



Why Pioneering Journalist Maria Hinojosa Put Herself in the Story

She worked for decades to make sure her voice and ideas were valued as much as those of non-Latinos in the newsroom. Then she founded her own media company to make sure. Now she has written a memoir, *Once I Was You*, about all of it. Maria, a veteran journalist used to asking the tough questions, opens up to Alicia about her groundbreaking career, the strain it put on her marriage and family, and the friends and mentors who carried her through.

Alicia Menendez:

Whether you grew up listening to Maria Hinojosa on NPR, or watching her on CNN or PBS, the chances are that you knew her, because, well, there weren't a lot of people doing what she was doing, telling stories about our communities. Maria spent her life telling the stories of others and now she's telling her own in a new book, *Once I Was You: A Memoir of Love and Hate in a Torn America*.

Maria, I loved the book. Congratulations.

Maria Hinojosa: Thank you, Alicia!

Menendez: It was so good. I told you. I was texting with you. I devoured it. And I want to jump in the middle. You tell a story about writing a television script for Walter Cronkite. What was the assignment?

Hinojosa: It's a juicy story.

Menendez: It's a good story.

Hinojosa: So, I love it, because nobody's asked me about this one yet. Short story is that I am the first Latina hired at NPR, and then very quickly I'm like, "Uh, this feels really weird." And I go and work for Latino Public Radio in Spanish in San Diego, and I experience deep machismo there, and so I end up working kind of miraculously back in New York at CBS News in the radio department. And I was doing fill-in work over the summer, and then I was asked to stay on through the end of December to produce a segment from Walter Cronkite. They asked me to write his end of the year commentary. And so, I was terribly nervous. As a Latina in journalism, in the mainstream, and being the first, I was terrified most of the time.

I write this piece and I go in and I show it to my boss, Norman. And Norman liked me. Norman hired me. But he saw this piece and he said, "Walter Cronkite is not gonna read this." And I was like, "Why not?" He was like, "Because it sounds like you wrote it." And I can't remember if he said, "And you're a little bit of an angry Latina." I don't think we talked in that way, but it was almost like because he didn't have to say it. He was like, "Because it sounds like you wrote it." And I said, "Well, let's take it down to the fishbowl and have one of the evening news writers read it and see what they think." Something just said, "Stand up for yourself. You worked really hard. You actually worked on this. You talked to other

journalists. This shit is good. And you're angry in this piece because every American should be angry at what is happening in the United States of America in the year 1987."

And so, I said, "Let's go down to the fishbowl, the people who edit the evening news with Dan Rather." We walk up to one of the writers who did not know me and he's like, "Yeah, this is good. Yeah. He'll read it. Yeah. Change this one word." And my boss had to eat his words, eat crow as it were, and I was like, "Damn." And so, the point of the story is that as journalists of color, as journalists of conscience, when we are the first or one of the few in many newsrooms, we have to battle for ourselves. The way we see the world as journalists is as valid as Walter Cronkite's way of seeing the world, or Katie Couric, or Dan Rather. We're journalists just like them.

Menendez: There are so many pivot points on your journey. From intern to staff, producer to on air, from Spanish to English. Is there one moment that stands out to you as the moment where your career took a turn and where you really started to set out on your journey as a journalist?

Hinojosa: Well, look. To decide basically that you're going to walk away from a steady gig because you want to become a correspondent, you want to try to become on air, that was a pretty risky move and I feel like I did that in one of those moments where I was like, "You just have to do this. Like there are no Latinas. There are no Latina voices out there. And you have done radio. You have a voice. You know how to use it." No, no, so that was a turning point.

I think when CNN recruited me that was another moment. It was very scary, because I had never done television, much less live television. But to answer your question, I feel like it really came to fruition once I moved into doing NOW on PBS, which was long-form investigative. It was close to 60 Minutes in terms of its style and production and deep investigative. And that led me to then doing documentaries, and led to the Frontline, which happened at the same time that I created my own company, Futuro Media. And I just want to shout out the book, News For All the People, which was written by Juan Gonzalez and Joe Torres. Once I read that book, I was like, "Oh, okay. All of this suffering, of being a journalist, a Latina, woman of color, immigrant, all of this is... There is a reason why, and it is because you have a responsibility to be part of this long arc of responsible journalism in the United States."

Menendez: You write, "I had heard rumblings at NPR. Some folks said I got too close to stories. "I know all about you and your agenda," one of my editors, a nice, middle-aged white guy said to me. "Agenda," I said. "What are you talking about?" "Oh, Maria. Come on. You and your Latino agenda." How did you respond in that moment?

