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Manuel F. Medrano

*The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley*

Teresa Cadena

*The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley*

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## ROLANDO HINOJOSA—FROM BELKEN COUNTY AND BEYOND

BY MANUEL F. MEDRANO AND TERESA CADENA<sup>1</sup>

Those who write are best evaluated by those who write.

Oscar Casares, University of Texas professor and writer, recalls the following about his former colleague, “There is no doubt that Rolando Hinojosa captured a sense of place in his Klail City Death Trip Series, but what I’ve always particularly admired about his work is the extent he seems to move beyond the need for his material to feel universal. While Hinojosa’s writing clearly has broad appeal, it is also so incredibly specific and insular in nature that it can be no other place than the distinct and utterly genuine narrative world he has created for us, his readers.”<sup>2</sup> That world is the Rio Grande Valley. Américo Paredes, folklorist, anthropologist and friend said about Hinojosa, “the way that he has created a fictional community, the way he uses the language . . . He stands out head and shoulders above other Mexico-Tejano writers.”<sup>3</sup> Students have sought him out as a teacher and respected him as a person.

Rolando Hinojosa was born in Mercedes, Texas on January 21, 1929. His father, Manuel Guzman Hinojosa, was Tejano and his mother, Carrie Effie Smith, was Anglo.

Both were readers. They read to each other, to his brothers and sisters, and to him, stimulating and nurturing an interest in reading. This led to Hinojosa’s development as a writer. He says that to be a writer, you must be a lifelong reader. “There’s just so much imagination can take you.”<sup>4</sup> During the summers, he lived in Mexico with relatives who spoke only Spanish. Thus, he incorporated a valuable bilingual component in his writing and described it as “a nice symbiotic relationship.”<sup>5</sup>

During these years Hinojosa became an avid reader. He read English-language literature by Edgar Allen Poe and James Thurber and Spanish-language articles by Pepe Diaz and Americo Paredes that appeared in *La Prensa*, a San Antonio newspaper.<sup>6</sup> Don Rolando referred to his reading as “a lifetime of study and interest.”<sup>7</sup>

World War II affected Hinojosa’s life like it did millions of other Americans. Shortages and rationing became commonplace. The war also affected his writing because for six years war news was covered daily in newspaper articles and *Paramount News*.<sup>8</sup>

Hinojosa graduated from Mercedes High School and served in the army in Puerto Rico. There, he was a newspaper reporter and an Armed Forces radio announcer nicknamed Rocky the Disc Jockey. After his discharge, the veteran enrolled at the University of Texas at Austin. Both his parents knew the importance of higher education. His older brothers and sisters all had attended college. Hinojosa never had any doubts about enrolling in college, only about where to attend.<sup>9</sup>

For college expenses, Hinojosa used his G.I. Bill benefits, worked at the campus library as a tutor, and as a part-time translator. Don Rolando fondly remembers other Mexican Americans from the Valley who were his friends and roommates. He recalled that being from the Valley was beneficial at the University of Texas. The few Latino students from there seemed to form a collective identity. Hinojosa explained, “if you come from the Valley, you know who you are and you know what you are.”<sup>10</sup>

His memories about his undergraduate years are generally pleasant ones, and he still has friends that he met when he attended the University of Texas.<sup>11</sup> He remembers it as a “a busy, happy time.”<sup>12</sup>

After graduation, Hinojosa worked briefly at a chemical plant in Brownsville. When it closed, he taught high school English from 1959 through 1961. Then, he worked for eighteen months for the Social Security Administration earning enough money to attend and complete graduate school at New Mexico Highlands. There, he earned a master’s degree in English and in 1969 received a Ph.D. in literature at the University of Illinois. He recalled that era as “very exciting time . . . things just conjugated in the sixties.”<sup>13</sup> Concurrent was the Chicano Movement, that allowed Hinojosa to interact with Mexican American educators and writers from throughout the country.

