

Memories of Fire: Eduardo Galeano and the Geography of Guatemala

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Abstract

In *Memory of Fire*, a poetic narration of the history of the Americas from pre-Columbian times to the late 20th century, Eduardo Galeano furnishes readers with over 1200 of his trademark vignettes, some 35 of which pertain to Guatemala. Galeano evokes disparate aspects of the geography of Guatemala, past and present, in grounded miniatures of time, place, and episode. His sketches of the experiences of Maya peoples allow us to see them as survivors of three cycles of conquest: (1) conquest by imperial Spain; (2) conquest by local and international capitalism; and (3) conquest by state terror. Composed in the literary mode of creative non-fiction, *Memory of Fire* serves as an inspirational classroom text, exposing students not only to factual detail but also a powerful artistic imagination.

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If one can really penetrate the life of another age,
one is penetrating the life of one's own.

T.S. Eliot (1928).

1. Introduction

For three decades, the words “geography” and “Guatemala” for me have been synonymous. When, in June 1974, as a graduate student finishing up Master's fieldwork in Mexico, I decided to route myself through Guatemala before heading back to Canada, my life shifted in such a way that Guatemala became, from that moment on, an integral part of it. Little did I suspect, boarding a bus in San Cristóbal de las Casas, that before the day was over, Guatemala would insinuate itself so centrally on my consciousness.

South and east of Comitán the Grijalva Valley of Chiapas was hot, flat, and scrubby. Bit by bit, however, as the bus approached the border town of La Mesilla, a range of mountains came obtrusively into view—long, green, high, and alluring. Two casual passport checks straight out of a B. Traven story allowed me to walk from one country into another, running a gauntlet of bellowing money changers. I bought a soft drink from a roadside vendor and climbed onto a waiting bus, already chock-full of passengers. We took off just as a deafening peal of thunder roared across the heavens. I gaped out the window, awed by the splendour of the scene. Beauty here assumed an elemental, shifting guise: trees glimpsed then engulfed by mist; a grape-dark, menacing sky; a torrential downpour of rain; a wan burst of sun; all around, a kaleidoscopic play of shadow and light. Steep patchworks of fields and forests towered above the valley that followed the course of the Río Selagua, whose raging waters threatened to flood the road at every hairpin turn. The bus would screech to a halt mile after mile, dropping people off, picking people up,

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all of whom were carrying some item or other—a steel *machete*, a basket laden with fruit, a bundle of firewood, an armful of flowers, a chicken or a rooster, even a small pig. And, of course, babies—lots and lots of babies, one of whom relieved herself against me through the thick folds of her mother’s shawl. These people were for the most part Indians—men, women, and children wrapped up not just in startlingly colourful clothes but in exchanges beyond my ability to comprehend, for their conversations were conducted in an idiom my Spanish could not access. I reached my destination mesmerized.

In Huehuetenango’s central plaza, a three-dimensional relief map fifty paces in circumference, and funky in the extreme, informed me that the mountains I had skirted were the Sierra de los Cuchumatanes, home to dozens of communities identified by the names of Catholic saints painted on tiny metal flags inserted across the surface of the relief map like candles on a birthday cake. There it was in front of me, a doctoral dissertation topic cast in plaster and cement, framed by the curve of a low iron fence toddlers ran around and sweethearts cuddled against. The virtual topography someone had toiled hard to render was littered with broken glass, plastic bags, cigarette ends, and dog droppings. Just as I was about to turn in for the night—a bed at the Hotel Central went for a dollar, fleas and room-mates included—a thought entered my mind and entrenched itself: why not write about the Cuchumatán highlands and the Maya peoples who inhabit them? That was the beginning of my geography of Guatemala.¹

Eduardo Galeano’s geography of Guatemala began seven years before mine did. In 1967 the writer from Uruguay spent time not in the Sierra de los Cuchumatanes but in the Sierra de las Minas, a mountain chain in the east of the country where a guerrilla insurgency had sprung up. It was a visceral experience for him, one that scarred and shaped him. His account of that experience is the subject of one book, *Guatemala: Occupied Country* (1969), and a crucial frame of reference in another, *Days and Nights of Love and War* (1983). Other countries and other struggles, over the years, have commanded Galeano’s attention, but Guatemala exerts on him a peculiar, unrelenting hold, as it does for many. Nowhere is his relationship with the country explored more creatively, communicated to the reader more passionately, than in his epic trilogy *Memory of Fire* (1985, 1987, 1988), in which some 35 of his trademark vignettes, numbering over 1200 in all, furnish an incisive, grounded reconstruction of the vicissitudes of land and life in Guatemala.

