

# A Voice of My Own

# Essays and Stories



# Rolando Hinojosa

## **Praise for the work of Rolando Hinojosa:**

“Another unusual police procedural is Rolando Hinojosa’s realistic-feeling *Ask a Policeman*. As this case about cross-border murder and drug-smuggling unravels, Hinojosa gets to you in his sneaky way. He’s witty about the Orwellian bylaws in the middle-class neighborhoods of Klail City, Texas . . . and once in a while he nails a character with a single line of dialogue. Hinojosa is also mordantly funny about the local law enforcement honchos who queue up at the U.S. federal trough.”

—*The Washington Post* on *Ask a Policeman*

“Rolando Hinojosa has established himself as sole owner and proprietor of fictional Belken County, which, like the author’s native Mercedes, is situated in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. If Belken is the Lone Star Yoknapatawpha, Hinojosa is its Faulkner.”

—*The Texas Observer* on *Ask a Policeman: A Rafe Buenrostro Mystery*

“The timeless truths of war—the slaughter of civilians, atrocities condoned, legions of refugees—are related with near-documentary realism in this powerful novel of the Korean War. Hinojosa draws on his own experience in Korea to reveal the racism that Mexican Americans faced from fellow soldiers. Hinojosa gives us a graphic picture of the unchanging face of war—raw, gritty and inhumane.”

—*Publishers Weekly* on *The Useless Servants*

“Hinojosa’s novel is in the form of a diary kept by a young Mexican-American soldier serving in the Korean War. Its spare style, heavily spiced with military lingo, and episodic form are intended to recreate the fragmented process of discovery that occurs when one is at war. But what the narrator, Rafe Buenrostro, discovers is not heroism or patriotism, but the futility of war and its heavy human toll.”

—*Booklist* on *The Useless Servants*

“Like Faulkner, [Hinojosa] has created a fictional county (Belken County), invested it with centuries of complex history, and populated it with generations of families and a host of unique characters. The saga is a rich mosaic, and Hinojosa renders the collective social history of a Chicano community. Hinojosa’s tack in this novel is to dramatize how the community responds to *la mujer nueva*, the Chicana who eschews traditional roles and asserts her independence and individuality. [He] spins the story of Becky and her twenty-five friends and enemies with sensitivity, humor, wit and keen insight into the history and attitudes of the people of the lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas.”

—*World Literature Today* on *Becky and Her Friends*

“Hinojosa turns his Faulknerian gaze upon a particular family struggle, in this case a divorce. It is an opportunity to observe a master of voice and characterization at work, to watch a web-spinner weave a narrative masterpiece.”

—*The Texas Observer* on *Becky and Her Friends*

“Themes which predominate and are explored in a humorous, good natured fashion include: the migration experience of Texan Mexicans, family feuds, the ongoing conflict between Anglos and Mexicans and the experiences of Mexicans in the Korean conflict and the Second World War. While Hinojosa explores the exploitation of Texas Mexicans at the hands of Anglos, his message is never heavy-handed or didactic, but rather pointed and understated. Hinojosa has an unusual talent for capturing the language and spirit of his subject matter.”

—*Western American Literature* on *Klail City*

“Hinojosa’s *Dear Rafe* effectively uncovers social, economic and political relationships along the Texas border. A mystery of sorts, it permits readers to make their own judgments about the reality of Klail City. The dozens of characters speaking in their own voices create not a babble but a sort of call and response pattern between cultures, classes and generations. With a quiet irony and persistent understatement, Hinojosa describes an alien place that is part of who we are as a people.”

—*Newsday* on *Dear Rafe*

“Hinojosa’s obvious and heartfelt feminism, his linguistic facility, erudite allusions and, above all, his witty, colloquial, epigrammatic pronouncements make this novel a feast for scholars.”

—*Choice* on *Dear Rafe*

“*Rites and Witnesses* has delighted and mystified [Hinojosa’s] audience. In the very ambiguity of the documents, his purpose becomes known. The issues are clear, the battle lines are drawn, the reader now knows that what is at stake is the death of a culture.”

—*Houston Chronicle* on *Rites and Witnesses*

“*Partners in Crime* reads like Dashiell Hammett with a Texas twang, but underneath it all is Hinojosa’s gift for conversational lyricism. . . . a brilliant technical achievement.”