Hinojosa then taught as an assistant professor at Trinity University in San Antonio until 1970. It was then that his career as a writer began. A

friend and former colleague from Trinity, Danny Rodriguez, introduced Hinojosa to the man who became his closest professional associate and friend, writer Tomas Rivera.<sup>16</sup> Rivera, an established writer, encouraged Hinojosa, "who had not published a line"<sup>17</sup> to send him some "stuff."<sup>18</sup> Hinojosa soon began to publish and receive national and international recognition. Their friendship as writers was born then and they lectured together at many universities over the next fifteen years.<sup>19</sup> By doing so, they brought attention to Chicanos and enhanced their opportunities for a higher education.

Rivera died in 1984, and Hinojosa received condolences from colleagues and friends throughout the country. It was a difficult loss for don Rolando who recalls, "I'd lost the dearest friend I ever had."<sup>20</sup> Rivera's death left Hinojosa to lead the growing number of Chicano/a writers. In 1969, as the Movimiento was intensifying, Hinojosa committed himself "to contribute." as a writer.<sup>21</sup> In his fictional Belken County, the Mexican American people are the protagonists, and Hinojosa captures their sense of place in the Rio Grande Valley. In "Es el agua," he describes how that sense empowers its people with a connection to community, regardless of where they go or the prejudice and racism they may endure. Here, Hinojosa asserts that although the children of migrant farmworkers may never have been to the Valley, they still claim the Valley as home because it is where their parents are from. It captures the geographic, historic, and cultural markers that gives them a certainty of identity. In "Con el pie en el Estribo," Estevan Echavarria, an elderly Mexican American man, laments the losses and recounts the ironies brought to "el Valle" by Anglo American influence and the passing of time. It is an echo of many of his age who see the Valley as a generational kinship of people who have lived in the same place for many decades.

In his fictional recreation of the Valley, people recognize themselves and each other and the many lives they have lived. In presenting the connections between generations, Hinojosa affirms the bonds that *los del valle* share the same history, a history of change that has given the Valley its unique Mexican American character. He remembers that some live in Spanish all their lives, and

... there are families from around Klail, Flora, and Bascom who have known each other some six-seven-eight generations, and many are blood related as well."-- In *Es el agua*, Hinojosa asserts that although the

children of migrant farmworkers may have never been to the Valley at all, they still claim the Valley as home because that is where their parents are from.<sup>23</sup> It captures the markers—geographical, historical, and cultural—that give them that certainty.

Hinojosa reminds his readers that family has helped the people of the Valley survive. Families confronted economic hardship during, for instance, the long trips north, not unlike those made by the family of Don Albino Cordero.<sup>24</sup> And, in the lives of the children of many of these families, such journeys were common realities:

In Monon, Indiana, on the left-hand side of Route 421 going north, we always stopped there to gas up on the way to Benton Harbor during cherry picking season. Once, while the woman waited on us, she told my dad that I was getting to be a little man now. Back in the truck once again, Dad turned to me and said, "This makes the sixth time you've made the trip to Michigan, son."<sup>25</sup>

"It's this life; that's all. It's hard," as Tere Malacara says while Hinojosa reminds his readers that the Valley has been populated by "*gente con la cultura en las unas*" (people with their culture in their fingernails), gente like Beto Castañeda, who has no equal "in packing the type of vegetable labeled as thick and weighty: beets, broccoli, spinach, cabbage, cucumber, and lettuce."<sup>26</sup>

Hinojosa states that it is the people who have prevailed in the Valley. It is the ability to recognize the irony of people in Bascom walking "softly" and telling others to behave themselves "when the bald truth is that our fellow Texans (Anglos) across the tracks could hardly care about what we think, say, or do." It is the irony of Miss Moy's overt prejudice against the children at First Ward School and the fact that "somehow she managed to teach me to read."<sup>27</sup> For *los del valle*, it is being able to see the irony in the increased Border Patrol and stringent immigration laws against the children, grandchildren, and even spouses of the *nacionales* who not only think "like the Texan Mexicans more often than not, but . . . are also blood-related as they have been for one hundred years before the Americans had that war between themselves in the 1860s."<sup>28</sup>

Teresa Cadena, a former professor at the University of Texas at Brownsville, used Hinojosa's literature to remind her students of their past and present. She says,

