was pressure but there was the future; above everything we had hope and a belief that everything we were doing was for the betterment of ourselves, our children and the children of their children somewhere in the future.”

Although Davis-Undiano never met Rivera, he says he always felt a little haunted by him and loved the idea that he was at OU. “OU was the city on the hill for him in

terms of education,” he relates. “But OU has never properly celebrated him.”

That is changing. Last year, *World Literature Today* and OU’s Department of Modern Languages, Literatures and Linguistics honored Rivera with “Tomás Rivera: Celebrating 50 Years of Achievement in Latinx Scholarship and Higher Education.” The daylong event featured Latinx student actors in OU’s Helmerich School of Drama reading excerpts from *y no se lo tragó la tierra*.

Drama junior Andie Fuentes had not heard of Rivera before taking part in the reading, yet her early life could have been a chapter in Rivera’s novel. Fuentes was born in El Paso, Texas, moved to Mexico at age 2 and lived there for 10 years before the family relocated to San Antonio, Texas, to escape violence and seek better opportunities for her and her sister.

“The section we read is called, “When We Arrive,” says Fuentes. “It’s told in the point of view of people who are trying to cross the border and about how different everyone’s journey is.”

Some of the characters are elderly, she explains, and want to be with their families who live in the United States. Other characters are really young and want to start their new life with better opportunities.

“Everyone’s story is unique. So, it was really cool to have the Latinx students onstage telling the story of their character, whether it was a mom talking about how she is going to put her son in a good American school or a couple who is going to start a business. Rivera is still relevant today.

“In the current political climate, Latinx are portrayed in the media negatively, families are being separated and we are not given the same opportunities. All of these things are in Rivera’s writings. We don’t have any Latinx authors in the dra-

ma curriculum right now, but I think that will change. After the Rivera reading, people realized we are here. There's a lot of us in the school. It's hard to ignore us now.

Latinx stories need to be told, Fuentes says, especially in places like Oklahoma, which “has a long way to go when it comes to understanding the importance of representation and how to be better allies to the people of color. It's just really nice to have people hear your story.”

The day after the reading, the Tomás Rivera Educational Empowerment (TREE) Conference, hosted by multicultural fraternity Omega Delta Phi, was held at OU for the 14th consecutive year. The conference honors Rivera's lifelong commitment to education by helping to prepare and empower Latinx students for success in a variety of academic disciplines including STEM and health care fields. Each year, the fraternity raises money to fund scholarships for those students. In 2019, says TREE Conference chairman Christopher Coronado, a recording-breaking \$30,000 in scholarships were awarded, bringing the 14-year total to approximately \$300,000.

“Dr. Rivera was a trailblazer and an example for many,” Coronado asserts. “His grit and determination to succeed, despite the obstacles, show us that through hard work and perseverance, one can achieve their dreams. His achievements and contributions to both society and the Latinx community show that anything is possible, despite your background or status. He was a light for many Latinx students, especially for students at the University of Oklahoma and for the brothers of Omega Delta Phi Fraternity. Through the TREE Conference, we hope to share his legacy, empower others to start their own legacies, and continue to show future generations, ‘Si se puede! (Yes we can!)’”

One cannot help but wonder what direction Rivera's career



The Rivera family at their home in Riverside, Calif. Courtesy of Special Collections & Archives, University of California Riverside, © 1999 by the Regents of the University of California

would have taken if he hadn't died so young. “He was one of the greatest writers of the Chicano Renaissance but he also was a gifted teacher and administrator,” says Davis-Undiano, who is writing a play about Rivera. “I think he would have been very rational and thought, ‘In the time I've got, where can I do the most good?’ Education was so important to him, particularly for Mexican Americans. But he wasn't writing as much as he wanted to. I think he fought with himself, but that he would have turned back to writing.”

While his path will remain a mystery, Rivera is widely remembered for his brilliance and dedication as an agent of change in both education and literature. And while OU is just beginning to commemorate his remarkable contributions to Chicano life, literature and history, other universities have variously honored him for decades.

The University of California, Riverside named its main library the Tomás Rivera Library. The library contains



Rivera returned to OU in October 1974 to take part in a major Chicano Literature Symposium. Left to right: Arturo Madrid, Rolando Hinojosa, Rudy Treviño, Tomás Rivera, Frank Pino Jr., Luis Dávila, and Charles M. Tatum. Courtesy of Special Collections & Archives, University of California Riverside, © 1999 by the Regents of the University of California

the Tomás Rivera Archive, which comprises more than 85,000 items. UC Riverside also named the plaza facing its administration building for Rivera. At the University of Southern California Sol Price School of Public Policy, the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute addresses the challenges and opportunities of demographic diversity in the 21st century, focusing on Latinos and the criminal justice system, civic engagement and capacity building among immigrant-serving organizations, and demographic change in major metropolitan regions of the United States. Texas State University's College of Education's Tomás Rivera Mexican

American Children's Book Award recognizes authors and illustrators who create literature that depicts the Mexican American experience. Winners have included Rivera's close friend Rudolfo Anaya.

The list goes on. The University of Texas Austin established the Tomás Rivera Regents Professorship of Spanish Language and Literature. The tutoring center at the University of Texas at San Antonio tutoring center is named the Tomás Rivera Center for Student Success. Public schools in both California and Texas carry Rivera's name: Tomás Rivera Elementary School in Riverside; Tomás Rivera Middle School in Val Verde, California; Rivera Elementary School in Denton, Texas and, Dr [sic] Tomás Rivera Elementary School in his hometown of Crystal City, Texas.

"He was so brilliant across the board and was a mover and shaker on the national stage," Davis-Undiano declares. "I can see a Tomás Rivera renaissance about to happen."

Perhaps now, a half century after Rivera earned his doctorate from the university that nurtured him in a community that embraced him, OU can be the catalyst.

Debra Levy Martinelli is a freelance writer living in Norman.

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