—*Dallas Morning News* on *Partners in Crime*

# A Voice of My Own

## Essays and Stories

*Rolando Hinojosa*

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY  
HÉCTOR CALDERÓN



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## INTRODUCTION: THE MANY LIVES OF ROLANDO HINOJOSA

I recall first meeting Rolando Hinojosa in the early 1980s at an MLA (Modern Language Association) National Convention. He had just delivered a paper at a panel and was answering questions in the hallway just as he was leaving. Besides beginning a career as a writer, Hinojosa was one of the first Chicano professor activists advocating for the inclusion of Chicano literature within the MLA. I was waiting in line to introduce myself. I had just begun my career as an assistant professor. A Chicano graduate student had questioned, in a more critical than inquisitive tone, why Hinojosa just wrote about one county in Texas. That Hinojosa had, obviously, read widely in many literatures did not matter to the student. Or that other writers like James Joyce, William Faulkner, Juan Rulfo and Gabriel García Márquez had chosen to write about their own fictional corner of the world did not matter either. Hinojosa smiled back without any anger and responded that he was happy with his county and did not see a need to change that. Hinojosa had two published novels in the United States at that time, *Estampas del*

*valle y otras obras* (1973) and *Generaciones y semblanzas* (1977). We did not yet know his expanding literary corner of the world, Belken County, Texas. As is well known, Hinojosa has continued with his *Klail City Death Trip Series* through some eleven installments; his latest *We Happy Few* was published in 2006.

Hinojosa is a Chicano writer who spans the entire tradition, one of the founding members of what is termed the Quinto Sol Generation. He received the third annual Premio Quinto Sol for Novel in 1973. This is now ancient history of which many of my current graduate and all of my undergraduate students are not aware. In his *We Happy Few*, Hinojosa enters the world of campus politics, faculty promotions and tenure at Belken State University. In his first two novels of the 1970s, readers were introduced in Spanish to nineteenth-century Texas Mexicano ranching culture and the deaths of elder Mexicanos who passed away in mid-twentieth century. This then is a developing history that Hinojosa has been writing in a variety of literary forms, chronicle, biographical sketch, epistolary novel, diary, detective fiction, comedy and poetry all told through monologues, conversations, dialogues with his characteristic wit, humor and irony. Needless to say, Hinojosa is one of the tradition's canonical writers.

But it should be clear that becoming canonical was not an easy matter for the first generation of Chicano writers or those who were Chicanos or Mexicanos before the Chicano Movement. Becoming a student, an academic, a professor and a writer had its strange turns and twists. The many lives of Rolando Hinojosa began before the Chicano Movement as a teenager in the mountains above Saltillo, Coahuila, in a Mexican rural environment where he wrote his first stories, which were in Spanish; upon returning from Mexico, Hinojosa joined the army and served in Korea; the citizen soldier returned to Texas for undergraduate study at the University of Texas, Austin in the 1950s; he earned an M.A. at New Mexico Highlands University in 1963 and a Ph.D. at the University of Illinois in 1969, both advanced degrees were in

Spanish literature. He was a “Chicano scholar” before the Chicano Movement.

*A Voice of My Own: Essays and Stories* is a parallel volume to Hinojosa’s fragmented history of Belken County. Those who know Hinojosa’s fiction understand his own use of time. Readers, more often than not, are left in medias res, looking at the past from an indeterminate present and anticipating a future yet to be told. This constancy of change can occur within as well as between books. In *A Voice of My Own*, Hinojosa’s life is more fully fleshed out, certainly as a writer, but also as son, student, high school teacher, civil servant, office manager, sales manager, laborer, professor, university administrator, translator and as a Texas Mexicano from the Rio Grande Valley who has lived through decades of change. There is much useful personal and institutional history in this volume that can take the reader back to the *Klail City Death Trip Series*.