Irony is a staple in the Valley, your works remind us. But, also noted, a sense of irony has allowed Mexican Americans to endure with dignity. Yes, we recognize that we have the discrimination of the Miss Moys and the abusive greed of the Adrian Peraltas, but we also have the dignity and services of Don Manuel Guzman and the history and friendship of Don Esteban Echavaria at the *Aquí me quedo bar*. Moreover, as you note, we must look at the Valley honestly. *La vida es un ir y venir*. (Life is a departure and arrival) It is changing, but change is the only constant. In *Con el pie en el estribo*, Don Esteban laments, “*Desaparece el valle, gente*,” and he cannot go home again because the Valley has changed.<sup>29</sup>

Throughout his academic career, he was acknowledged for both teaching and writing. In 1985, Hinojosa was named the Ellen Clayton Garwood Professor at the University of Texas at Austin. In 1997, the Center for Mexican Studies hosted the Rolando Hinojosa Symposium where scholars from throughout the country spoke about the man who meant so much to Chicano literature and to them. In 2006, he became a member of the Texas Literary Hall of Fame. That same year the University of Illinois inaugurated the Rolando Hinojosa-Smith lecture series. In 2014, Hinojosa received the Ivan Sandrof Lifetime Achievement Award given by the National Book Critics Circle.<sup>30</sup>

His writings have been critically acclaimed. In 1972, *Estampas del Valle* was recognized with the Quinto Sol Award. Four years later, Hinojosa received the *las Americas* award for *Klail City y sus alrededores*, the second installment of what he refers to as the Klail Death Trip Series. The novel seems to transcend culture and chronology. In 1981, Don Rolando's *Mi Querido Rafa* earned the Southwest Studies on Latin America award.<sup>31</sup>

Rolando Hinojosa retired from teaching in 2015. He said many times, “I have the best job in the world. I teach where I want to be teaching and I teach what I like to teach.” During his professional career, he lectured in Europe, Cuba and throughout the United States—wherever the request was. Hinojosa navigated his teaching and writing seamlessly. Throughout his life, the man from Belken has been guided by a sense of place and purpose.

I have known don Rolando for nearly thirty years and my respect and admiration for him has never waned. I regard him as *un hombre fino*,

a fine man. Don Rolando once joined me, Jose Angel Gutierrez, Jose Limon, and Emilio Zamora in testifying before the Texas State Board of Education to include more Latinos and Latinas in history books. Proponents and opponents of minority inclusion were in attendance. The air seemed to leave the room when Rolando approached the podium. He was as knowledgeable, eloquent, and convincing as he always was at a hearing with high stakes and consequences.

One of my fondest memories of Rolando occurred at a restaurant in Austin. I had invited him to dine with my students before we attended a conference at the University of Texas. Rolando was early, waiting for us at the restaurant entrance. The students already knew who he was. At the door he smiled, introduced himself, looked each one in the eye, and shook their hands. Once we were seated, Rolando ordered his usual Shiner Bock beer, an onion bloom and baked potato on steroids, and a twenty-two-ounce Porterhouse steak. When the students left and after his second beer, he began to tell stories about people at the bar he had never met, and they were believable. I had never seen this man of letters so relaxed and happy, and his laughter was proof of it.

Since our retirements, we rarely see each other. Because of age and pandemics, he seldom travels to the Valley, and I seldom go to Austin. Nevertheless, I will always remember him as a friend and a man of character and integrity who treats others with dignity. Some say that the mark of a great man is not solely in what he achieves, but how he treats others once he achieves it. Rolando Hinojosa has done both.

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1. MANUEL F. MEDRANO is Emeritus Professor of History at UTRGV. He is producer/director of the Los del Valle oral history documentaries and author/coauthor of six books and over twenty-five articles and essays about people, history, and culture in the Rio Grande Valley. DR. CADENA TERESA was born in the RGV and received her doctorate at Texas A & I University. She taught English at Texas Southmost College and the University of Texas at Brownsville for three decades and is now retired.

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4. Rolando Hinojosa, Interview with author, Brownsville, Texas, March 23, 1996.

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