

# The Power of Language: Strengthening Chicano Voices Through Song

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## ABSTRACT

In a country as full of diversity as The United States, there are numerous groups of people, especially racial/ethnic minorities, that are systemically marginalized. Because of this, representation through music that is created by those who are individuals within these groups can act as empowerment. The Chicano Batman cover of the song “This Land is Your Land” by Woody Guthrie establishes an attitude of resistance towards prejudiced norms and inspires a sense of belonging for Latino/Chicano people through the Spanish lyrics that are embedded into the classic American song. In this essay, I will use *The Chicano Studies Reader: An Anthology of Aztlán* by Chon Noriega to highlight and demonstrate the significance of Chicano culture and history within the United States. I will dissect the Spanish lyrics included within the Chicano Batman cover of the song and elaborate on the importance of their inclusion in relation to both current and past Chicano history.

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Music is a force that has been uniting people for thousands of years, and the new personal connections that become possible through song and music can change people's lives. Individuals and groups across the globe have all created different music that shares their perspectives on humanity and the world, and this representation has allowed for the sharing of unique points of view. Lyrics and musical composition have the power to unify and educate people about key topics. Musicians revisiting well-respected songs from the past and creating new covers can create spaces for entirely new audiences within the genre and music, and this type of change is notable, especially regarding universal topics such as immigration. This can allow for new experiences with music and new meaning making as well. A prime example of this is the cover of "This Land is Your Land" done by the Latino band called Chicano Batman. The Chicano Batman cover of Woody Guthrie's song "This Land is Your Land" is both important and empowering, as it reclaims a sense of belonging for multigenerational Chicano people and immigrants through the modernized way they rewrite the original 1940 song. This cover allows for Chicano and Latino communities to make meaningful connections and feel a sense of empowerment in the United States through the inclusive Spanish lyrics that it includes. This specific choice of alteration, among others in their cover of the song, is already making lasting impressions within Latino communities.

The Chicano Batman cover of "This Land is Your Land" was released in January 2017, and most listeners noted this significant timing, as it was released just days before Donald Trump came into office for his first term as president. This cover of the iconic original song by Woody Guthrie captivated audiences across the nation, as it transformed an already pro-freedom anthem into a new one: one that amplifies the voices of Latino and Chicano-identifying people in the United States. The last stanza of lyrics in their cover contains three lines from the original version in English, and one final line in Spanish. This concluding Spanish line reads, "Esta tierra es para ti y para mi." By

blending the two languages together in the ending of the song, they are connecting the two central cultures that make up the Chicano identity. By making the choice to end the song with one last line in Spanish, they are also intentionally reemphasizing a sense of Latino triumph and pride. Their bilingual cover acts as a more inclusive version of the original song. Chicano Batman allows for Latino audiences to establish more meaningful interactions through their cover of the already well-known anthem. This version does so with the stanza of Spanish lyrics that the band implemented into the song. With its synth, Bardo Martinez's powerful vocals, and accompanying background vocals, the Chicano Batman cover contains a more upbeat tempo and groovy melody in comparison to the original. This restyling of the song adds to the already empowering tone that it creates, as well as creating a more twenty-first century and bilingual take. These changes may also appeal more to modern audiences, as they turn the original song into one that sounds similar to pop or indie music that may play on the radio.

Chicano Batman is an indie Latino rock band that was formed in 2008 in Los Angeles, California and is made up of members Eduardo Arenas, Carlos Arévalo, Bardo Martinez, and Gabriel Villa. They are known for their soulful and bold music and the culturally relevant themes they discuss and present within their songs and albums. They tackle serious and important topics such as immigration, identity, police brutality, and freedom while blending them into their smooth style of music. Their album "Freedom is Free" takes a stance on these topics in both straightforward and inexplicit ways. For example, their song titled "La Jura," a Spanish word colloquially used to identify police, tells the story of an instance of police brutality head-on and is inspired by tragic events that happened to Arenas' old neighbor/companion (Bryan). Their song sharing the title of "Freedom is Free" contains lyrics that promote freedom as an individualistic idea of belonging and liberation. This song contains lyrics such as: "Freedom is Free, and you can't take that away from me" and "that's the way it's always gonna be." In their

album and song titled “Invisible People,” Chicano Batman explains what it is like to be a minority in the United States, stating that “Invisible people, the truth is we're all the same, the concept of race was implanted inside your brain.” In this song, they do not stray away from the idea that minorities are treated differently than dominant groups, and bring attention to this idea with their groovy/funky cover.

The unique name Chicano Batman does not simply come out of nowhere either, and lead singer Bardo Martinez is the one who originally came up with the concept/ band name. In a PBS SoCal article, Martinez shared that “The whole point was that both Chicano and Batman are very iconic names so when you combine these two iconic names it creates a whole different thing. The whole point is combining a pop-cultural symbol and a cultural-political symbol” (Anguiano). The word Chicano is a term that Mexican Americans in the United States have identified with and used to label or describe their culture or family heritage (“Latino/a/x, Hispanic, Chicano”). The name Chicano Batman exists and works to create a newer positive reception and reputation of the word Chicano, as it has previously held a negative connotation in the United States. The name does so by blending this term with the previously established pop culture of the United States to add balance. By creating, releasing, and performing their music under the band name Chicano Batman, they are decreasing the negative stigmas surrounding the word and becoming a visible and well-known positive representation of it. The name acts as an immediate attention grabber for multiple audiences, and this is only the beginning of how Chicano Batman is spreading visibility for Chicano people as a band. Their Chicano representation directly acts as a powerful influence that can inspire and empower Chicano people of all ages and reduces previous negative stereotypes.