*A Voice of My Own* presents a collection of essays spanning some three decades. History, place, language and the border are the constant interrelated themes of the essays. Hinojosa is a product of the first northern Mexican settlers in the Spanish Province of Nuevo Santander established in 1749 which along the Rio Grande would become the cradle of ranching culture in the United States. This history has nurtured a sense of place based not on cattle and horsemen but on relationships among family and friends, a way of looking at the world from a disadvantaged position given the history of Texas but with a certainty of self and cultural identity. Like Hinojosa in these essays, his characters survey the situation, the problem and arrive at decisions, conclusions in a rational manner. Loud, blustery voices are not part of his characters nor of Hinojosa’s voice.

The early settlers brought with them northern Mexican Spanish which has remained constant through the twenty-first century. I am pleased that *A Voice of My Own* includes essays in Spanish. In 2011, Spanish is a personal as well a public language, of oral expression as well as literary expression in the United States. Hinojosa makes it clear in this volume that literature in Spanish

had existed in Texas before the Chicano Movement of the 1960s. As then, this language continues to unify Spanish-speakers across the jurisdictional barrier between Mexico and the United States. Hinojosa says it often in this collection; the border was never a cultural barrier. In the initial essay, “A Voice of One’s Own,” Hinojosa responded to Richard Rodriguez’s *Hunter of Memory* (1981), to his shame of being Mexican, the son of Spanish-speaking parents, so much so that Rodriguez advocated against bilingual education and the use of Spanish as a public language. With Rodriguez in mind, Hinojosa wrote “I wonder about those who choose adaptation over true happiness in a desire to please others; and I wonder, but not for very long, about those who ignore, and about those who choose to deny the existence of at least two cultures” (4-5). Hinojosa’s parents, Manuel G. Hinojosa and Carrie Effie Smith, like other Mexican and Anglo families and marriages from the Valley, both spoke Spanish and English. Hinojosa is the finest exponent in literature of the duality and fusion of these two cultures.

The border as a political barrier between two cultures has existed since 1835—the Texas Republic. The subsequent War of 1848, Hinojosa writes, created the Valley, el Valle which is Texas (in the past Union and Confederate) north of the Rio Grande but always will be Mexican which also means that social and racial strife will continue to condition relations among cultures be they Mexican, Anglo or African American. In addition to wars on Mexican-U.S. soil and in Korea, Hinojosa recalls the Mexican Revolution of 1910. After the celebrations of the centennial of the Revolution, it will serve us well to emphasize that this Mexican civil war declared in San Antonio was a northern Mexican phenomenon that also included Texas Mexicanos. As we discover in this volume in “E Pluribus Vitae,” Don Manuel G. Hinojosa, like other Mexicanos del Valle, supported the Mexican Revolution. Throughout Hinojosa’s fiction, the Revolution has been a constant—his first short story written in the 1940s as a youth in Coahuila was based on events in the Revolution. As in 1910 with Mexican émigrés in el Valle recalled by Hinojosa, Mexican immi-

grants have continued in waves after waves to enter the United States and el Valle. Let's now in 2011 state clearly that Hinojosa is an American writer, a Texas writer, a Chicano writer and a writer of the Mexican cultural diaspora of North America.

Rolando Hinojosa and I did eventually meet at that MLA Convention. I was patient and took my turn. Readers of *A Voice of My Own* will find a voice that has remained constant in his fiction, in these essays and in his lives. Rolando is a friend and through the years the profession has brought us together in Germesheim, Paris, Aix-en-Provence, New Haven, Austin, Palo Alto, Claremont and Los Angeles. I have relied on his knowledge as an administrator, scholar, writer and friend. He has always been generous with his time, support and advice. Most recently, he expressed his condolences for my recent personal losses. I thank him here publicly. In the very insightful "The Baroque in the Life and Literature of the Hispano-American," Hinojosa speaks of the brevity of life as the most Baroque of all elements. Life is "[i]n brief, a one-way trip where we all share the same destination if not the same estimated time of departure" (111). The solemnity of death, the passing away of time and life, is acknowledged in his Baroque novel, the *Klail City Death Trip Series*, in the essays collected here in this volume and, personally, in our friendship. These essays in *A Voice of My Own* whether in the form of personal recollection, biographical sketch, short story or literary criticism are all delivered with that unmistakable Hinojosa style—direct, personal, witty and honest. The voice does not vary. It's the one I heard in that hallway many years ago.