Cultural Daily

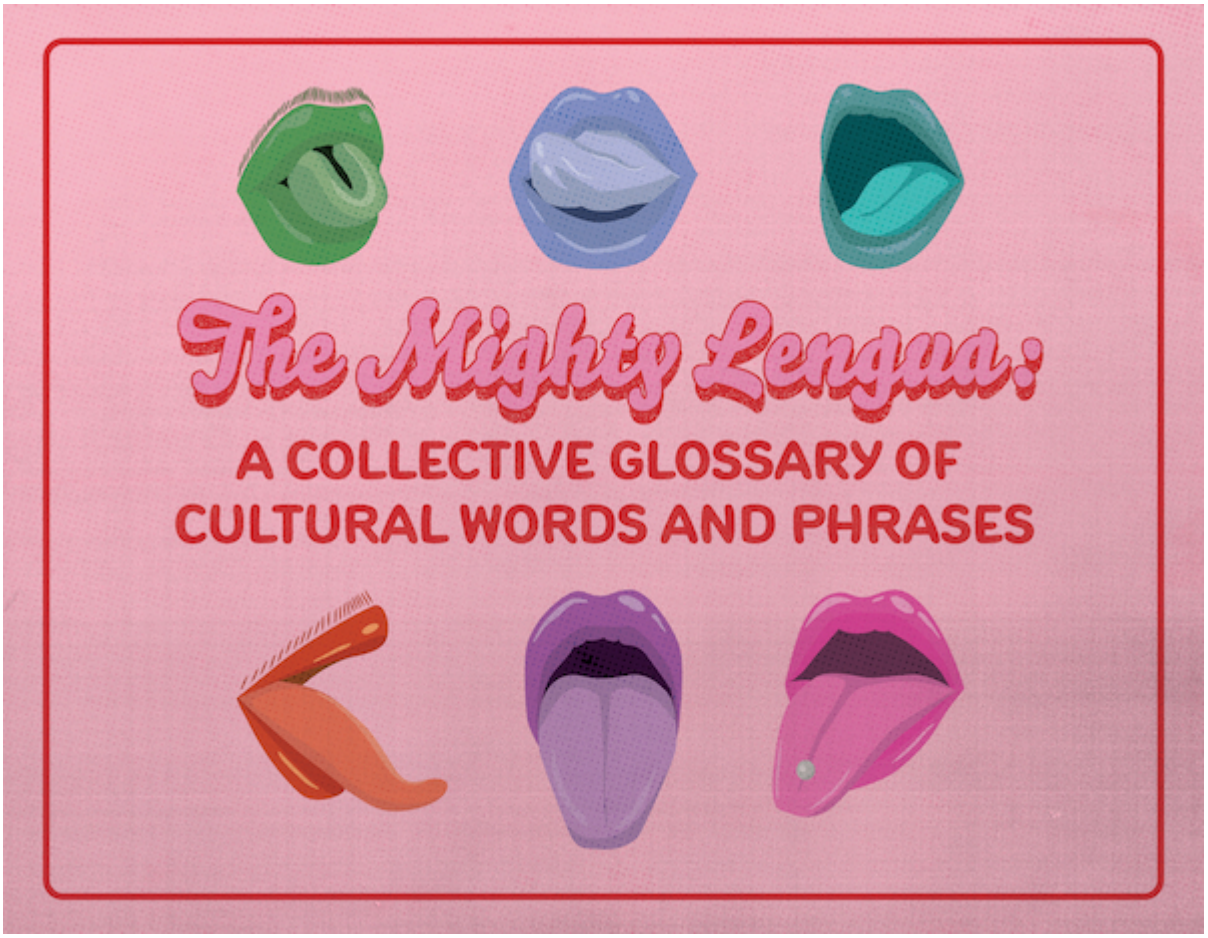
Independent Voices, New Perspectives

# The Mighty Lengua: A Collective Glossary of Cultural Words and Phrases

Olga Garcia Echeverria · Wednesday, May 12th, 2021

"The tongue is a snazzy tool"—tatiana de la tierra

*This glossary evolved out of a writing activity in our Chicanx Literature class (CLS 4020) at California State University, Los Angeles in the spring of 2021. The assignment was to celebrate the mighty lengua and produce vignettes about cultural expressions we grew up with. The entries that follow are short excerpts from longer vignettes. They highlight personal stories about cultural words and phrases that have shaped us, uplifted us, and at times also insulted and oppressed us. La profe Olga Garcia Echeverria and one of her former students, Michael Nicolas Elias, organized the entries and made minor edits to tighten each piece. In the editing process, however, word choice / syntax / and storytelling style were honored over prescriptive grammar to maintain each author's unique voice. Because we strongly believe that a mighty tongue is also a free tongue, we freely code-switch (sin italics) wherever nos da la creative gana. A special thank you to visual artist Tanya Flores-Hodgson for creating such a cool lengua graphic to accompany our glossary. We invite you, dear reader, to enter your own story about a cultural word/phrase that you grew up with in the comments. We'd love to read them!*




***

## “¡Qué bárbara!” by Vanessa Campuzano

Whenever my mom uses “¡Qué bárbara!” I feel like I am taking a step into uncharted territory and that I am daring enough to break barriers, especially as a first-generation Chicana. These phrases can mean either tremendous girl or outrageous in Spanish. It can also mean something exaggerated or scandalous. In my awkward teenage years, I knew I looked pretty when I showed my mom my outfit and she said, “¡Qué bárbara!” When I won awards at school for my academic achievement and leadership, she always expressed her admiration through these two words. The message stuck with me.

## “Hijo/a de la Chingada” by Cristopher Guia Cortes

One phrase that has been most prevalent at home is “Hijo/a de la Chingada,” which oftentimes is referred to as “Hijo/a de tu Madre.” My mother has used this phrase to correct my slanted behavior, from tantrums to moments when I was being a maleducado and malcriado. In regards to the positive connotations of this phrase, my mother raised us independently without the help of a man and seeing that her kids are striving to become what she was in essence denied because of generational poverty generates a positive meaning to the phrase. An example of this would be celebrating the successes of her kids, like “¡Hijo de la Chingada! ¡Sí pudiste!”

*

