

## Spanish Lessons

Christine Marín

Christine Marín was born to bilingual Mexican American parents in Globe, Arizona. Remembering the discrimination they encountered during their own childhoods, the elder Maríns determined that their children would speak English in their home. Her parents recognized the power of language—they told their children to “speak better English than the gringo, so that he could not ridicule [them] the way they had been ridiculed in school and work.” In this environment, Christine Marín began to encounter some mixed messages. On the one hand, she was encouraged to be proud of her heritage and cultural background; on the other, she was discouraged from speaking Spanish. It was not until high school that she began to recognize the power of the Spanish tongue. The essay that follows describes Marín’s gradual awakening to the power of her cultural language, her emerging respect for this language, and how it ultimately shaped her identity.

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1 The reality of being a Mexican American whose mother tongue was English and who did not speak Spanish came in the form of a 1958 high school band trip and the song “La Bamba” by Ritchie Valens (I didn’t even know he was Mexican-American!), which was quite popular. I wasn’t any different from the other high school kids who learned the words of popular songs we heard on the radio. Anglo and Mexican-American kids would sit together in the back of the bus and sing loudly and attempt to drown out the singing of those kids who sat toward the front of the bus. The game was to see who could sing the best and the loudest, and consequently drown out the singing of those in front.

2 On one band trip we sang “La Bamba.” I didn’t realize we were singing so loudly and in Spanish! My “voice” came out in the form of Spanish lyrics, although I was unaware of it. My Mexican-American identity shone through. I remember how proud I was for singing in Spanish, even though I didn’t understand all the words of the song. I didn’t know what a *bamba* was or what a *marinero* was. I hadn’t heard those words before, and I wondered if my Mexican-American girlfriends knew the meaning of the song. I stumbled over the words, mispronouncing many of them. Suddenly, one popular Anglo girl sitting toward the front of the bus stood up in the middle of the aisle and shouted out loud so that everyone could hear: “Hey, you Mexicans! This is America! Stop singing in Spanish!” She proceeded to loudly sing “God Bless America” and “My Country ’Tis of Thee.” To my surprise, her Anglo friend joined her in singing those patriotic songs. Well, our group of Mexican-American girls was not to be outdone. We sang the words to “La Bamba” even louder, and this infuriated her even more! Eventually, our band director jumped up

from his seat and demanded that we all shut up. That stopped the singing. I could see that our band director was agitated, but I wasn’t sure if it was because of that stupid, racist remark from that little twerp or because of all the noise throughout the bus.

3 It didn’t take me long to figure out what had happened. I realized that the girl and her friends did not resent being outsung but resented the fact that we were singing in Spanish, using words that weren’t even a part of my everyday vocabulary! All I was doing was singing a song. I felt like getting up out of my seat and beating up that insensitive, stupid girl—and good! But I didn’t. I learned the power of both the English and Spanish languages on that band trip. And what a lesson it was! The Spanish language posed a threat to that girl, and it made me feel proud of being a Mexican American despite the fact that I didn’t speak Spanish. I felt superior to her because I knew two languages and I could understand both English and Spanish, while she could only understand English.

4 In high school, I was an above-average student but certainly not one who made straight A’s. I excelled in English and writing assignments, and my work was noticed by my English teachers, especially Mrs. Ethel Jaenicke. She hoped I would attend college after high school, something I hadn’t thought was possible. She spent extra time with me and encouraged me to continue my writing. Unfortunately, my father’s pay didn’t stretch far enough to pay for a college education. My parents, however, knew the value and importance of a good education and wanted their children to continue on to college. They made great sacrifices to help all of us begin our college education and were encouraging, nurturing, and understanding about our struggles to stay in school. It was ultimately up to us to somehow find the money to stay in school and continue our education.

5 After graduation from Globe High School in 1961, I moved to Phoenix, where I lived with my older brother and his wife. A friend of his helped me get a job as a salesgirl at Jay’s Credit Clothing, a Jewish-owned clothing store in downtown Phoenix. Customers bought their goods on credit. The clothing lines were fashionable, stylish, and overpriced. Most of the customers were African Americans, Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and some Anglos. Mexican-American saleswomen were paid a small weekly salary but earned most of their money through sales commissions. Making those sales was very competitive, and I didn’t do so well. I couldn’t speak Spanish well enough to assist Spanish-speaking customers who came into the store, which left me frustrated and embarrassed. One of the senior Mexican-American saleswomen felt sorry for me; she noticed how desperately I struggled with the language. She often gave me her own sales after she had assisted Spanish-speaking customers by putting my name on her sales tickets. She knew I would be attending Arizona State University in August and needed to save money for school. She took me under her wing and spoke to me of her childhood wishes of going to college, though her family couldn’t afford to send her. This woman worked in that clothing store for many years. She taught me another lesson about the power of language: bilingualism paid well—monetarily well! I decided to retrace my lost na-

tive tongue and consciously worked on speaking more Spanish so that I could earn more money.