Hinojosa: I said, "So, does that mean that you've got a white guy's agenda? And he was like, "No, it's not the same thing." And I was like, "It is the same thing." I'm able to tell you those moments because they were few and far between when I was just like *es que yo estoy hasta aquí*. You know, like the saying in Mexico. *Estoy hasta el plato, se me ha colmado el plato, no aguanto más*. When I would just suddenly rip something out and just be like that.

But a lot of the times, as you know, you're mostly just dodging, dodging, you're doing a weave, you're doing another weave, and then sometimes you're just like *, es que no puedo más*. I'm gonna answer back. I hope that a lot of journalists read this book, young journalists, because you do have to be incredibly strong willed, and I would hope that they

understand that this is not a job. It is in fact a mission that we're lucky enough to love, but we need them.

Menendez: Right. And part of that mission is a love of storytelling, and that type of correspondent work requires travel, requires you to be able to get on planes, jump in a car, go places, but you write in *Once I Was You* about how challenging that is as you're building a family. And so, that hit me very hard, because it is the moment I am in. I am in the diapers and breast milk portion of the program. I appreciate your honesty about how hard it was on your family and how hard it was on your marriage.

Hinojosa: I don't want people to think like, "Oh my God, look! She "has it all."" Yeah, you can lose it all real fast, too. And part of I think what I tried to... What really came clear to me in the book, actually in the writing of the book, was, "Damn, you have been so busy fighting the fight," right? To be visible, to be taken seriously, to create a space, to have a job, "that you became hardened even at home." And that can't happen. It's your home that has to be the refuge, the place that loves you. But if you have to be like *bien cabrona*, all the time, to survive in the mainstream media, and really in many ways you have to be, then it's sometimes hard to turn that off.

Part of what happens in the book is just the kind of reckoning with myself and what I owe to my family, and what I've basically put them through. They're older now, and so we talk about it, and well, I'm doing therapy with my daughter, because she asked for it. And this is a definite conversation, like I don't need Maria Hinojosa at home. I need my mom. And I gotta turn it off, and I've gotta be present, and that is... It is hard.

Menendez: Your husband, German, staged an intervention at one point. Told you you were addicted to being on TV.

Hinojosa: Yes. He stages a lot of interventions. No, German basically was just like, "Look, if you stay at CNN, I'm out. I gotta go." So, I think as Latinas, oftentimes we're really in a battle with traditional Latina role versus independent American woman. We're both. How do we manage that? And so, I think German in many ways had to basically suffer through me just being like, "Well, I'm not available for you, because I'm doing this. I'm doing my job." And he's such an amazing human being that he was like, "Cool, cool. I'm gonna do my work. I'm here whenever." But at some point he was like, "No, wait a second." At that point at CNN he was very concerned that not only were they robbing time, but they were gonna rob my integrity.

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Menendez: What is amazing to me is that in retrospect, it feels so clear that you would eventually start your own media company, and yet it was not clear to you. What was your initial vision for Futuro Media?

Hinojosa: Oh my God. To make it to three years. No, I'm not kidding you. I was like, "Jesus, if we can just make it to three years. Oh my God, if we can just make it to three years. " Because the three-year hump for a nonprofit is really like the make or break. Thankfully, I immediately understood I have to bring people on with me, and I was able to get funding, and then I said... I think the most important thing was to secure Latino USA, which we did. But it was floundering.

Menendez: Well, you went to go ask if you could acquire it and they were like, "Well, we're just thinking about letting it go altogether."

Hinojosa: Yeah, we were there having a contract renewal conversation with NPR at the time. And they were like, "It's okay if Latino USA disappears. We like your brand." And I was like, "What?" And I was like, "Yeah. No, no, no. We cannot. No, you can't lose this brand right now, when Latinos in 2010 just came out 43% growth in the census. Why would you kill a Latino-Latina brand?"

Menendez: Why establish Futuro Media as a nonprofit?

Hinojosa: I've always had this deep sense that journalism should not be a commercial entity. Back when I was consuming journalism, mostly by watching it on television as a little kid, CBS News, NBC News, ABC News, those were the networks. Their news departments were not tied to ratings or to earnings, so that kind of set the stage for how I understood the responsibility of journalism, and then consuming public media, both in the United States and in Mexico, for me the core of journalism is that it is a public responsibility, and it should be independent. We should be giving this gift of the work that we do because you need it.

Menendez: You are the youngest of four, a baby born in Mexico, raised south side of Chicago. One of the ways in which *Once I Was You* is adding to the narrative, the... What's the word I'm looking for? The canon of immigration, is that it's a very middle class story. And so, I wonder when you look at Central American migrants who are coming today, what you see as the commonality between your experience and their experience, and how you reconcile the privilege differential that exists between your story and theirs?

