

Taking a Bite Out of Social Injustice

By Youssef Martinez

This essay surprised and impressed me at every turn. Youssef begins personally, articulating the deep nostalgia for homeland food that plagued him and other immigrants to the Houston and the U.S. Then his discovery of the taco trucks is expressed with great insight and compassion – in one instant giving us surprising images of the palatial inside of a truck and in another recording the abuses and humiliation that immigrants endure when they get to America and have to start from scratch, regardless of their education, qualifications, and status in their home countries. Youssef makes a strong case that taco trucks are brilliant celebrations of a different kind of immigrant experience, one of triumph and independence. I recently reread the essay and was again overwhelmed by the beautiful, sharp writing and filled with admiration and hope for the taco truck drivers of our city and all that they represent to the rest of us.

---English Professor Gemini Wahhaj

Long ago, I was a red-faced little boy who had just arrived in the United States from Mexico. I was flushed with culture-shock, and I missed my mother and her cooking with all my heart. I longed for home, and most of all, I longed to be seated with my family at the dinner table, eating the wonderful food that my mother used to prepare for me. In America, my father tried his best to mimic her cooking, but he could not prepare anything that did not come in a box, despite his very admirable efforts. We had arrived in a small, Midwestern town that had very few Mexicans, and I spoke no English at all. For months, I had no friends, and desperately missed the food that reminded me of home.

After a year of searching for *authentic* Latin American food, like my mother used to make, I had found nothing but Taco-Bells and other Americanized spinoffs of Mexican food. It all tasted the same-- fake and mass-produced. To any Latin American, that ground beef in most dishes is unthinkable, as is the use of flour tortillas or American cheese slices. That is not Mexican food, and it bears no resemblance to what Latin Americans grow up eating. Slowly, I became more and more disillusioned with my new 'home.'

One day, long after I had already given up on finding the food that I pined for, my father and I pulled into the parking lot of an auto parts store. I sat in the car while my father went in. At that time, we had no A.C. in our vehicle, so the window was rolled down to permit a breeze to flow through. I leaned back in my chair and closed my eyes. Suddenly, I smelled something wonderful. I knew what it was, but I refused to get my hopes up until I was sure. It became unmistakable-- herbs and spices infused with an earthy odor, the fragrance of fresh, healthy beef being seared to a fatty crisp, the bursting aromas of freshly sliced lime and radishes, and the lingering scent of grilled baby-onions. The smells of my homeland were now here, in America! I was ecstatic.

I lunged forward and looked to my right. There I saw a large, white, box-truck, which was so old and scuffed-up that I immediately assumed it was in the parking lot because it had broken down there. Suddenly, a little window slid open and a man with a white hat and a white apron leaned out of the window and yelled something. Another man stopped the conversation he was having and quickly walked over and grabbed a little white bag from the window sill. He opened it, and did not even move a step away before he began to eat. There, half-wrapped in tinfoil, I saw some of the food from my childhood; black beans with jalapenos and crumbling cheese, beside a bed of rice and fried plantains with cream. There were also a couple of tacos, made with real corn tortillas and beef chunks. This man also had other, much more complex Latin dishes available. Things like rice-stuffed egg-battered peppers, and a dish called "mole," made of chocolate and almond-cream, poured over chicken. He even had "Puchero," a hearty Mexican stew made of beef and various delicious vegetables. I could smell it all, and I was overjoyed.

I had never paid attention to a taco truck before, and in all honesty, I didn't know what they were. So this man struck me as someone quite interesting. He was not wearing a uniform with a name tag. His truck did not have a company logo, or a brand of any kind, anywhere. He did not seem to be part of some large corporation or chain. In fact, he looked just like many of my neighbors in Mexico. I determined that he was just a normal person, and that he had made this wonderful little business all on his own. I felt proud of him, though I did not even know him.

When my father came out of the store, I rattled on about what I had seen and a look came over his face as if to say, "Oh yeah, the taco-trucks. Why didn't I think of that?" My father had no cash on him, so he knew that he would not be able to buy anything for me to eat at that time, until we went home and got more money. He took me to the window to ask the man inside at what time he would close. Because my father is of Irish descent, he has white skin and blue eyes, so the man in the truck replied in broken English, "I close ten minutes. Maybe twenty. When the sun is gone."

To the man's surprise, my father began to speak Spanish and a friendly conversation ensued. I listened and learned. Out of all Latin America, it so happened that this man was from a region very near to my own. Because of our proximity, he cooked the dishes that I grew up with in almost the same way that I was used to. In overhearing their conversation, I became fascinated by the man's story. He had left his wife behind, and was only able to send for her many years later. He told us that he had become tired of working physically exhausting jobs for someone else, and so he saved his money and started his own business. He explained that he had never had enough money for his family, despite working many, many hours.