It is no surprise that a band that creates music in order to promote freedom and diverse voices would end up working on a modernized cover of Woody Guthrie’s classic song “This Land is Your Land.” In an interview for *Billboard*, the members of Chicano

Batman discussed their beliefs and experiences as a band and what the music they create and play means to them. When asked about the creation of their cover of “This Land is Your Land,” they shared that the idea of them covering the song came from a pitch in hopes of them recording the song in collaboration with Johnnie Walker Whiskey. This collaboration ended with a video advertisement in which all members of the band were in the spotlight for. This ad itself acted as a source of Chicano/Latino representation in media and became a source of attention and discussion because of this. Carlos Arevalo, the guitarist of the band, shared about the initial hesitation they had about the song because it was “cheesy” and something that they all had to sing in school when they were younger. Eduardo Arenas, the bassist of the band, also shared they believed “that song [“This Land is Your Land”] has been misappropriated into this all-American, almost pro-war type of chant,” and how after beginning to recontextualize the lyrics of the original song, they began to understand the importance of it and what their cover of it could mean for people (Norris).

In this interview, Arenas shares about a meaningful interaction he had with someone who had listened to their cover. He recounts this moment, stating, “I ran into someone after a show who said he was working on a midterm, one of his college papers, about the song and what it means for Latinos to be singing that song today, in America” (Norris). This interaction alone is a prime example of how their cover of “This Land is Your Land” has created environments for people to connect with it and resonate with the messages that it shares to promote and inspire community and belonging for multigenerational immigrants in the United States. Their cover promotes the idea of Latino and Chicano people using their voices in order to represent themselves and claim their rightful belonging within the United States. Conversations like the one Arenas had with a fan may seem as though they are a smaller interaction, but there is a deep significance behind these discussions. When people within the Latino/Chicano communities are able to see

the inclusion of Spanish within a classic American anthem, they are able to establish a sense of relation and belonging that is specific to them and their culture.

In his essay titled “Unraveling America’s Hispanic Past Internal Stratification and Class Boundaries,” historian Ramón A. Gutiérrez notes that there are “several possible origins for the word” (Gutiérrez 257). Gutierrez shares a few of the most plausible beginnings for the word, stating that it may derive from the following: the switching of letters in the Spanish word “chinaco,” meaning “tramp;” the shortening of names used with children learning to speak; the passing down of the name of an Aztec tribe called Meshicas; or that it stems from the Spanish word “chico,” meaning “small” (Gutierrez 258). Despite which of these origins the word accurately came from, in the past it has been used as a derogatory word towards Mexican people that live in the United States, especially aimed at, but not limited to, low-income Mexican families. Since then, newer generations have especially begun to reclaim and identify with the word Chicano/a in the mid-to-late 20th century. Adaljiza Sosa Riddell shares this sentiment in her essay titled “Chicanas and El Movimiento,” expressing that the Chicano movement is “the all-encompassing effort to, on the one hand, articulate and intensify the Chicano existence, and on the other hand, to articulate and alleviate the suffering that has accrued to Chicanos precisely because of that existence” (Riddell 245). The reclamation of the Chicano label has allowed for Chicano people to restore a sense of power for themselves within the word and use it as a word that empowers them, rather than belittle or discriminate against them. This provides a stronger sense of agency within these communities and unites Chicano voices together.

Since World War I and World War II, Chicano-identifying people and Mexican people have endured several cases of mass deportations and acts of racism in the U.S. These types of experiences are unfortunately nothing new for Mexican people in the United States to face, and there is a relevant history and multiple examples of this occurring.

In her essay about Chicano movements, Rosaura Sánchez shares some of this history, summarizing that this discrimination presented itself as “the repatriation of Mexican immigrants in 1930-1931 and continuing with media reports promoting violence against the ‘zoot suiters’ of the 1940s, the deportation of ‘wetbacks’ in the 1950s, and the raids and border violence against ‘Mexican illegals’ throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s” (Sánchez 352). These acts of violence and prejudice have reinforced immense feelings of exclusion towards Mexican people, as well as created and upheld these attitudes and structures in which they have the potential to be harmed.

For decades, the United States allowed the maintenance of these harmful beliefs and judgements towards Mexican Americans and Mexican individuals, and this is something that still occurs today. Current immigration policies in the United States have also allowed for these negative mental and physical consequences to continue. According to the American Immigration Council, The United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has contributed to the deportation of 231,000 Mexican individuals from 2013-2018 that had at least one child that was a U.S. citizen. Similarly, in 2019, 27,980 Mexican people were deported that had U.S. born children (American Immigration Council). This demonstrates one of the many ways in which Mexican and Chicano-identifying people are treated and the cultural shame they have endured in the U.S. because of their identity. Modern bands like Chicano Batman are working to reclaim the word Chicano in both a positive and powerful sense in relation to identity within the United States. They are shedding light on the importance of the Chicano identity and history and becoming additional representation for those within this community.