Hinojosa: I did understand privilege, like I understood poverty very clearly from a child, because I was going to Mexico every year by car, and so I would see it all around me, and I was going to Pilsen, 18th Street in Chicago at that time, and poverty in the Mexican barrio in Chicago was for reals. And I lived in the south side of Chicago, so poverty was real, and I understood that I was not poor, that I had privilege. Ya sabes, Mexican father. We also lived on a tight. And he was a research professor, so he wasn't making a lot of money, but I understood privilege and that I think is what became the core for me in terms of how I move in the world.

My mom, I saw this with her, that ella siempre hablaba con todo el mundo. She was always talking to everybody, from all different, whether super high class, or del pueblo, working in the gas station. You know, ella hablaba con todo el mundo, and so I understood that I

could do this, too. That there was no difference between me and you. Whether you were an official, I'll speak to you with authority, or whether you're somebody who is coño, limpiando los platos, eh, los zapatos. I try to meet people where they are. That's why I try to approach my journalism with a lot of humility. Never, never assuming anything. If you looked at my phone right now, I have calls coming in from refugees whose stories I'm following and they just call me and they're just giving me, "I'm stuck in Honduras. I'm stuck in Tapachula. I'm stuck in Juarez." You know, "I'm afraid for my child. I'm hungry. I don't know what's gonna happen."

And no, I couldn't be further from their reality. But I am a connection. I'm a connection to a person who is living through a horrible moment in history. I feel my identification with them. Y se que te escucho. You know, as a journalist, I'm not sending money. That changes the entire story if I do that. But I can be here to listen to your story and let you know that I'm trying to tell it.

Menendez: You referenced a great piece of advice from Sandra Cisneros, where she tells you don't write about the things you remember. Write about the things you can't forget. What most stood out to you that you could not forget and had to put into the book?

Hinojosa: Oh. Well, when Sandra said that to me, and by the way, I owe a lot to Sandra Cisneros. Oh, I get all emotional. Yeah, because she actually was the person who read the first chapter. She said, "I'll read something if you send it to me." She said, "But I'm gonna be honest with you, so if you're okay with that." And I was like, "Okay." And I put on my big girl britches and I just said, "Okay, ahí va.." And I clicked send. And she wrote me back and she said, "You got a voice. You got a voice here. Go."

So, when Sandra told me that, I just started doing voice memos of things that I didn't want to remember. It mostly was about my experience in the immigrant detention camps and what I've seen there. People don't realize there are concentration camps right now, today, in the United States of America. They will be written about in the history books. They'll probably do recreations of these places in the American Museum of Natural History. So, yeah. This is a horrible moment in our history.

There are things that I would rather forget. And the sad part about it, Alicia, is that those are from memories of 2011. So, imagine. That's the story that does not get better with time, it gets worse.

Menendez: Among the things you share, you describe losing your virginity as non-consensual. What did it take for you to come to terms with the fact that you had been raped?

Hinojosa: Oof! Decades. Oooh. Decades, decades, decades. I have an amazing therapist. Her name is Cristina. And it was 2015. My dad was dying. My best friend was dying. My cousin was dying. It was just like another one of these hitting rock bottom kind of moments. And we decided we needed to do some deeper kind of therapy. We actually started talking about vulnerabilities from when I was a child, like when was the first moment, but as we went on there was this moment, and that's happening at the same time that the Netflix series 13 Reasons Why was out, and this is when I really was just like, "Oh, whoa. Whoa."

I used to call it... Okay, I'm gonna tell you the truth, like once I had gotten married and I was settled with my husband, I think I used to say, "Well, you know, it was like a baby rape. It was kind of like a mini rape." ¿Qué es eso? Because I didn't know. I didn't know how to own that term, that experience, that... All of it. I didn't even have the vocabulary. And so, it Latina to Latina: Why Pioneering Journalist María Hinojosa Put Herself in the Story

was in the therapy that led in many ways to the writing of this book, and then of course, Kavanaugh. That's really when it just like... exploded. And I really just was able to speak publicly. Because the same thing happened to me. Like the whole question was like, "no, pero, how can it be that this happened to you when you were 15 and you're just now dealing with it and you're still traumatized?"

I actually had convinced myself that the rape happened when I was 17. No. It had actually happened to me when I was 16. But I had convinced myself, because this is what we do. Oh, well, if it happened when I was 17, I was older. That means that it's... That's how old my mom was when she got married, so when she lost her virginity, so that makes it a little bit... No. No, no, no, no, no.