I listened as they spoke, intrigued, but also eager to find out if I would finally get to eat the food of my childhood. Finally, I interrupted and asked if there would be enough time to get the

cash to pay the man. My father explained that it would be "impossible" today, for there was simply not enough time, and though I knew it was true, I was saddened.

We said our goodbyes, promising to come back tomorrow to buy every everything on the menu, and then turned to leave. As I began to waddle away, I heard a rustling noise, and then I heard the man say, "Mijo, aqui" ("Here, son"). I turned and found the man stretching his arm out past the little window of his truck. He handed me something warm that had been hurriedly wrapped in a piece of foil. I opened it and beheld in my grasp, for the first time in a year, a little piece of home. It was reminiscent of my childhood, of my earliest memories; of my friends, of my mother's cooking, and even of my mother herself. I was impressionable and very young at the time, and I am told that I ate the first of two tacos through tiny sobs. I don't recall, but it is certainly possible.

At that time, it meant so much to me. But of course, you may think, "It's just a taco! What baby would cry over a taco?" But it was less about the food and more about what it represented to me, especially as a child. Not only had I finally found my homeland's cuisine, but I had met a man who had the same background as I had, and who was very kind and enthusiastic, as well as uplifting.

We frequented his truck many times after that, and he inspired me with stories about immigrants who had succeeded in America, despite the odds. There was something so enthralling about hearing this man talk about breaking the cultural mold for immigrants. He told me about the dangers of letting the world tell you how to live your life. He was very critical of his own people, saying that they were too often happy to kill themselves working for someone else, rather than taking a risk to move up in the world. He told me that he spurned the idea of going back to construction, or of his wife becoming a clothes launderer again. He also told me

that in the town where we lived, he was the first person to open a taco truck, since he could find nothing that resembled authentic Mexican food and had decided to start making it himself. Out of passion for Latin cuisine, but also out of desperation for a better life, he opened his taco truck business.

What he told me about the limitations placed on immigrants by society rings true to this day. Although stereotypical, it is true to say that immigrant Hispanic men are usually seen working in backbreaking construction trades such as concrete work, drywall installation, or exposed to the elements doing lawn care. The women fare no better, generally employed as fast-food workers, housekeepers, or maids (as my own mother is).

Consider also that Hispanic culture places a huge emphasis on the importance of food, which can easily become neglected in the rush of American life. This loss of tradition leads to a deterioration of the Hispanic immigrant's cultural identity. Personally, I can recall nothing in my childhood which received more time and attention than did cooking, and I can recall no happier, more affectionate moments in my youth than those spent sitting around the dinner table with my parents, with a plate of food before me. Immigrants often find that one of the things that they miss the most is the cuisine that they grew up eating, but have left behind.

Therefore, life in America can often be very disillusioning for Hispanic immigrants in two key ways; immigrants find that they work long hours for very low pay at unfulfilling jobs, while they have also been torn from the cuisine that embodies the spirit of their homeland and the culture of their people, which they cherish so deeply.

However, despite this taco truck owner's fatalistic views, not all Hispanic immigrants have chosen to settle. He himself is an example of how, hungry for a taste of home and disappointed with their career prospects, some Hispanic immigrants have found the solution to both problems

in an entrepreneurial leap of faith. Known to most as the iconic 'taco trucks,' mobile food catering businesses are accessible, realistic business opportunities which allow immigrants of all walks of life to express themselves and their culture through the culinary arts, as well as forge a new career path for themselves, one that brims with opportunities and the prospect of financial independence. To undertake the task of opening a taco truck is hardly a glamorous endeavor, but it is a wonderful one because it is an artful act of escape, if done successfully.

Not all Hispanic persons need to be gardeners, gas station clerks, or maids. In fact, it is a profoundly harmful thing for there to be so few career options available to Hispanic immigrants. There is nothing wrong, in the least, with being a maid or a gardener, or a gas station clerk, *if* one has chosen to lead that life. However, if immigrants simply choose these cookie-cutter careers because they are unable to acquire anything else, then there *is* something profoundly wrong taking place. Also, it is no secret that immigrants face a language barrier, and that foreign education rarely stacks up to that of American universities; Hispanic immigrants are disenfranchised from the start, stuck with the 'left over' careers that everyone else has passed up. Therefore, there is very little diversity in career options for Hispanic immigrants.

Naturally, this leads to stereotypes, labels and cliches that abound, unrestrained. For example, many Hispanic immigrants have casually turned a blind eye to such offensive cliches as that of Family Guy's 'Mexican Maid' character, which depicts an elderly Hispanic woman who speaks only broken English and is presented as being incapable of doing anything other than house chores. Stereotypes like these have been ruthlessly hammered into American culture, and have themselves been accepted by many Hispanic immigrants, who awkwardly blush, chuckle or look away when confronted with such caricatures. They do not know what to say: in the land of liberty, they are the unfortunate punchline to a joke that they do not even understand.

