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CULTURAL WORK

Our Migrant Meal: Toward an Immigrant Haggadah

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Abstract

Our Migrant Meal and *Towards an Immigrant Haggadah* is a work by Adolfo Guzman-Lopez and Sara Harris Ben-Ari that seeks to give people a framework for a periodic meal ritual to hold space for their own migrant experiences and those of other people.

Keywords

Food; Migration; Mexican; American; Jewish; Ritual

A swirl of memories tied to food ricocheted inside my head the night of October 19, 2019, on a hillside lawn in Los Angeles.

The tortillas so fresh when I was five years old in Tijuana that I would pinch the top edges into two long ears and call the tortilla a *burrito* (donkey). [The December bacalao dish](#) my cousin in Mexico City made with the olive oil, salted cod, olives, and other ingredients her father had bought weeks before he died. The rolled tacos, topped with guacamole that my poet friends and I ordered late at night after our poetry readings in our mid-20s in Southern California. The meal of condolence on Long Island a few years before for my wife's grandmother, a woman whose father and other relatives were murdered in Eastern Europe by the Nazis.

The gathering on the lawn of Barnsdall Art Park attracted over 100 people who were given a box of food with unleavened bread and a cactus salad. The event was called Our Migrant Meal, and included the following text, 'Toward an Immigrant Haggadah.' I, and my collaborator, Sara Harris Ben-Ari, shared different aspects of the American, Mexican, and Jewish experience.

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We'd shared *Pesach* (Passover meals)—'seder' is what the sit-down meal is called which means 'order' in Hebrew—and felt strongly that the meal's order, ingredients, prioritizing of interpretation and recollection, are key to increasing empathy and compassion.

Thanksgiving in the United States, at its core, is a holiday that centers on a family meal and links the food to gratitude. It's left to be seen whether the holiday's colonial roots—the beginnings of the genocide of American Indians and the land grab of their territories—can ever be shed.

Our event centered on the act of recalling our own migrant stories, those of our ancestors, and those of contemporary people we may not know but who need our help. And as in the seder, we tell the stories so that the creation of our words will bring forth healing and comfort.

By pairing food items from two cultures—the unleavened bread from the seder and the cactus salad of Mexican Indigenous origins—we hoped the memory of the night would stick and the experience would create enduring emotional and sensory anchors that food can create to ease the pain of migration. We hope this multi-dimensional dialogue invites people to engage with the textures, tastes and aromas that shape our ever-shifting sense of home and self.

Our Migrant Meal

By Adolfo Guzman-Lopez and Sara Harris Ben-Ari

These poems and this syncretic seder were originally presented at Barnsdall Art Park in the East Hollywood neighborhood of Los Angeles on October 27, 2019. The presentation was part of [Current LA Food](#) a celebration of the intersection of the arts, society, community and foodways. We called the project, Our Migrant Meal. It was inspired by the Haggadah, the text read each year during the Jewish holiday of Passover. The goal was to take the elements of storytelling, gratitude, diaspora, hardship, and eating which are part of the Passover ritual meal and offer them as methods to think about and make sense of and ritualize contemporary migrations and transitions in attendees' minds. Our Migrant Meal took place among community members and families from all over Los Angeles as they sat in folding chairs or on blankets in the early evening at the hilltop park. Max La Rivière-Hedrick and Julio César Morales created dozens of boxed meals for those in attendance that included a piece of unleavened bread (*matzoh*), cactus (*nopal* in Spanish) salad with tomato and cilantro.

AN INVOCATION AND POEMS:

It is not enough to remember our own departure, the exodus of our parents, the wanderings of our ancestors here and there, whenever the memory chooses to visit. We must set aside a time each year to remember the tears, to remember the danger, to remember the travels, to remember those who helped, to remember how close we were to death, to remember our stops along the way, and to recline on that night because we can express gratitude. We make room for those who are traveling now, those who know they must leave tomorrow, and those who cannot leave.

Food will allow us to go through this remembering.

A syncretic seder plate is presented for Rosh Hodesh, a ceremony song to the new moon.