¹ My doctoral study on the Sierra de los Cuchumatanes (Lovell, 1980) later became the subject of three monographs in English (Lovell, 1992; 1985; 2005) and one in Spanish (1990). A second Spanish-language edition is nearing completion.

What follows is an act of interpretive collaboration, in which fragments from Galeano’s *Memory of Fire* are deployed to illustrate the three cycles of conquest to which Maya peoples have been subjected since the early 16th century: conquest by imperial Spain; conquest by local and international capitalism; and conquest by state terror.² As the base of time past tapers toward the peak of time present, the iniquities visited upon Guatemala’s Indians are shared also by a mass of exploited, impoverished Ladinos, mixed-bloods with whom Mayas now live side-by-side in squalor—deprived, marginalized, and neglected souls who inhabit a land of potential plenty.

2. Women and men of corn

But first, as Galeano himself would insist, we must listen to Maya voices, ones that spoke in many tongues—today, more than 20 Maya languages can still be heard in Guatemala—long before the cut and thrust of European intrusion. From the *Popol Vuh*, for Dennis Tedlock (1985) the “Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life,” Galeano invokes the mythic origins of human kind on the sacred Guatemalan earth:

The gods made the first Maya-Quichés out of clay. Few survived. They were soft, lacking strength; they fell apart before they could walk.

Then the gods tried wood. The wooden dolls talked and walked but were dry; they had no blood nor substance, no memory and no purpose. They didn’t know how to talk to the gods, or couldn’t think of anything to say to them.

Then the gods made mothers and fathers out of corn. They molded their flesh with yellow corn and white corn.

The women and men of corn saw as much as the gods. Their glance ranged over the whole world.

The gods breathed on them and left their eyes forever clouded, because they didn’t want people to see over the horizon.³

The descendants of the women and men of corn, however, could see over the horizon. In vain they tried to deal with what they saw coming their way.

² The notion of three cycles of conquest transforming Maya life from the 16th century on is one I first conceived of as such after reading the classic work of Edward Spicer (1962) on the American Southwest. One article (Lovell, 1988a) engages the notion explicitly, but two others (Lovell, 1988b, 2000a) argue the case similarly. I have discussed the work of Galeano on three previous occasions (Lovell, 1992a, 1993, 2000b). Fischlin and Nandorfy (2003) subject Galeano’s work to extended critique.

³ Galeano (1985, pp. 28–29). The source upon which the vignette is based is Recinos (1976).

3. Conquest by imperial Spain

In 1522, both the K'iche' and the Kaqchikel, once kindred Maya spirits but by then bitter, warring rivals, dispatched representatives to confer with Hernán Cortés in the Mexican city of Tuxpán. Cortés had defeated the Aztecs at Tenochtitlán the year before and had turned his gaze south, to regions beyond Aztec control, where “rich lands” and “different peoples” were reported to exist. What, precisely, the Maya delegations discussed with Cortés is a matter of conjecture, but we do know that, in the wake of the visitations, Cortés entrusted and equipped Pedro de Alvarado with an expeditionary force whose goal was the conquest of Guatemala. Forging an alliance with the Spaniards against their K'iche' enemies, an alliance they were later to break if not regret, the Kaqchikel played a decisive role, as did Mexican Indian auxiliaries, in the outcome of initial military engagements (Asselbergs, 2002; Lovell and Lutz, 2001). Galeano captures a nuanced sense of the complexity of pre-contact scenarios, and of contact-period politics, in his description of the fall of the K'iche' capital, Utatlán, in 1524:

The Indian chiefs are a handful of bones, black as soot, which lie amid the rubble of the city. Today in the capital of the Quichés there is nothing that does not smell of burning.

