



Taco Night

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I remember the invitations:

red text on a white background, the name of the event in curly bold face surrounded by a crudely drawn piñata, a floppy sombrero, and a dancing *cucaracha*. A fourth grader that year, I gushed with enthusiasm about these sorts of cultural festivals—the different, the alien, the other—dancing around me, a dash of spice for a child of white flighters. Ms. Manning distributed the invitations in mid-April, providing parents ample time to plan for the event, which occurred the first week of May, on or around Cinco de Mayo.

A few weeks later my parents and I and a couple hundred other parents, teachers, students, and administrators, crowded into the cafeteria for Guilford Elementary School's annual Taco Night. The occasion was festive. I admired the colorful decorations, like the papier mâché piñatas designed by fifth-grade classes, then watched my parents try to squeeze into cafeteria style tables built for eight-year-olds. Sometimes the school hired a Mexican song and dance troupe from a neighboring town. They'd swing and sway and sing and smile. I'd watch, bouncing dutifully to the rhythm, hoping they'd play *La Bamba* or *Oye Como Va* so I could sing along, pretending to know the words. If it happened to be somebody's birthday the music teacher would lead us in a lively performance of *Cumpleaños Feliz* and give the kid some Mexican treats.

¡Olé!

Granted, not a single Mexican or Mexican-American student attended Guildford at the time. However, I do recall Ms. Manning asking Adolfo, a classmate whose family had immigrated from Guatemala, whether the Taco Night tacos were "authentic." He answered with a shrug. Granted, too, there was little educational substance to the evening; I knew nothing more about Mexico or Mexican American people upon leaving Taco Night than I did upon arriving. And granted, we never discussed more important concerns like, say, racism faced by Mexican Americans or the long history of U.S. imperialist intervention throughout Latin America. Still, hidden within Taco Night and the simultaneous absence of meaningful curricular attention to Mexican, Mexican American, Chicana/o people, or Latina/o people more broadly, were three critical and clarifying lessons: (1) Mexican culture is synonymous with tacos; (2) "Mexican" and "Guatemalan" are synonymous and by extension all Spanish-speaking people are the same and by further extension all Spanish-speaking people are synonymous with tacos (as well as sombreros and dancing *cucarachas*); and (3) white people love tacos, especially in those hard, crunchy shells which, I learned later, nobody in Mexico eats.

Thus began my diversity education: an introduction to a clearly identifiable and intensely stereotyped "other." And I could hardly wait until Pizza Night.