6 At ASU, I enrolled in liberal arts courses and had many interests. I took classes in psychology, sociology, history, and English, to name but a few. One college adviser even suggested that I major in Spanish because “Mexicans make good Spanish teachers and you could always find a job teaching it.” If he only knew how badly I spoke the language! I didn’t want to major in Spanish. Chalk up two more lessons learned about the power of language. First, someone assumed I spoke Spanish simply because of my surname and brown-colored skin. Second, by knowing the Spanish language, I would always be guaranteed a teaching job. However, I didn’t want to be a teacher. . . .

7 During my freshman year, an English professor insulted my character and intelligence when she accused me of taking credit for a writing assignment she believed was written by someone else. According to her, the essay was extremely well written, but I couldn’t have written it because “Mexicans don’t write that well.” “You people don’t even speak the language correctly.” Another hard lesson to learn about the power of language! This time the lesson was that my skin color and Spanish surname—not my language proficiency and ability in English—served as criteria to discriminate against me. My English ability was questioned and discredited. The academy had silenced my English voice. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t convince her I had written that essay and that I had not paid someone to write it for me, as she presumed. This incident angered me. I had done what my parents said—be better than the gringo through language. But since this gringa professor had power and status, she felt she could accuse me of cheating. Needless to say, I dropped the class and never spoke to her again. I didn’t care whether she believed me or not. . . .

In 1970 I applied for and was hired for a bibliographer position, where I  
8 learned all aspects of verifying English-language bibliographic entries and citations for monographs, serials, periodicals, and government documents, among others. I learned the intricacies of checking and verifying library holdings and how to use bibliographic tools and sources. I grew intellectually in my work. Because of my knowledge of library-related information, I became the “expert” and “voice” for my classmates and their friends who either were unfamiliar with the library system or found learning how to use book or serial catalogs confusing. I taught them how to use the library’s catalogs and reference tools and encouraged them to enjoy the library setting. My job empowered me. I had learned a new code—the library code.

9 The year 1970 was an important one for Mexican-American students at ASU in other ways. My friends were beginning to call themselves “Chicanos” as a term of self-identification and tossed aside the term “Mexican Americans.” For them, the term “Chicano” meant empowerment, and they found a new identity as Chicanos. But it was not a new word to me. I had heard it used by my parents and their friends when I was growing up in Globe. My father called himself a Chicano, and so did his friends from his military service days in World War II. For them the word “Chicano” was used in friendship—as a term of endearment, as a term of identity.

10 Now my college friends were using the word “Chicano” differently and in a defiant manner, with the word “power” after it: “Chicano Power!” For them and for me, it became a term of self-identity. The word was an assertion of ethnic and cultural pride, a term heard in a new form of social protests and associated with student activism and civil rights militancy. Chicanos throughout the Southwest were caught up in the Chicano Movement, a civil rights movement. They made new demands—that they become visible rather than invisible on their college and university campuses—and wanted a voice. They demanded courses that described the history, culture, and experiences of Chicanos in the Southwest. They wanted Chicano counselors and professors to teach bilingual-bicultural education courses and courses in social work on their campuses. Arizona State University was going to be at the forefront in making these changes. Two scholars, Dr. Manuel Patricio Servín and Dr. H. William Axford, played an integral role in this demand for change. Hayden Library was to be the setting that allowed students to legitimize history, culture, art, language, and literature by acknowledging the presence of Mexican Americans, Chicanos, and Mexicans. . . .

11 Servín and Axford quickly became my friends; the scholar and the librarian took me under their wings. They anticipated what Chicano students were going to do: demand that their library have books *by* and *about* them. They were right, and they gave students their voice. This is where I came in. Not long after his arrival, Dr. Axford came to the bibliography department and asked if anyone was familiar with Chicano materials. Being the only Chicana in the department, I was the one who spoke up.

12 In 1969 my friends had organized the Mexican American Students Organization (MASO) on the ASU campus, and I attended the meetings. MASO students came from various Arizona places, including mining towns, cities, and rural towns. The majority spoke English, so meetings were conducted in English; the MASO newsletter was written in English, with a few slogans in Spanish thrown in for effect, such as *¡Basta Ya!*, *¡Viva La Raza!*, *Con Safos*, and *¡Viva La Huelga!* By 1970, I had attended Chicano Movement-related meetings, had participated in United Farmworker rallies in Phoenix, and had leafleted pro-union literature urging the boycott of lettuce sold at Safeway stores. I became well acquainted with Chicano Movement ideologies and with the events of the times.