Furthermore, the condition of the Hispanic immigrant community has deteriorated from these unresolved issues. Over the course of decades, on a national scale, Hispanic immigrants' acceptance of such cultural stereotypes has resulted in a community of immigrant workers which is arguably the most oppressed, belittled, and disenfranchised of all the working classes found in America. Despite the complacency of some, many immigrants have become discontented, and have instead chosen to humbly, but sternly, stand up in the face of these insults.

They are the diamond in the rough; a widespread group of immigrants who have chosen to empower themselves through their entrepreneurial skills. They have done this by starting small businesses, a most interesting one being taco trucks. Admittedly, these tiny establishments seem unsuspecting, dull, and unimpressive, in nearly every regard. Profits for taco truck owners are mediocre at best and the work is barely different than fast-food. The owners occasionally slave over a hot stove for hours, and are often over-worked during peak rushes such as breakfast and lunch. Often, the trucks themselves are hideous-looking, with chipping, peeling paint, and exposed metal patches, worn and rusted. Honestly, looking from every angle on the outside, a taco truck can quickly seem to be nothing more than a failed attempt at a 'real' restaurant.

But these superficial impressions are misleading; when one is on the inside the truck looking out, it is an entirely different view. That is because, although a taco truck's appearance may be completely ordinary, its very existence means that whoever is inside has successfully escaped from the life-draining drudgery of twelve-hour shifts in the sun, swinging a hammer or digging a ditch. That person is no longer subjected to the will of a cruel, sometimes racist boss, or to the stresses of facing an impossible workload. It is a step up in life--if only a foot up onto the floor of a trailer bed.

These small businesses give back greatly to their community and provide fulfillment to their owners. They provide homesick immigrants with the dishes that they know and love, thereby encouraging and edifying them on their journey. They foster friendly conversations, meaningful dialogues, and new friendships. The owners themselves find that rather than being stifled in their cultural identities, they are empowered to be artistic, expressive, and demonstrative of their cultures in many creative ways. Rather than slowly watching their heritage and traditions dissolve into a fast-paced life filled with countless hours of unfulfilling work, they can develop themselves and their identities more than ever. For example, they may suddenly choose to add a festively decorated fruit drink to the menu for the holidays, or perfect a new dish that catches on and brings in revenue.

These small establishments also pose big challenges to the socio-economic molds of what immigrants are expected to adhere to. Opening a taco truck (or any other immigrant-owned business) is something of an act of confidence in one's own value and worth as a person. It is like telling your boss that you value yourself, and your family too much to needlessly endure hardships at work for chump change. It is a bet on yourself, but it is wonderfully rewarding when it works out.

These views are confirmed by a man whom I interviewed named Jairo, who is a taco-truck owner in Spring, Texas. Jairo used to work at a dead-end job at a factory, and before that, in construction. But he saved his money and eventually bought a trailer, which he converted into a taco stand. I found my eye drawn to his stand because of the way in which it was plastered with goofy, comical stickers and tropical decor. As he prepared my order, I was allowed inside to ask him about his work. Everything inside his truck was perfectly in order. There were no stains, spills, or bits of garbage. He decorated the inside just like the outside-- Hawaiian-themed. It

seemed to be a well-run operation, and he took great pride in it. There was an atmosphere of calmness, and Jairo himself exuded a positive, cheerful attitude. He prepared a plate of fried plantains with Mexican cream for me as we talked.

I asked him how he felt about being a taco truck owner, and whether he cooked with passion or if he did it just for money. He replied in Spanish, "Son, of course I'm very passionate about my food. You see the smiley face sticker on the window?" He leaned out and wrapped his arm around the glass to point at an enormous, yellow, smiling face sticker. "That's a man who wants to be here. That sticker doesn't have to be there. But food is everything, and if you can make your living with food? It's much nicer that way. If I didn't earn money, I couldn't afford to do what I love. It's great. I mean, when I was a kid, I was fat! No toys, no playing, no nothing. I just wanted to be in the kitchen with Mama, and we'd cook all day. She showed me how to cook. Dinner was the best part of the day. I grew up cooking and being around food. Some people, they don't have that. They have money and other stuff, and I think that's fine. But they don't have that connection to food."