Almost a century ago, a prophet had spoken. It was a chief of the Cakchiqueles who said, when the Quichés were about to tear out his heart: *Know that certain men, armed and clothed from head to feet and not naked like us, will destroy these buildings and reduce you to living in the caves of owls and wildcats and all this grandeur will vanish.*

He spoke while they killed him, here, in this city of ravines that Pedro de Alvarado's soldiers have just turned into a bonfire. The vanquished chief cursed the Quichés, and even then it had already been a long time that the Quichés had dominated Guatemala's other peoples.⁴

Alvarado's wanton restlessness, including his disastrous campaign to challenge Francisco Pizarro in the conquest of Peru, is vividly traced before Galeano documents the conqueror's personal fate as well as that of his two wives, the sisters Francisca and Beatriz de la Cueva.⁵ He then focuses, in a series of strategic snapshots, on Maya resistance to Spanish rule, in which cer-

tain attitudes and patterns of behaviour become what James Scott (1985) celebrates as the “weapons of the weak.” At Samayac in 1625, for instance, Galeano tells us:

The monks proclaim that no memory or trace remains of the rites and ancient customs of the Verapaz region, but the town criers grow hoarse proclaiming the succession of edicts of prohibition.

Juan Maldonado, judge of the Royal Audiencia, now issues in the town of Samayac new ordinances *against dances injurious to the Indians' consciences and to the keeping of the Christian law they profess*, because such dances *bring to mind ancient sacrifices and rites and are an offense to Our Lord*. The Indians squander money on feathers, dresses, and masks and *lose much time in rehearsals and drinking bouts, which keep them from reporting for work at the haciendas, paying their tribute, and maintaining their households.*

Anyone dancing the *tun* will get a hundred lashes.⁶

A century and a half later, religious backsliding in the Maya countryside continued unabated. It was plain for all to see, and undermined the entire spiritual enterprise. A reading of the “Moral-Geographic Description,” pieced together by Archbishop Pedro Cortés y Larraz (1958) in the late 18th century from reports submitted to him by local parish priests, allows Galeano to elaborate on the highly unorthodox nature of Maya Christianity. In the following vignette, the time is 1774, the place San Andrés Itzapan. San Andrés is a stone's throw from Santiago, the colonial capital whose destruction by earthquake the year before conjures up an image of crumbling Spanish dreams:

The Indians are forced to spit every time they mention one of their gods. They are forced to dance new dances, the Dance of the Conquest and the Dance of Moors and Christians, which celebrate the invasion of America and the humiliation of the infidels.

They are forced to cover up their bodies, because the struggle against idolatry is also a struggle against nudity, a dangerous nudity that, according to the archbishop of Guatemala, produces in anyone seeing it *much lesion in the brain.*

They are forced to repeat from memory the Praise Be to God, the Hail Mary, and the Our Father.

Have Guatemala's Indians become Christians?

⁴ Galeano (1985, p. 78). The sources upon which the vignette is based are Alvarado (1863) [1524] and Recinos (1976). All through *Memory of Fire* italics indicate that Galeano is quoting directly from his sources, rendered in this case from Spanish into English by his translator, Cedric Belfrage.

⁵ Galeano (1985, pp. 91–92 and 103–104).

⁶ Galeano (1985, pp. 204–205). The source upon which the vignette is based is Acuña (1975).

The doctrinal friar of San Andrés Itzapan is not very sure. He says he has explained the mystery of the Holy Trinity by folding a cloth and showing it to the Indians: *Look, a single cloth folded into three. In the same way God is one in three.* And he says this convinced the Indians that God is made of cloth.

The Indians parade the Virgin on feathered platforms. Calling her Grandmother of the Light, they ask her each night that tomorrow may bring the sun; but they venerate more devoutly the serpent that she grinds underfoot. They offer incense to the serpent, the old god who gives a good corn crop and good deer hunting and helps them to kill enemies. More than Saint George they worship the dragon, covering it with flowers; and the flowers at the feet of the horseman Santiago pay homage to the horse, not to the apostle. They recognize themselves in Jesus, who was condemned without proof, as they are; but they adore the cross not as a symbol of his immolation, but because the cross has the shape of the fruitful meeting of rain and soil.⁷