13 I met with Drs. Axford and Servín and listened to a new idea that they proposed to me. Dr. Axford suggested that I become the bibliographer for the Chicano Studies Collection, with my first task being to conduct an inventory of the library’s holdings of Chicano-related materials. Dr. Servín provided me with various bibliographies listing the Chicano Studies’ holdings of university libraries in California. I kept a record of the library’s strengths and weaknesses in Chicano Studies by searching publishers’ catalogs, listing the titles we didn’t have, and marking them as available for purchasing. In that meeting with Drs. Axford and Servín, I learned that it was their intent to build a Chicano Studies Collection that would support Servín’s teaching and research needs in Chicano Studies and the needs of those students who would enroll in the American Studies program. Dr. Axford wanted to

strengthen the library's holding in Chicano Studies so that he would be prepared to justify those holdings to Chicano students when they demanded that the library have them. I agreed to become the bibliographer for the Chicano Studies Collection. I was the staff of one. In essence, Axford and Servín empowered me to take over the Chicano Studies Collection. I became the expert, the liaison for scholars, students, and researchers. The Chicano Studies Collection became another means by which my voice was heard. I now had the opportunity to tell others of my culture, of which I was proud. . . .

14 Dr. Axford was open to the idea of meeting with MASO. I agreed to work with MASO representatives in selecting books for the Chicano Studies Collection. It was a positive relationship, reflective of Dr. Axford's philosophy of open access to library materials and sources. Chicano students began to utilize the library, and brown faces were now appearing in greater numbers in the study areas in and around the collection. Soon I was collecting and saving MASO newsletters, leaflets, minutes from meetings, membership lists, and other Chicano movement materials for my own interest. Dr. Servín encouraged me to collect these materials for the library and planted the seed in my mind to someday build a Chicano Studies archives. What a great idea! He also encouraged me to return to school and enroll in his courses to familiarize myself with the historical literature of the Southwest. It was my fate and destiny to encounter Drs. Servín and Axford and to find a new direction that would satisfy my intellectual growth and development. I learned more about Chicano history from Dr. Servín's classes, where I was exposed to the writings, research, and thought of Chicano scholars and writers. He also gave me the opportunity to do research and helped me publish my first article about the Chicano Movement in a scholarly journal that he edited. In 1974 my scholarly voice came through.

15 Outside the classroom, I continued to be exposed to Chicano Movement ideas and activities, and I easily made friends and contacts who would lead me to those elusive materials that are archival prizes in academic libraries today. I was challenged to improve my Spanish language skills by those individuals who were community activists. They spoke in both English and Spanish, and I learned what the term "codeswitching" meant. As a reflection of the times, MASO students changed their name in 1971 to MECHA, which stands for Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán.

16 I've continued working at Hayden Library, where I am now the curator/archivist for the Chicano Research Collection. I have built the Chicano Studies Collection into an important archival repository. During the last ten years, I've been an adjunct faculty associate in the Women's Studies program, where I have taught the courses "La Chicana" and "Women in the Southwest." I have assigned my students to write about the history of Chicanas in their families, to become curious about their family histories, and to incorporate oral history into their research. Through this assignment, they give voice to their own family histories, and they acquire their own voices in the discovery of their identities. Their manuscripts, as well as those of others, are in the Chicano Research Collection. These

materials provide information about the past. Students, researchers, and scholars from all over the world have access to records, documents, oral histories, photographs, diaries, correspondence, videos, pamphlets, leaflets, and posters about the history, culture, and heritage of Chicanos, Chicanas, and Mexican Americans in the United States. I am proud and honored to preserve these records for future Chicana and Chicano scholars. It is these materials that transmit the voices of *nuestra raza* vis-à-vis the printed page.

17 As I conclude my journey and the sharing of my story of growing up in an Arizona mining town, I have come to discover the many voices and modes of communication I had available to me and how they have contributed to the formation of self and identity. These voices have empowered me, educated me, sensitized me. Empowerment came through my work as an archivist and MASO/MECHA student, my scholarship, and my work in academe. My English voices as a young child, in school, and throughout ring clear: the discrimination in academe that I encountered in my English class and also my knowledge of the intricacies of library language. My Spanish voices are also evident: in the back of the band bus in high school; when, for economic survival, I was a salesclerk; and when, through activism, I worked for change in the Chicano community. My empowerment coming full circle is evident through the sharing of my voice in my scholarship and my roles as teacher, lecturer, and historian. From the back of the bus to the ivory tower, I have learned the power of language.

### THINKING CRITICALLY

1. What is the catalyst for Christine Marín's awareness of the power of Spanish in her life? How does she react to this event? How does it connect to her identity and her growing consciousness of the power of language?
2. How does Marín's physical appearance conflict with the expectations of the "Anglos" around her? Cite some examples in which her ethnic appearance causes cultural confusion and how she deals with this.
3. How does Marín learn to appreciate her heritage? Having been raised in an English-only household as an American, how does her ancestry begin to blend with her identity? Review the changes described by Marín to the term Chicano. What did the word mean to her when she was a child in a Mexican American household? How did the word change in the early 1970s while she was in college? What do you think accounts for this transition?
4. Until college, Marín says that she did not really feel that her Mexican heritage made her any different from her peers. What event does Marín experience as a freshman that changes her perspective? How does she react to it?
5. How does the Chicano Studies Collection at the University of Arizona become a means by which Marín's voice can be heard? What is this voice? How does it empower her?
6. What do you think is the meaning of the author's last sentence? Does it connect to her essay as a whole? Explain.