The order of the meal is explained:

Find a place to sit with one another, a friend, a family member, or someone else. Look at each other as you sit, shake hands, hug, kiss, whatever each agrees to.

Say, thank you for being part of me and allowing me to be part of you.

A veces

El nopal

Extiende una penca tierna

Sin espina

Ofreciendo su comida

Para la sangre

Para los viajes

Inesperados.

Inhale as the meal comes to you, exhale as it is placed in front of you.

A veces

El nopal nos

Ofrece pura cochinilla

Color de sangre

Que se convierte

De una plaga

Hasta una belleza

Para teñir las telas

De la vida.

The meal shall include something green, cooked or raw, that symbolizes the trip, the trees you left behind, the grasses along the railway or road, the vegetation on the hill as you or your ancestors approached the destination.

Cilantro,

Epazote,

Quelites que crecen entre los pavimentos chuecos

De la ciudad

Una milpa

Para cosechar

Sin esperar

El regalo eterno

De lo verde

A dentro de lo grís.

The meal shall include a bread or something similar made out of a grain. It is the sustenance when times were tough, it is what got you and your ancestors through pain.

There shall be something red in the meal to remember the bloodshed where you or your ancestors departed from and the blood shed at the place you arrived.

A veces

Buscamos

El chile que pica

Lo suficiente

Para hacernos llorar.

A veces

El chile

Nos quema

Los lados

Del la lengua

Provoca

La lágrima

Que nos hace

Acordar

Toward an Immigrant Haggadah

By Adolfo Guzman-Lopez

For me and my mother the remembrance of our journey from Mexico City to Guanajuato, to Tijuana, to San Diego and to where we are now happens ad hoc, maybe when something triggers a recuerdo, every few years a deep sigh makes my mother say, we have gone through a lot.

That is not enough. Letting the feelings rear their head and take us by surprise is not enough. A time once a year, when we all sit down, when we tell the stories of walking, of getting on the bus and saying goodbye, of waiting for the thinnest moon to leave at night, of getting on a flight, the first and only time.

We need a yearly telling, a Haggadah, a yearly ritual.

A dinner with an order, a seder: foods that remind us of the tears, foods that remind us of the work, for me the work my mother did cleaning houses in Lomas de Chapultepec, of picking onions and strawberries in the fields of Guanajuato as a kid, of being fatherless and living from aunt to aunt, forced to wash dishes, mop, and serve others.

We need a time to sit down to a meal and remember the work our ancestors did, the deserts they crossed, the rocks that tore their souls, the God who betrayed them when it was God that was being killed there too.

We need an immigrant seder, a ritual dinner once a year to tell the stories, relive the hardship, be grateful that one journey is over.

A quick departure: unleavened bread; it's dry and flat.

A nopal salad is the way; it's the tree lined road out of Romita, a nopal salad pica la lengua, recuerda el camino, the way out of your town, your city, your countryside. The tomatoes remind us of the blood of those who could not leave fast enough. Cilantro leaves are the shade when we stop by the side of the road, we take a breath and wonder what the new home will be like.

We need to tell it to the children. How will we tell it, how will we tell them that we cried, how will we tell them that it was all worth it because their eyes glisten with the shine of the first evening star.

Along the way we left blood, hands covered our cries of pain.

And the evening closes with the children, as they look for the hidden matzoh, the hidden nopal, the hidden naan, the hidden pita, the hidden pupusa, they will be rewarded and they will be older and sit down to a dinner with their children and tell the story of how there is a sojourner in all of us, there is a refugee in all of us, there is an asylum seeker in all of us.

Conclusion

When that 2019 meal ended, and the boxes were cleaned up and people returned to their homes we hoped the flavors and their memories would remain in their mouths and minds. And maybe during our daily work commutes and the hustle and bustle of everyday life, a spark of memory of that dry bread and the oil dressing on the cactus would create a space to be with the social and political issues that affect so many people today, not necessarily to come up with answers but to keep engaging in dialogue with those around us to keep questioning, keep tasting, and keep remembering.