



## Who Prisca Dorcas Mojica Rodríguez Is Writing For

The Latina Rebels founder and author of *For Brown Girls with Sharp Edges and Tender Hearts: A Love Letter to Women of Color*, opens up about imposter syndrome, colorism, and why shaking off traditional roles was key to finding freedom.

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Alicia Menendez:

Sexism, colorism, colonialism. So many isms that impact our lives and are often written about in ways that are meant to keep us out rather than to bring us in. That is part of what Prisca Dorcas Mojica Rodríguez is reckoning with in her new book “*For Brown Girls With Sharp Edges and Tender Hearts*, a love letter to women of color,” and by reckon, I mean breaking down in the most relatable ways, how these forces have shaped her life, who she is and her pursuit of freedom.

Prisca, I want to start by asking you to tell me about your sharp edges, your tender heart, and how you arrived at the title of this book.

Prisca Dorcas Mojica Rodríguez:

So I have a book where the quote comes from, so let me pull it because I don't want to butcher it. So this is Gloria Nailor and it's *Women on Brewster Street*. And before she starts the book to describe the women she's about to talk about, she says they were hard edged, soft centered, brutally demanding and easily pleased, these women of Brewster street. And I read this in 2012 and I was obsessed.

Menendez: Because the rest of you cannot see it, that page has more highlighting and scribbling on it than it does printed word to the publisher.

Rodríguez: Yeah. And I just like have always connected with that when I write about even myself, usually when I'm not still hiding from COVID, my nails are long and I wear acrylics. I wear heels. I'm not a casual sneakers girl. I am very high fem and I show up high fem in all places. And so I have physical sharp edges that I talk about, like my tacones sticking up to destroy you, there's a lot of poetry in my so sharp edges that I've always leaned on because I connected with that sentence, the hard edge and soft centered, like nobody acknowledges how a lot of us who are a little bit bitchier and a little bit sharper, it comes from protecting all of the soft stuff that we have inside that we haven't been encouraged to nurture.

Menendez: Not allowed to make me cry this early in the interview, Prisca. You dedicate your book to difficult daughters. In which ways were you yourself a difficult daughter?

Rodríguez: I was called la kolita mal all my life by my mother. So I was like the black sheep a lot. I asked too many questions I think for my parents. I wanted to know why like, because the Bible says, or because God said wasn't enough for me. I was like, but why? And I think like, I've just, that's always been my identity and my mom would always say, we have to be more strict with you because you're smarter. And I hated that. I hated that I felt like she saw that I was viva and the response to that was to reign it in as more than she would reign in the other children.

Menendez: And there's an inherent contradiction that you write about that really took my breath away. You write your parents brag about your brilliance all while exhorting you to be more like their friends daughter, the good obedient daughters who did what they were told. I just, the paradox there.

Rodríguez: It's like my whole life. I think that they're very proud of what I've been able to do, but I don't think that they ever could have imagined it. It's easier for me to just have gotten married at 19, pregnant, a mom, stay at home, have more babies. They knew what that looked like. That was my mom's story. That was my grandma's story. That's my mom's sister's stories. It was like, we know what that looks like. We don't know what the heck you're doing. And I think that there's fear in that pride too. And I've had to accept that they both exist.

Menendez: How much of that was also echoed by growing up in Miami?

Rodríguez: Miami's an intense place I think because it is a bubble of a lot of Caribbean folk. So there's a lot of Puerto Rican. There's a lot of Cuban, there's a lot of Colombians, there's Nicaraguans at the time that I was there Nicaraguan was the second largest Latina kids population in Miami. So I mean, fritangas are everywhere. Our culture is everywhere. It was very easy to just do traditional roles to be put in traditional boxes as girls and as women. And I think a lot of us did a lot of us who stayed, especially just absorbed that. And we're like, this is it. This is like what success looks like in the US, like in Latin America, but with a twist with AC or something,

Menendez: There really was so much that I identified with, including you talk about the way you learn to manage imposter syndrome, you began to over prepare, which I think is just going to be so familiar to so many of our listeners. What did that look like for you? How were you showing up in rooms?

Rodríguez: I did the most.

Menendez: Still doing the most.