I agreed, but later met and interviewed a man named Byron, an immigrant from Ecuador, who differed from Jairo in that his taco truck was made solely for financial gain, with very little to do with culinary passion. I asked Byron why he remains in America, rather than taking his savings and returning to Ecuador. He explained that, despite missing his eight children and his wife, he was providing for them with his business. "We all have people we miss. We all have people that we can't see. That's life. That's always been life. And you know what? No matter what you do, that's always going to be life. So, I do what I should. We have a house, you know? We aren't renting, my daughter is in a good school in Ecuador, and this little taco-stand paid for it. I own two of these, but I run this one. Anyhow, my daughter might still come on a visa here. This

is what it's all for. I could go back but I'd run out of money in five years or less. No, you should put your priorities in the right order. Is it about you, or about your kids and your wife?"

Jairo's words echoed these sentiments in their own way. When I asked him how he felt about his business, he said, "It's everything I push for. I mean, I know it's a small, little business, and there's thousands of them. It's nothing to a high-roller. It's only just a little taco-truck, but it's *my* taco-truck. I keep what I make, and it goes to my family. It doesn't go up the ladder to make some rich guy richer. It's for *my* children. It's actually for *us*."

He later stressed to me that making it to America is only half of the battle, and that if you let your passions and your entrepreneurial spirit mingle, with some hard work you can achieve many worthwhile things. He also told me about a documentary that recently came out about a man who practices brain surgery at John Hopkins. He attended higher schooling for something like twenty-one years, but was at first only an illegal immigrant who spoke no English and had no real prospects in America. Of course, there is a great difference between starting a taco-truck business and becoming a brain surgeon, but there are immigrants who have done both. I am thoroughly convinced that taco trucks are a step in the right direction for the Hispanic immigrant community to break free from unwarranted stereotypes and unjust socioeconomic boundaries. Also, the move up in society that Latin American immigrants experience by becoming business owners (rather than being perpetual employees) empowers and encourages them to be bolder, and to stand for themselves and their place in the world.

For example, in David Staff's article, "Culinary Workers Build Taco Truck 'Wall' Outside Trump Hotel in Las Vegas," a band of taco truck owners are seen taking a stand for themselves outside of a hotel owned by a man who has been openly critical of the Latin American immigrant community. Staff shows that these Latin American workers are not content

with the way in which things are moving politically in this country, as well as personally for their community of workers. They are irate over Donald Trump's repeated threats to build a wall, as well as the Trump Tower's management's unwillingness to recognize these workers as having a unionized status. The article shows us a community of upset Hispanic business owners who have found that Trump's comments "were offensive" (Staff 1). It also brings to light "an ongoing battle between the hotel's management and the Culinary Workers Union, which represents roughly 500...culinary employees"(Staff 1). The article expounds upon these workers' willingness to fight back in protest of Trump's racism and to "make light of his promise to build a wall spanning the length of the southern border" (Staff 1).

However, these obstacles are not the only ones that Latin American business owners face. In California, unjust legislation has been passed which has adversely affected the growth of the taco truck community. In Steven Greenhut's essay, "California Takes a Bite Out of Taco Trucks," we read about yet another taco truck threat. A tax agency called the Board of Equalization has been found to be "targeting and mistreating" (Greenhut 1) taco truck owners—by means of deceptive maneuvers involving unfair tax estimates, which are grossly unrealistic. The agency is "desperate for cash, and state officials are concocting unrealistic estimates of food sales and employing heavy handed tactics"(Greenhut 1). Essentially, the BOE is taking advantage of a disadvantaged small-business community which has, despite the BOE's claims, always had a solid record of "paying an acceptable amount" (Greenhut 1). It should also be known that these workers and Greenhut are not defending the idea that they should be spared of taxation: on the contrary, Greenhut states that he is "not arguing that small businesses shouldn't pay their fair share of taxes or comply with reasonable rules, but it's a sad day when the state government treats them like criminals--or like a piggybank" (Greenhut 1). As though beginning

their lives in American society as one of the most disenfranchised of all American communities were not enough, these underprivileged immigrants must now also weather a social and political storm that is centered around racism, fear-mongering, and the abuse of the poor by the wealthy.

Despite this, the Latin American community, specifically its immigrant population, has refused to back down and be bulldozed by racism, unfair taxation, or any other type of opposition. These immigrants choose not to succumb to the stereotypes and demands laid out for them by certain members of society, one of whom more closely resembles a tomato wearing a wig, than others. Instead, they continue to strive towards a better life in which they are self-sufficient, and able to do more for themselves and their families. I am happy to share in this often over-looked community because they have made something meaningful out of so little.

As I work through college, myself an immigrant, I find that I am impressed by their work ethic. For some immigrants, the promised land is never reached. Others arrive, but unfortunately settle, and work their lives away, hour by hour. Only a few, however, make it to America safely and *then* choose to give it one more push, to take ten more steps, and to make a wonderful life out of almost nothing. In this way, my community has formed a brighter future where only hardship, and an all-all-too predictable future of conformity, once awaited us.

Works Cited

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