Menendez: Did it affect your relationship to intimacy, to sexuality?

Hinojosa: Totalmente. Like everything.

Menendez: Because it's a very sensual book. You seem to experience pleasure and joy. But in reading all of that, I imagine that there was an undercurrent of this always.

Hinojosa: Because pleasure and joy does not always mean or equate to sex. Right? So, you can live a very Bohemian, sensual experience that doesn't mean that it's reflected in an act of sex, for example. I was a sexual being, but there was always something missing. And a lot of it got mixed up with, "Well, you know, well, you're not free sexually because you're not really an American woman. You're Mexican. You're Latina. That's why you've got all this confusion." Which in part is true, but it was very fraught.

So, it is true, because as I was rereading the book for the audio version, I was like, es que, no you really were very coqueta, and very sensual, and very flirty, and very much a part of that, and dancing until 4:00 in the morning, and wearing tight, short dresses, and all of that. Very much. But it was in my marriage, of course, where I was like, "algo pasa, algo pasa." Who wants to deal with that stuff? It's like it's hard stuff to deal with.

Menendez: And yet you're very open about mental health. This morning you tweeted out that you were going back to therapy. What happened that let you know it was time to go back and get help this time?

Hinojosa: My daughter. We're working through stuff, you know? Because I'm really busy and she really needs me now. I actually said, "Mamita, ¿qué es lo que necesitas de mí?" Apart from doing therapy together. I said, "I'm gonna do therapy with your therapist. I'm there. We're gonna do it together." And then she said, "I want you to go back into therapy." And I said, "Done."

Menendez: Because she feels like you're too busy, you're wrapped up in being busy?

Hinojosa: Because I'm not dealing with the shit. Because I'm not dealing with whatever's happening around me. Because I need to be shaken again. As women who have success, as Latinas who have families, who are... We have to move with a tremendous amount... We have to move in this world with a tremendous amount of determination, and ego, and fuerza, and kind of bulldozing ahead. Sometimes what happens is that we also need our family to pull us back and say, "Yes, but we're the ones who love you and we need you right here."

I feel like this is another one of those moments, right, where the book is gonna get a lot of attention. I hope the book gets attention because I want women, young women, Latinas, to Latina to Latina: Why Pioneering Journalist Maria Hinojosa Put Herself in the Story

read this and find something to hold onto. But the book and its success has nothing to do with what my daughter needs right now. She needs to know that I'm at her side, that I'm with her, that I'm gonna work through the therapy, and that I'm doing the work in the therapy. It makes me a better person. It does. That's what self-love looks like. You do therapy because you're gonna do a little bit of self-love. It makes it easier to love other people when you're dealing with your stuff.

Menendez: I was speaking with someone who had worked with you in the '90s and she really wanted to impress upon me like, "Alicia, you have to understand. She really was the only one. Maria was literally alone in those newsrooms." And I cannot imagine how hard that was.

Hinojosa: The person who I turned to, who was kind of... The two people who I turned to to kind of help guide me through being the only one, one of them is Sandy Rattley. She was the first African American vice president at NPR and three-time Peabody Award-winning producer. So, I would turn to Sandy, because she was the first in many of these places as a Black woman. And she would give me the strength. Then Cecilia Vaisman, may she rest in peace, who, my best friend in the whole world, who was a journalist like me, and so both Sandy and Cecilia were the ones that I turned to.

When I think about it now, it really does sound very dramatic. Like, "Coño, man. You're like the only one. Like, shit." Pero es que, it was my reality. Oh, heck yes, I was hazed. People said things like, "Oh, you were the affirmative action hire." Like, so, that stuff really happened. But again, I come back to the earlier question, and so, you had the privilege to be hired in those places. Y entonces, ¿qué? ¿Qué vas a hacer? You know? You're gonna friggin' use your privilege to do something responsible, and to give back, and to do better. So, that's what kept me going.

Menendez: Maria, thank you so much for taking the time to do this.

Hinojosa: Alicia, a tí, muchas gracias. It's been just a beautiful, beautiful conversation. Thank you.

Menendez: I'll give you a hug in 2021.

Hinojosa: I hope so.

Menendez: Thanks for joining us. *Latina to Latina* is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me, Alicia Menendez. Virginia Lora is our managing producer. Cedric Wilson is our producer. Carolina Rodriguez mixed this episode. Manuela Bedoya is our social media editor. We love hearing from you. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com, and remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, wherever you are listening, and please, please leave a review. It is one of the fastest, easiest ways to help us grow as a community.

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