## “Pocho” by Jesus Cambero Elias

“¿No sabes cómo hablar español? ¡Eres pocho, guey!” These are some of the comments I would hear growing up in my neighborhood. However, they didn’t realize that as a kid, I was laughed at by my own teachers for speaking Spanish. I was looked down on and bullied because I spoke Spanish while trying to learn English in elementary. This discouraged me from speaking Spanish for a while. Later as a teen, I was intimidated by Mexicans who spoke Spanish fluently. I thought I was alone, but since majoring in Chicanx Latinx Studies, I have encountered many peers sharing the same experience. Now I am owning the narrative of being “pocho” and no longer care what others say about me. Now when I am called pocho, I reply, “¡Sí, soy pocho! ¿Y qué?” My response always shocks them because I have accepted who I am and no longer let others define me.

*

## “Pinche Paula” by Maria Benicio

Every time I hear the word ‘pinche’ it gives me a sense of warmth because it reminds me of my childhood and my mom yelling at me or just saying “Pinche Paula” in response to my chistes. Although the word ‘pinche’ can be used in a negative context, it was more of a joke in my family. I clearly remember one particular occasion when all my cousins were over because they were rehearsing for my cousin’s quinceañera. I was running on the street and slipped on the gravel. My cousins helped me inside the house because my scratches were starting to burn and bleed. Before we went inside the house, right before getting to the door, we all looked at each other and said “Pinche Paula” in unison because we could already hear my mom’s response to my fall. Y sí, right there and then as soon as I walked up to my mom, she looked at me limping and saw my leg all scratched and bleeding and said, “¡Pinche Paula!”

*

## “Me Vale Madre” by Alejandra Marquez Gomez

The phrase “me vale madre” means “I do not care.” Translated literally it means, “It’s worth a mother to me” or “It doesn’t matter to me at all.” It’s not quite a curse, but it can be considered offensive in more formal situations. I have been hearing this phrase since I was very little because my dad and my older brother say “me vale madre” often, and now I use it too. Every time I did not want to do something, they’d say, “¡Me vale madre, tienes que hacerlo!” When my sister did not want to go to school because she wanted to stay home all day with her dog, my dad would say, “Me vale madre con quién te quieras quedar. ¡Tienes que ir a la escuela!” Once my friend from Guatemala asked why we say “me vale madre” and not “me vale padre.” My other friend (who is Mexican) said, “Well, once my grandma told me that Mexicans say and use the word ‘madre’ for everything because la madre vale mucho. Una madre es quién te dió la vida, so she is someone very important in your life.” But ever since my friend from Guatemala asked that question it made me think. In reality I do not know why we say “madre” instead of “padre.” Like instead of “chinga tu madre,” why not say, “chinga tu padre”?