Since the creation of the United States, many artists have used creative means to express their beliefs about the country, including both appreciation for it and what could be changed for the better. “This Land is Your Land” is a song known by many due to its peak in popularity in the 1940s that has lasted to this day, and this Woody Guthrie song

has been well-received and chanted by many throughout the country as a patriotic song. Although this song includes patriotic themes, Guthrie also worked to ensure that the song included elements that brought attention to the economic disparities in the country. In fact, Guthrie is believed to have written this song as a unique response to the song “God Bless America” by Irving Berlin (“This Land is Your Land”). According to the Library of Congress, Guthrie’s observations “accurately reflected the fact that, even in the depths of the Depression, nearly 20 percent of the nation’s wealth rested with one percent of its population” (“This Land is Your Land”). Guthrie wrote this nationally acclaimed song as a means to acknowledge both the beauty and injustice of the country. He also included lines of a similar sentiment in the song that were later removed from recorded versions. Two of these lines read: “Nobody living can make me turn back / this land was made for you and me” (“This Land is Your Land”). These lines reflect more of an objection in relation to the unequal distribution of property, wealth, and land in the United States.

While the Woody Guthrie version of “This Land is Your Land” was advanced for its time in promoting a more inclusive United States, the Spanish lines added to the Chicano Batman cover of the song are what makes it so unique and sets it apart from the original version from several decades ago. The Spanish stanza of lines from their cover state:

No existe nadie que pueda pararme  
 Por el camino de libertad  
 No existe nadie que pueda hacerme volver  
 Esta tierra es para ti, para mí.

In English, this stanza translates to read: “There is no one who can stop me / On the path of freedom / There is no one who can make me return / This land is for you, for me.” It is noteworthy to mention that the Spanish lines from the song have been partially translated through a combination of translations from both *SpanishDict* and myself. The line “Esta tierra es para ti y para mí” is repeated again as the last line of the song, and

this repetition highlights the specific importance of presenting that the U.S does not solely exist for one group of people/people that were born there. While these Spanish lines only make up a smaller section of the entire song, the significance of this stanza is immense because of the ways in which it speaks for immigrants and envisions a new pro-immigrant version. The specific line “No existe nadie que pueda hacerme volver” or “There is no one who can make me return” especially display this belief because of the ways that they express Mexican immigrants/Chicanos should not be-and will not be forced to leave the United States to live in Mexico.

While the original version of the song does express views that the U.S. should be shared between everyone with the consistent line of “This land was made for you and me,” it does not include lines that are specifically aimed toward the inclusion of all immigrants and Latino/Chicano immigrants in the same modern way the Chicano Batman version does. They put emphasis on the fact that these are their rights as human beings, and their uplifting lyrics within the song begin to work as a sense of activism in itself. These Chicano Batman lyrics discourage sentiments of alienation towards people who are immigrants in the United States and instead promote ideals sharing the belief that these people belong in the U.S. and should share the same freedoms as every individual who lives in the country.

As a band, Chicano Batman has already achieved success when it comes to sharing the messages of Latino voices through their music. Their influence has been noted by many, and people in the Chicano and Latino community have been able to make strong personal connections with their songs and musical performances. In a review of “Are We Not Foreigners Here? Indigenous Nationalism in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands” by Jeffrey Schulze, Gregorio Gonzales recounts a time in which he was able to see Chicano Batman perform their cover of “This Land is Your Land” live in New Mexico and how powerful this experience was for him. He shared that after the Spanish lines in the song were

first sung, “Chicano nationalism and Native nationhood soaked the sea of brown bodies grooving to the psychedelic soul rhythm pulsing through the veins of this transnational Indigenous, urban border town of Indian country” and “a crescendo of voices then emerged from the crowd to yell protest anthems in Lakota” (Gonzales). Gonzales’ experience in this crowd of people demonstrates a first-hand account of how Chicano Batman’s cover of “This Land is Your Land” has directly positively impacted the Chicano community in the United States. Gonzales was able to see the Latino and Indigenous communities that were brought together through Chicano Batman’s cover, and this goes to show just how impactful the Spanish lines were for Chicano and Latino voices.

Music and songs are powerful tools which artists are able to use to craft entirely new meanings and connections for themselves, as well as their audiences, to experience. The exposure and influence that Chicano Batman has had as a band through their cover of “This Land is Your Land” has instilled further growth, pride, and belonging within the Chicano label and Chicano/Latino community in the United States. It has allowed for Chicano/Latino people to claim the sense of belonging and that they deserve to live and exist as human beings wherever they are in this country-without the dismissive and prejudiced views of others interfering. This cover of “This Land is Your Land” has promoted ideas of inclusivity and empowerment, and Chicano Batman as a band itself continues to provide Latino representation for audiences of Latino/Chicano and their communities.

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