Galeano well understands not only the material but also the cultural bases of Maya resistance. Furthermore, he is acutely aware that Spanish might was imposed in the first place in no small measure because of the devastation Maya communities suffered on account of outbreaks of disease, “secret judgments of God” that were an unforeseen consequence of conquest.⁸ Galeano takes us back to Huehuetenango. The year is 1775:

The monk enters Huehuetenango through mists of incense. He thinks that infidels are paying homage in this way to the true God. But the mothers cover their new babies with cloths, so that the priest may not make them sick by looking at them. The clouds of incense are not for gratitude or welcome, but for exorcism. The copal resin burns and the smoke drifts up in supplication to the ancient Maya gods to halt the plagues that the Christians have brought.⁹

⁷ Galeano (1987, pp. 43–44). The source upon which the vignette is based is Solano (1974), who in turn lifts much of what he has to say from the tour-of-inspection of Cortés y Larraz (1958) [1768–1770].

⁸ Cook and Lovell (2001). In addition to my collaboration with Cook, I have written several other pieces about Old World disease and Native American depopulation, among them one that covers all of Spanish America (Lovell, 1992b) and another (Lovell, 1998) the New World in its entirety. For a discussion of the numerical dimensions of demographic collapse among Maya groups in Guatemala—an estimated contact population of two million plummeting to 128,000 by 1625—see Lovell and Lutz (1995).

⁹ Galeano (1987, pp. 44–45). His source, once again, is Solano (1974). Elsewhere (Lovell, 1988c) I have written about the havoc wrought by smallpox and typhus in the Huehuetenango region around the time at which Galeano’s vignette unfolds.

The plagues, alas, could not be halted. They lashed the Maya peoples of Guatemala until the mid-19th century, when one cycle of conquest gave way jaggedly to another. That conquest was spearheaded not by grisly pathogens but by Guatemala’s relentless search for a successful cash crop, one that would modernize the young, independent republic and make it part of a voracious world economy. The cash crop’s scientific name is *Coffea arabica*. We know it simply as coffee.

4. Conquest by local and international capitalism

How coffee first entered Guatemala, how it adapted well there to conditions that stimulated its development, how it embodied for the domestic and foreign interests who invested in its production the progressive aspirations of a fledgling nation, how it set an economic precedent for sugar, bananas, cotton, and other commodities to follow, how in the end it created a geography of inequality as pronounced as any in all Latin America—coming to terms with these complex, dynamic factors has generated a giddy body of literature.¹⁰ Coffee’s radical transformation of the cultural landscape signalled the true end of the colonial order, but not for fully half a century after independence had been declared. Many of the policies advocated between 1830 and 1839 by Liberals led by Mariano Gálvez and Francisco Morazán were reversed by the Conservative rule of Rafael Carrera (1844–1865). When Miguel García Granados (1871–1872) and in particular Justo Rufino Barrios (1873–1885) reasserted Liberal hegemony, a modernizing agenda was unleashed on the country’s resources, especially Indian land and Indian labour, with uncompromising intensity. On a walk through the corridors of power of Guatemala City in 1877, Galeano introduces us to the general he calls “The Civilizer,” who himself was a coffee planter:

Justo Rufino Barrios, president of Guatemala, closes his eyes and hears a din of railroads and steam engines violating the silence of the monasteries.

There is no stopping synthetic dyes in the world’s markets, and no one buys the cochineal and indigo that Guatemala sells. It’s time for coffee. The markets demand coffee and coffee demands lands and hands, trains and ports. *To modernize the country*, Barrios expels the parasitic monks, seizes from the Church its immense properties and gives them to his closest friends. He also expropriates the lands

¹⁰ A decade ago (Lovell, 1994) I grappled with this literature in a lengthy review essay, to which the reader is referred. Since then other important studies have appeared, among them the work of Jeffrey M. Paige (1997), Arturo Taracena (1999), and Regina Wagner (2001).

of Indian communities. Collective property is abolished by decree and compulsory peonage is imposed. *To integrate the Indian into the nation*, the liberal government makes him a serf of the new coffee plantations. The colonial system of forced labor returns.