*

## “Dime con quién andas y te diré quién eres” by Johnny Magana

The translation of this phrase is “tell me who you are with and I will tell you who you are.” My

World History teacher in high school would always bring up this phrase during class. There is the possibility that those you hang out with don't influence you, but it is really rare. Usually, people follow the footsteps of friends in order to feel included. The phrase "dime con quién andas y te diré quién eres" really resonates with me because I want to have a positive impact on my community.

*

## "Chingona" by Jaritza Ornelas

I love the term Chingona because I relate it to being a strong, independent, and badass woman. To me, the term represents being a feminist, a motivator, a liberator, and a Chicana. I did not grow up in a traditional household where I was given specific gender role duties. My dad taught me all the same things my brother learned and vice versa with my mom. My dad wanted me to be a tomboy who knew how to change a spare tire and who didn't have to rely on a man. I think a lot of young Latinas are now able to view themselves as Chingonas as they start challenging the injustices they face on a daily basis. All women have the ability to become Chingonas, as long as they stand up for themselves and for others who are not heard.

*

## "Ponte Chingona" by Rosalia Mendoza

To me, "ponte chingona" or "be a badass" has always given me motivation. As a little girl I learned how to ride a bike at the age of three without training wheels. My mom likes to tell everyone that story and she always mentions how I learned so fast. I guess it can be said that I was "poniéndome chingona" from a very young age. Playing soccer with boys from the age of eight to fifteen was definitely a challenge because I would always hear ladies make comments like, "Oh she's a girl," making it seem like I was weak or less than the boys. But my dad always reminded me that I was strong and a "chingona," which helped me fight my fears. Hearing the phrase "ponte chingona" always reminds me of my dad because it's one of his favorite lines. "Ponte chingona para que no dependas de un hombre."

*

## "Callejera" by Paola Tavares

The word "callejera "directly translates to a "streetwalker" in English. In Spanish it can be a hurtful insult that parents can use against their daughters. When I was younger, I did not want to be the traditional eldest daughter that was supposed to be the mother figure in the family. I loved to go to parties, hang out with my friends, and I had a drinking problem. My bad habits got worse and worse, but my mother did not know how to stop it and neither did I. I slowly started unraveling the years of childhood trauma and using drugs as a coping mechanism. So every time I wanted to go out, my mom would insult me and call me a "callejera que solo le gusta la calle." Now that I am a little bit more grown up, I have managed to turn things around. When I do decide to go out and come home late, my mom makes the joke that "ya llegó la callejera" and we all laugh. It doesn't have the same bitter insult that it did when I was a teenager. My friend and I now use it as a joke and a mantra. We are "Las Callejeras" who are only for the streets.

*

## “Metiche / Handle Your Scandal” by Steven Montoya

The word “metiche” holds a lot of meaning to me. Every time I’d go to my grandma’s house from my mom’s side, my grandfather would say that to me. I came to realize that my grandfather was teaching me to mind my own business and not gossip about other people. In other words, handle your scandal. My grandfather’s frequent use of the word “metiche” is a fond memory and lesson that I’m gonna keep forever. I’m the type of person who will either spill my guts or say nothing at all, but I’m learning to balance. I now wonder where my grandpa got that word from. Who taught him this “metiche” lesson or value? He passed away January 4, 2021, so I can’t ask him. I’m always gonna remember his use of the word “metiche” though, among the many other lessons he taught me. My grandpa was a mensch and if I can handle my scandal just as he did, I think I will make him just a little prouder.

*

## “¡Ganas!” by Juan Castaneda

Whether it was with my studies, playing recreational sports, or daily challenges, my mother always reminded me that it took “ganas” to get it all done. I grew up with this word and it is still used in my home today. “Ganas” helped me when I was thinking of dropping out of high school. I heard the word “ganas” when I walked across the stage to receive my four Associate Degrees at my local community college. And in recent years, I find myself saying these powerful words of “ganas” and “don’t give up” to the community youth I mentor and coach.