Rodríguez: I would go up to the professor, even before school started, I would email my professors and introduce myself and then I would go up to them after the first class and be like, hi, I emailed you. I was like, I want you to know who I am and look at the syllabus before class starting and start talking about our final paper. I was like, so I was thinking about this. And I was thinking about this and I just wanted, I wanted them to know that I existed and I wanted to feel like I fit in and I did the most and I showed up in ways that academia doesn't necessarily reward professors like it. But professors aren't your peers. I think for my peers, it was very silly that I was doing that and they didn't get it. It was a joke. It was a running joke and peer cohort. They were like, Prisca have you started your final paper yet? Like it's the first week of school and I would laugh, but I was embarrassed, because I was like, I just want them to know that I belong too.

Menendez: It is funny to me to be talking with you and to see your tender heart and to see you laughing and smiling about it in the way you communicated about because there's no laughter and there's no smiling in the way you communicate about it. In the book, it was deeply hurtful. And is one of the many ways in which you illustrate that institutions can send strong messages about who belongs and who doesn't belong and how even folk who consider themselves woke can in many ways send signals subtle and extremely overt that a person does not understand the cultural nuance of an institution or of a culture.

Rodríguez: Yeah. And God forbid you say that my graduate program was known, it's still known and listed as the people who graduate are known as activists and change makers and that's the reputation of the program, but the experience that I had there was just a lot of silencing, a lot of policing, a lot of signaling, like you're not good enough. And when things are happening to you, we're going to watch and we're going to be uncomfortable. We're not going to say anything.

Menendez: Have you learned how to not do that?

Rodríguez: Yeah.

Menendez: How not show up that way.

Rodríguez: Yeah.

Menendez: You have, great. I have not. Can you please teach me?

Rodríguez: I think you have to be willing to risk it all. You have to be willing to not get the book deal and see what happens. Even with my, when I was doing the interviews, because my book went to auction and so I was doing, I was interviewing all these editors and talking to them and I was kind of just like, what would it look like to not try to impress them, but for someone who's first gen to create a path for them to understand that English is my second language, I struggle with syntax. I need an editor who understands that and won't ridicule me for it.

And a lot of these editors kind of avoided the question and the only editor that was like, oh my gosh, of course my grandma is a Japanese immigrant. And I understand what you're talking about. I get it. You just need to write it and I will fix it. I will rearrange it if I have to. I don't mind doing that and welcomed almost my perspective with all the things that were going to come as an ESL person, as a person who English is a second language for me. I still struggle on my freaking Instagram captions with syntax. Like I'm just like, ah, no, that's not supposed to sound like that.

Menendez: One of the things I loved most about *For Brown Girls With Sharp Edges and Tender Hearts* is your experience and understanding of colorism unfolds over time. So first, how did it change as you moved from somewhere like Miami to somewhere like Nashville, when you went to school?

Rodríguez: There's a lot of policing. There's this overvaluing of whiteness, especially in non-black Latina case communities, all that is happening. And I definitely got teased by Latina kids for looking more indigenous and not looking like some of the wider Cubans in my school or whatever. But for some reason still was like, but I'm cool. I still had a self-belief that when I moved to a white city like Nashville, it felt really dangerous.

Menendez: A white non-Hispanic city, like Nashville.

Rodríguez: It felt really personal. It wasn't people just trying to assimilate and become white. It was just, it was white people, gate keeping and it changed everything. I developed an eating disorder. I didn't know how to show up in spaces. I buckled. I started failing in my graduate program. I spiraled, I was confused for a while what was happening until there was a big incident on a 4th of July. And I was with a group of my white friends, a couple that was visibly Latinx sat near us with their family. It was a few kids and them and behind us, some of the Vanderbilt undergrads just started singing like go back to your country. And I was just sitting there mortified. And I just looked at my white friends and I was like, oh yo, you all aren't going to do shit.

We're all in this progressive program and we're all trying to quote unquote, change the world. But it's happening now and you all aren't doing anything. Okay. So I got up. It was a little hill called love circle here. I just got up and ran down the hill. I like panicked, all the

little experiences like that just came to this place where I just panicked. And the next day I went up to the only other Latina in my program who had avoided because I did have this thirst to be around Latinx because that's had always been my normal in Miami. So I didn't leave Miami being like, oh, I got to find all the Latinx. I was fascinated with whiteness. I was like, oh my goodness. Look at these, my people.