Soldiers tour the plantations distributing Indians.¹¹

Galeano engages us with riveting vignettes of the governments of Manuel Estrada Cabrera (1898–1920) and Jorge Ubico (1931–1944) before he turns his attention to pivotal events in the mid-20th century from which Guatemala has yet to recover.¹² In a country in which official government statistics show that 90 percent of farms account for 16 percent of total farm area, while 2 percent of farms occupy 65 percent of total farm area, land reform and rural development lie at the heart of any attempt to tackle meaningfully the miserable lot of the vast majority of Guatemala's population, be they Indian or Ladino (De Villa and Lovell, 1999). Even raising the question of land reform, however, is such a charged political issue that only rarely is it debated seriously, let alone given priority consideration.

As with the introduction and impact of coffee, so efforts to make Guatemala's resources more available to its poorest inhabitants has been a notable subject of inquiry, especially the “democratic decade” or “ten years of spring” between 1944 and 1954.¹³ The trajectory of collision between naked US business stakes and the desire of two enlightened presidents to enact reforms is charted by Galeano in a series of vignettes that recount the self-serving actions of the United Fruit Company and the fate of Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán. The hey-day of United Fruit is portrayed by Galeano thus:

Throne of bananas, crown of bananas, a banana held like a scepter: Sam Zemurray, master of the lands and seas of the banana kingdom, did not believe it possible that his Guatemalan vassals could give him a headache. “*The Indians are too ignorant for Marxism*,” he used to say, and was applauded by his court at his royal palace in Boston, Massachusetts.

Thanks to the successive decrees of Manuel Estrada Cabrera, who governed surrounded by sycophants and spies, seas of slobber, forests of familiars; and of Jorge Ubico, who thought he was Napoleon but wasn't, Guatemala has remained part of United Fruit's vast dominion

for half a century. In Guatemala United Fruit can seize whatever land it wants—enormous unused tracts—and owns the railroad, the telephone, the telegraph, the ports, and the ships, not to speak of soldiers, politicians, and journalists.

Sam Zemurray's troubles began when president Juan José Arévalo forced the company to respect the union and its right to strike. From bad to worse: A new president, Jacobo Arbenz, introduces agrarian reform, seizes United Fruit's uncultivated lands, begins dividing them among a hundred thousand families, and acts as if Guatemala were ruled by the landless, the letterless, the breadless, the *less*.¹⁴

Of the ill-fated Arbenz, Galeano writes:

President Truman howled when workers on Guatemala's banana plantations started to behave like people. Now President Eisenhower spits lightning over the expropriation of United Fruit.

The government of the United States considers it an outrage that the government of Guatemala should take United Fruit's account books seriously. Arbenz proposes to pay as indemnity only the value that the company itself had placed on its lands to defraud the tax laws. John Foster Dulles, the secretary of state, demands 25 times that.

Jacobo Arbenz, accused of conspiring with Communists, draws his inspiration not from Lenin but from Abraham Lincoln. His agrarian reform, an attempt to modernize Guatemala capitalism, is less radical than the North American rural laws of almost a century ago.¹⁵

As soon as the Guatemalan Congress approved Decree 900, the cornerstone of the agrarian reform to which Galeano refers, Arbenz's days were numbered. Under Decree 900, 1.5 million acres of uncultivated land, about 400,000 acres of which belonged to United Fruit, was redistributed and paid for in government bonds. Of the \$8.3 million disbursed, United Fruit was awarded \$1.25 million, a figure based entirely (as Galeano makes clear) on the company's own taxation records.¹⁶ In the Cold War climate of the time—long before, ideologically speaking, global warming set in—Arbenz was demonized by the Eisenhower administration and distorted in the American media as a Red

¹¹ Galeano (1987, pp. 214–215). The source upon which the vignette is based is Cardoza y Aragón (1965).

¹² Galeano (1988, pp. 6–7 and 104–105).

¹³ Valuable contributions include the work of Cullather (1999), Gleijeses (1991), Handy (1994), and Immerman (1982).

¹⁴ Galeano (1988, 149). The sources upon which the vignette is based are Bernays (1965) and May and Plaza (1958).

¹⁵ Galeano (1988, pp. 149–150). The sources upon which the vignette is based are Cardoza y Aragón (1955) and Schlesinger and Kinzer (1983).

¹⁶ See Lovell (2000c, pp. 139–142 and 175–176) for elaboration.