*

## “Ponte las pilas” by Israel Tamayo

“Ponte las pilas” literally means “put your batteries on.” My mother would say this to me in Spanish to encourage me to always give whatever I was doing my all. Growing up, she always told me that it was important to give my full energy and focus to things I cared about and aspirations I wanted to see become a reality. This was because even if things did not end up going the way I wanted them to, I could find comfort in the fact that I had done everything I could. I developed this positive mindset with my mother’s encouragement. Embracing the cultural dicho “ponte las pilas” has enabled me to really spread my wings and attempt things that the past me only dreamed of doing.

*

## “Si vas a hacer algo, hazlo bien” by Michelle Ontiveros

Saturdays were typically our day for cleaning and my dad would have us do chores, like mop, wash laundry, broom, wash dishes, and much more. While I try to not look at it as a completely negative phrase, hearing it does sometimes feel a bit triggering because it was associated with anger, punishment, and anxiety. Even when it came to school, this saying made me feel that if I was not doing a million great things I was not doing enough. At times it feels like I keep setting unrealistic expectations for myself and I must always be perfect. But I just want to be myself, myself in a way that feels great and free from a perfectionist view.

*

## “Hija de tu Madre” by Cristina Cortes

The moment I came out of the womb, I was a llorona y chingona, therefore mi Madre and I would bump heads all the time porque eramos igualitas! As I began to walk and talk, things got harder between us. Time-outs became chanclasos, and chanclasos turned into chingadazos, of course with cariño, or so she says. If I was being an hocicona or malcriada, mi Madre would use this term to insult me, “¡Hija de tu Madre!” This, in reality, was an insult to her because the phrase implies a mirror/reflection of one’s own mother. Years later, the tables have turned. Today, when mi Madre finds out I am doing good in school she exclaims “¡Hija de tu Madre, saliste igualita de inteligente que yo!” Now that I am a mother, I have realized that I too had been using the phrase nonchalantly with my daughters. It is embedded in the crevices of my tongue, as it was embedded in my Madre’s lengua too. Pero now, it’s time to break away from this tradition because although I want mis hijas to be just like me, their Madre, I too want them to be just the way they are, traviesas, lloronas, and everything else in between.

*

## “Padiuxi Nagula” by Jesse Jimenez

My sister and I learned these Zapotec words at the same time. Our dad was excited to teach us how to say “padiuxi nagula” because they would be the first words that we would speak to our abuelita. It was 1996 and up until then we only knew about our abuelita when our dad shared stories of his childhood. Our family is originally from Oaxaca, Mexico. My parents migrated to Los Estados Unidos in the mid to late 1980s, cuándo no era tan difícil cruzar, and to this day we remain a mixed-status family. My sister and I were born in California, we grew up in the San Gabriel Valley, and we knew at a young age that what kept most of our family–and many other families–separated across borders were the Triple D’s: Distance, Documentation, y Dinero. Our dad’s side of the family, who we spent a lot of time with growing up, spoke Zapotec at family functions (cumpleaños, bautizos, Navidad), so naturally we thought that it was a normal thing, and we assumed that all Mexicans spoke an indigenous language. It was a rude awakening when we discovered that this was far from the truth (and that was before we learned how Indigeneity was/is regarded in Mexico, and also in the States, and this would play a part in some of the internalized racism that I would have to overcome). In Zapotec, the phrase “Padiuxi Nagula” means “Buenos días, Abuela,” and that is how we greeted our Nagula over the phone. A soft laugh came through the speaker, followed by, “Padiuxi Jesse. Padiuxi Sandy.” It would be years before I would say those same words to her in person, but back in 1996, it was just as memorable saying it to our grandmother for the first time on the phone.