Menendez: I was about to say you were nothing if not an anthropologist.

Rodríguez: Yeah. I was just observing and listening and fascinated. Like your dad is paying for your apartment right across Vanderbilt. I was like, what is this like? And I had avoided this Latina who was like 35, non-monogamous, had a baby that they were raising gender neutral. And I was just like, this señora wants to be my friend and I do not want it. I really did.

Menendez: Which like now that we're in our mid thirties, that hits hard.

Rodríguez: Oh yeah. But I went and found her after that experience and told her what happened. And she held me and she's like, that's really messed up, that shouldn't have happened. Let's talk to everyone and gave me all the language. And then I was like, okay, I've been attempting to find a space in a place that they didn't want me here. They don't want me to be happy. They don't want to defend, they're not friends. I'm like their token brown friend if anything, I add to their experience. They're not adding anything to mine. So I had to shift my friendships and the way I moved in that circle and the way that I learned to defend myself, because I didn't, I didn't before I just let it slide and was like, oh it's not. I was one of those people that if somebody was that was racist, I was like, no, you're thinking too much about it. Not everything's race.

Menendez: Part of building community for yourself is the sort of one-on-one relationships that you're building with other Latinas part of it also then is the community that you begin to build online 2013 and that makes you like an OG to build a community for Latinas online 2013. I think we all sort of understand the impetus for these things. But what was the first thing that you did to build Latino rebels?

Rodríguez: I remember I came home. I was starting to find a lot of the pages that I felt spoke to me because I had already figured out, okay Univision isn't doing me any good, Telemundo is not doing me any good, but also ABC's not doing me any good, NBC isn't doing me any good, CNN isn't, so who is providing counter narratives to all this? Because it's not popular media. I remember I found News Taco. I found Latino rebels and I was just like, I liked Latino rebels. I liked all these pages, but they were mostly ran by men. They were a little more radical, but it felt very vanilla in some ways, what would it look like for me to do it? Cause I love sleeping around and talking about it, taking the shame of that. I'm smart. And I could talk about that. I'm feminine and smart. What a concept. I was just like, I want to bring all those things.

Menendez: You're not just feminine and smart. You're the girl who wears a red, tight, short dress to church like.

Rodríguez: Yeah.

Menendez: You cross the chasm.

Rodríguez: But I was like, there has to be something that holds all of our complexities where we're not just trying to be like, oh we can do left leaning, reporting just like y'all can do your kind of reporting. I was like, I don't even want you all, like all your prescriptions of how this is done. Throw it out the door. Let's just like put memes up and put gifs up.

Menendez: Which also gets to your bigger ethos about saying goodbye to respectability politics. Because I think part of your critique there is that it is being built still with the white gaze in mind.

Rodríguez: Exactly. Yeah. And there weren't pages like this, like me too,

Menendez: The kids, they don't know the tiktokers, they don't know what the internet was like 10 years ago.

Rodríguez: No, I saw Latino rebels was celebrating an anniversary and I was like, and mind you, Julito is a mentor of mine in some ways. And still I was like, I could do it better and take their name and say Latina rebels. Because I'm not a Latino. And I don't like that Latino includes me because that's what we've decided is the neutral term for all of us or the plural term for all of us. So I was like, no Latina rebels. And I remember Julito even sent me a Facebook message and was like, we can't wait to see what you come up with. It was super encouraging and sweet.

Menendez: That's so sweet. Not a cease and desist. Like it's...

Rodríguez: Yeah. On their anniversary too. And me being emboldened by that because yeah, it was mostly men on these media places. But I also felt really embraced, I think, because maybe I wasn't a threat to them. Like they're like, this is so wild. It might work, but it might not?

Menendez: And also speaks to the fact that we're huge audience. That's the thing it's like, no, one's like, well we already have two white non-Latinx sites. So I guess we're not going to have anymore.

Rodríguez: Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

Menendez: You write about learning to run from people, from situations, from things. I think as I understood it in large part in reaction to watching so many of the women, you love stay, stay when it wasn't the right man, stay when it wasn't the right opportunity, stay because there was this sense of responsibility that they needed to stay. I think most of us deeply identify with that and deeply identify with the desire to run. And I, married, two babies, pushing 40, often think about the space between learning to run and learning to stay for the things that are right. And for us and I wonder if you have learned the same.