Blight in the Banana Republic. His democratically-elected government was toppled in 1954 by internal opponents to his reform program joining forces with external US counterparts. In the wake of actions undertaken to safeguard the second cycle of conquest, an odious third was born.

5. Conquest by state terror

When, in the name of anti-Communism, a succession of military regimes declared war on their own people, few could have foreseen that civil strife in Guatemala would reap the “harvest of violence” it did.¹⁷ No-one has summed up more succinctly the enormity of destruction, or why it occurred, than Christian Tomuschat, the Professor of Law who headed the United Nations Truth Commission that investigated, after a peace accord was signed on December 29, 1996, the crimes committed during 36 years of brutal armed conflict. In an interview with a correspondent from the Guatemalan newspaper, *El Periódico*, Tomuschat responds to two questions asked of him as follows:

- (Q) *How does the armed conflict in Guatemala compare with other wars?*
- (A) In no other country in Latin America has there been recorded as many cases of human rights violations as here. In terms of statistics, Guatemala heads the list.
- (Q) *What explanation can you give to account for such brutality?*
- (A) That is difficult, for Guatemala has a history of violence that dates back centuries. Also, transformed into a doctrine of national security, anti-communism carries a heavy weight. No party involved, most of all the army, felt itself bound to any rule of law.¹⁸

Galeano’s vignettes of conquest by state terror focus on army conduct and the military mindset of Guatemala’s rulers. In the aptly titled “Newsreel,” filed in 1980 from Guatemala City, a government representative spills the beans on his country’s president from the safety of exile:

It was General Romeo Lucas García, president of Guatemala, who gave the order to set fire to the Spanish embassy with its occupants inside. This statement comes from Elías Barahona, official spokesman for the Ministry of the Interior, who calls a press conference after seeking asylum in Panama.

According to Barahona, General Lucas García is personally responsible for the deaths of the thirty-nine persons roasted alive by the police bombs. Among the victims were twenty-seven Indian leaders who had peacefully occupied the embassy to denounce the massacres in the Quiché region.

Barahona also states that General Lucas García commands the paramilitary and parapolice bands known as the Squadrons of Death, and helps draw up the lists of opponents condemned to disappear.

The former press secretary of the Interior Ministry claims that in Guatemala a “Program of Pacification and Eradication of Communism” is being carried out, based on a four-hundred-and-twenty-page document drawn up by specialists in the United States on the basis of their experience in the Vietnam war.

In the first half of 1980 in Guatemala, twenty-seven university professors, thirteen journalists, and seventy campesino leaders, mainly Indians, have been murdered. The repression has had a special intensity for Indian communities in the Quiché region, where large oil deposits have recently been discovered.¹⁹

Guatemala makes its final appearance in *Memory of Fire* “thirty years after the reconquest,” when Galeano confronts head on that most geographical entity of all: land. The fight for control of land and resources, the struggle for land and life—these are what “the battle for Guatemala” (Jonas, 1991) is really all about. Once again Galeano walks us through the corridors of power in Guatemala City. That most Orwellian of years, 1984, by which time the worst of the slaughter was over, provides Galeano with a fitting point of closure:

[T]he Bank of the Army is the country’s most important, after the Bank of America. Generals take turns in power, overthrowing each other, transforming dictatorship into dictatorship; but all apply the same policy of land seizure against the Indians guilty of inhabiting areas rich in oil, nickel, or whatever else turns out to be of value.

These are no longer the days of United Fruit, but rather of Getty Oil, Texaco, and the International Nickel Company. The generals wipe out many Indian communities wholesale and expel even more from their lands. Multitudes of hungry Indians, stripped of everything, wander the mountains. They come from horror, but they are not going to horror. They walk slowly, guided by the ancient

¹⁷ The fitting description belongs to Carmack (1988) and his collaborators.

¹⁸ *El Periódico*, February 24, 1999, p. 4.