*

## “No Manches” by Yecenia Cardenas Gomez

I learned this phrase when I was very small. I often heard it from my older cousins and aunts. I was raised in Pachuca, Hidalgo Mexico, a state that is close to Central Mexico, where the Chilangos (People from other Mexican States living in Mexico City) live. Chilangos, along with other people like my uncles, aunts and older cousins, often use “No Manches” as a reaction to something negative or something that is not right, or unjust. It can be used to call out others, as in “El gobierno siempre la está manchando” or to check the self, “La estoy manchando.” Earlier in the semester I was laid off as a CNA because my DACA work permit expired, and due to the Covid-19

pandemic, it's taking a lot longer than usual to renew current work permits. A part of me wants to blame this on myself, "No manches,Yecenia!" I am a single mother of a six-year-old and I can't afford to not stay on top of such things. But then I think about everything we have to juggle as immigrants and as DACA recipients, all those hoops we have to jump through just to survive, especially during this pandemic, and I say, "No manchen!"

*

## "Soy Chingona" by Yahaira Mayen

The word "chingona" means so much to me. It translates to a "badass woman", which I am. On my graduation cap for high school, I put "Chillona Chingona y Xicana." After all the tears, hard work, and dedication, I was still able to come out on top. Depression can make you feel so small, but when I look back and see how far I came, damm right you know I'm a Chingona. If anyone has a problem with it, too bad they are going to have to kick it. We all have that Chingon/Chingona spirit, the me-vale-verga soul. Let's not limit ourselves to satisfy others.

*

## "Trucha" by Gisselle Samano

A cultural word I have a strong affinity to is "Trucha." I grew up hearing this word and using it all the time. The meaning of the word is to basically be aware of your surroundings or who is around you. Growing up in a neighborhood that wasn't always the safest, and being a girl, I was always told to be extra careful. My mother would always tell me, "Ponte trucha." Whether I was going to school, going downstairs to play, or even just to go get the mail or take out the trash, "Ponte trucha." The word has followed me since I was little and to this day, I still use it.

*

## "Me vale, ¿Y qué?" by Guadalupe Meneses

I have been raised by my dad ever since my mom passed away and my dad has always been afraid of not raising me and my sister right. Sometimes he would scold me more than my sister since I was the wild child / the rebel of the family. Whenever I did something wrong or dressed differently, since in middle school I went through like an "emo/gothic" phase, my dad would tell me, "¿Que no te da verguenza que te vea la gente así? ¿Qué van a decir?" I would always respond with, "Me vale." I have always been the type of person that doesn't care what others say. When the song "Me Vale" from Mana comes on, my family always tells me, "Mira, están tocando tu canción." Also, when it comes to my skin color my sister and dad are light skinned and me and my mom are more morenitas, so sometimes our family (especially my dad's side) always likes pointing out that I am more dark-skinned and it really bugs me, so I'll be like, "¿Y que? What is your point?" My skin color is part of my identity and it's something that I am proud of. I am happy with myself, but these comments are something I am trying to change in my family and help the generations to come so my nieces and nephews don't have to go through the same situation as me.

*

## "Chambiar" by Julio Henriquez

My family is from El Salvador and the word I connect with a lot is “chambiar,” which means “to work.” As a kid growing up, I began working with my parents as street vendors. I can remember the dark morning, the sun not being out, and the smell of food. I can still hear water boiling and the sound of steam coming from the ollas. I would see tamales in one olla, el atol’ de ‘lote in another, y en la otra olla, champurrado. My mother would say “Hay que chambiar para la renta” or “Hay que chambiar para comer.” My parents don’t have a formal education or 8:00 to 5:00 jobs, but what we have is great food and a good business that has lasted. I worked with them until I graduated high school. When my father or I get home from our work, my mom always says, “Ya vinieron de la chamba.”

*

## “Tengo Hueva” by Olga Garcia Echeverria

Currently one of my favorite phrases is “tengo hueva.” My mom always eggs me on and loves it when I say that I don’t want to do this or that porque tengo hueva. Hueva essentially means to be in a state of laziness. However, the cultural expression “tengo hueva” is so much more interesting, layered, and dramatic than plain inertia. Huevos in Spanish literally means eggs and is double-speak for balls. In this context, having hueva or being in a state of huevonada means having balls so big that you literally cannot move or do much. The state of laziness in hueva is essentially male, but women can embody this masculine trait and be big huevonas too. (I wanted to write a longer entry for this, but tengo hueva.)

This entry was posted on Wednesday, May 12th, 2021 at 4:10 pm and is filed under Education, Identity
You can follow any responses to this entry through the Comments (RSS) feed. You can skip to the end and leave a response. Pinging is currently not allowed.