Rodríguez: I had to figure that out by learning to run first because we're told to stay despite it all, I was taught to stay despite it all. Like you say, because you made a pact in front of God and that is the only reason to stay and the best reason to stay. So for me, I had to learn to run, to learn to truly stay in something healthy.

Menendez: Leaving your first marriage, which was a young marriage. What did that though teach you about knowing who you are, knowing what you want and what freedom looks like on the other side?

Rodríguez: The game changer for me is that it was so taboo because everybody in my family stays, that it was the most disappointing thing. It was like I killed my grandmother in front of my mom. It like that kind of betrayal, the way that they sobbed about it, the way they mourned that, like they were living in my shoes, the way that, the shame that I brought them, the way they reacted to the shame that I brought, the way that they, I even went back briefly because they were so much pressure that I went back because I was like, this is scary.

Menendez: I was about to ask, yeah.

Rodríguez: Nobody is supporting me. And I called my parents. And when I told them, my dad was like, yes, he screamed at the top of his lungs. He was so happy for my return to my ex-husband, which was brief because I shouldn't have done that.

And it made everything messier and harder or to detach from the second time I finally left, all the shame was dumped on me so quickly too, that once I was like, fuck it. And all my great friends were like, fuck it with me. Which was like a cute little army. And we burned my wedding dress that they even suggested and said, let's burn your wedding dress. Because they saw me struggling. And they were like, we need to transition you. And so we did this burning of my dress. I was able to relinquish a lot of the expectations that I thought were the most important thing to me. I realized it was never important to me. It was important to everyone around me. So I could move forward. I could learn to run. I could learn to speak up for myself. I could, but the divorce was the catalyst for everything because of what it meant in my context.

Latina to Latina: Who Prisca Dorcas Mojica Rodríguez Is Writing For

Menendez: Why did you want to disappear from the internet?

Rodríguez: It's really hard to be online. The way that I was. And I've been indie so long and it's exhausting to be indie. You're posting about your life. And people are like, why are you wearing Nike? Those children make those shoes. And everything becomes public discourse, everything that you do, how you speak, who you associate with.

Menendez: Especially when you have a politically charged brand. Because then everything you do is also is not just personal, it's political.

Rodríguez: I think it's very misogynistic too. It's how do we find ways to invalidate this person? It still feels so dehumanizing and violent. And I don't know how people don't understand, you're just using a playbook. You're just reinforcing the patriarchy. You are contributing to my downfall when there's 1,000,001 mediocre white men out here that you will not DM, that you will not tell them how you want them to be dead and that you want to rape them. That isn't a thing that they're experiencing. So I just get tired.

Menendez: What do you want to do next?

Rodríguez: So we're about to sell my second book. I really, really like this one.

Menendez: There's more ease in the second book always.

Rodríguez: I feel more confident. It took me two years to write my first proposal. This one took me maybe two months and we're with the final edits soon and we're going to start submitting it. I have never felt so supported in my life until I got the book deal. There's a team of people financially invested in my success and you feel it. We end phone calls and my agent will be like, you did so great. I'm like, am I going to go to therapy about how I've never felt this support my whole life. I get so uncomfortable with all the encouragement, all the kindness. I just sit there, like, I think you're great too. I'm writing. I have two other books that are in the works also, but they're, one's the children's books. So I'm still working within the illustrator and I'm going to keep writing, I like it.

Menendez: Prisca. Thank you so much for your time.

Rodríguez: Thank you.

Menendez: And congratulations. The book is what you wanted it to be.



Rodríguez: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Menendez: I want you to engage with the ideas Prisca lays out in the book itself. So I'm going to sign off with a reflection on how much work and thought Prisca has put into creating the space so that more of us can see ourselves as authors, as people who have stories that are worthy of being told. If you too believe that that is necessary. If you are into ideas that push and pull you, then be sure to check out *For Brown Girls With Sharp Edges* and *Tender Hearts: A Love Letter to Women of Color*.

Hey, thank you so much for listening. *Latina to Latina* is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Sarah McClure is our senior producer. Our lead producer is Cedric Wilson. Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer. Stephen Colón mixed this episode. Jimmy Gutierrez is our managing editor. Manuela Bedoya is our social media editor and ad ops lead.

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