¹⁹ Galeano (1988, p. 255). The source upon which the vignette is based is the Tribunal Permanente de los Pueblos (1984).

certainty that someday greed and arrogance will be punished. That's what the old people of corn assure the children of corn in the stories they tell them when night falls.²⁰

The stories told by the old people of corn, and listened to by the children of corn, eventually reached the world beyond their mountain homes. A young woman called Rigoberta Menchú, a K'iche' Maya from Chimel, a remote hamlet at the eastern edge of the Sierra de los Cuchumatanes, was among the first to break the silence.²¹ Few outsiders paid any attention. War was waged in the name of anti-Communism until the collapse of the Soviet Union laid bare the heinous fallacy of equating Guatemala's chronic ills with the designs of an "Evil Empire" an ocean and half a continent away. Peace in Guatemala does not mean the end of war, any more than the election of a civilian president signals the triumph of democracy. A vicious geography of inequality was the main cause of war, just as it remains the chief obstacle to peace.

That war, the UN Truth Commission revealed in its report, *Memory of Silence*, claimed the lives of more than 200,000 people, 93 per cent of whom were killed by state security forces. To guerrilla insurgents, including the group Galeano published his book about in 1969, could be attributed three per cent of all recorded abuses. Guerrilla excesses paled in comparison with the number of massacres committed by the army, a chilling 626. It is in its clinical analysis of army massacres that the Truth Commission cuts to the quick, for Tomuschat and his associates marshalled evidence in such a way as to lay charges of genocide under the precise definition of the term in the Geneva Conventions.

Having determined that 83.33 per cent of the victims of armed conflict were Maya Indians, the Truth Commission selected four regions of the northwest highlands to scrutinize the matter further. There the Truth Commission was "able to confirm that, between 1981 and 1983, the Army identified groups of the Maya population as the internal enemy, considering them to be an actual or potential support base for the guerrillas, with respect to material substance, a source of recruits, and a place to hide their members." A review of army documents allowed the Truth Commission to assert:

Acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, numerous groups of Mayas were not isolated acts or excesses committed by soldiers who were out of control, nor were they the result of possible improvisation by mid-level Army command. With great consternation, the Truth Commission concludes that many massacres and

other human rights violations committed against these groups obeyed a higher, strategically planned policy, manifested in actions which had a logical and coherent sequence.²²

The Truth Commission then argues:

Faced with several options to combat the insurgency, the State chose the one that caused the greatest loss of human life among non-combatant civilians. Rejecting other options, such as a political effort to reach agreements with disaffected non-combatant civilians, moving people away from the conflict areas, or the arrest of insurgents, the State opted for the annihilation of those it identified as its enemy.²³

Assured that it had at its disposal all the requisite proof, the Truth Commission concludes:

[A]gents of the State of Guatemala, within the framework of counterinsurgency operations carried out between 1981 and 1983, committed acts of genocide against groups of Maya people who lived in the four regions analyzed. This conclusion is based on the evidence that, in light of Article II of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, the killing of members of Maya groups occurred (Article IIa), serious bodily or mental harm was inflicted (Article IIb), and the group was deliberately subjected to living conditions calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part (Article IIIc). The conclusion is also based on the evidence that all these acts were committed "with intent to destroy, in whole or in part," groups identified by their common ethnicity, by reason thereof, whatever the cause, motive, or final objective of these acts may have been.²⁴

Two weeks after Tomuschat had officially presented the findings of the Truth Commission, President Bill Clinton visited Guatemala to attend a Central American summit. Expectations were mixed about what he would have to say. While, for some, his words fell casuistically short of an apology, to others Clinton's speech recognized the error of US ways. "It is important that I state clearly that support for military forces or intelligence

²⁰ Galeano (1988, 273). The sources upon which the vignette is based are Recinos (1976) and the Tribunal Permanente de los Pueblos (1984).

²¹ Menchú (1983).

²² The UN Truth Commission, technically the Comisión de Esclarecimiento Histórico (CEH), or "Commission for Historical Clarification," presented and later published its findings under the banner *Guatemala: Memory of Silence*. A multi-volume printed edition of the Truth Commission's work is available, as well as an online equivalent. The text I quote from is CEH (1999), which is a summary analysis with recommendations as to how Guatemala, and Guatemalans, might move on.

²³ CEH (1999).

²⁴ CEH (1999).

units which engaged in violent and widespread repression of the kind described in the [Truth Commission] report was wrong,” the president acknowledged. “The United States must not repeat that mistake. We must, and we will, instead continue to support the process of peace and reconciliation in Guatemala.”²⁵ Clinton’s words may not have been too little, but they certainly were uttered too late.

6. Return of memory

That epiphany in Huehuetenango was my point of departure. Since then, life as a geographer has taken me to most countries in Latin America. I have travelled by train across northern Mexico and by boat around southern Argentina. In between I have managed to reach Manaus, on a long haul through Brazil. Outside of Latin America, my research interests have taken me across Europe and on to Australia and New Zealand, with a stop along the way in Southeast Asia. While practising my craft, however, I have tried to heed Carl Sauer’s trenchant advice that a historical geographer be a “regional specialist.”²⁶ In the vast, daunting realm that is Latin America, taking Sauer’s advice to heart for me has meant never letting go of Guatemala. And Guatemala, in ways I often find difficult to articulate, has never let go of me.

Nor of Eduardo Galeano. The last time we met—December 2001 in Cuba, when fieldwork with one of my graduate students coincided with Galeano’s receiving a honorary doctorate from the University of Havana—we noticed that both our trousers were held up by leather belts stitched and sewn in Guatemala. Recalling a line of Pablo Neruda’s, I joked about the size of our “sweet waists of America.” We marvelled at how much our belts looked alike, if not the two men wearing them. I then gave Galeano what most educators, more so a freshly minted Doctor of Philosophy, would surely consider a suspicious gift: I handed him a set of exams. He looked at me quizzically.

Galeano begins *Memory of Fire* in a mode of textual confession, but one in which he whets the reader’s appetite with the prospect of redemption:

I was a wretched history student. History classes were like visits to the waxworks or the Region of the Dead. The past was lifeless, hollow, dumb. They taught us about the past so that we should resign ourselves with drained consciences to the present: not to make history, which was already made, but to accept it. Poor History had stopped breathing: betrayed in academic texts, lied about in classrooms, drowned in dates, they had impris-

oned her in museums and buried her, with floral wreaths, beneath statuary bronze and monumental marble.

Perhaps *Memory of Fire* can help give her back breath, liberty, and the word.²⁷

In defense of the word, Galeano subverts both canon and convention, committed above all to a quest for abiding essence, in which the research he conducts simply does not lend itself to “objective narration.” He continues:

I don’t know to what literary form this voice of voices belongs. *Memory of Fire* is not an anthology, clearly not; but I don’t know if it is a novel or essay or epic poem or testament or chronicle . . . Deciding robs me of no sleep. I do not believe in the frontiers that, according to literature’s customs officers, separate the forms.

I did not want to write an objective work—neither wanted to nor could. There is nothing neutral about this historical narration. Unable to distance myself, I take sides: I confess it and am not sorry. However, each fragment of this huge mosaic is based on a solid documentary foundation. What is told here has happened, although I tell it in my style and manner.²⁸

Galeano ends *Memory of Fire*, in its English-language incarnation, with a letter to his friend and translator, Cedric Belfrage. He writes:

My Dear Cedric:

Here goes the last volume of *Memory of Fire*. As you’ll see, it ends in 1984. Why not before, or after, I don’t know. Perhaps because that was the last year of my exile, the end of a cycle, the end of a century; or perhaps because the book and I know that the last page is also the first.²⁹

When, in 1979, I began teaching courses in Latin American geography, for 10 years thereafter my classes read standard regional texts to complement the material I exposed them to in the lecture hall and in the film theatre. My students still read standard regional texts, and get valuable information out of them. Nothing compares, however, with the passion they feel, the creativity they are exposed to, when engaging *Memory of Fire*. No other text about the history and geography of the Americas, at least one that I am aware of, guarantees such a rich return, emotionally as much as pedagogically. I know this because of the quality of the assignments the students submit for appraisal, in which Galeano’s

²⁵ Cited in Lovell (2000c).

²⁶ Sauer (1963 [1941]: 362).

²⁷ Galeano (1985, xv).

²⁸ Galeano (1985, xv).

²⁹ Galeano (1988, pp. 278–279).

trilogy not only informs them but moves and inspires them. I know this also because of one question I make a point of including in their final exam. Here it is as it appears most recently, in relation to a course I teach on the Geography of Middle America:

Now it's *your* turn! Having heard about how prominently his work is featured in *Geography* 257, Eduardo Galeano has written to you from his home in Montevideo, Uruguay. A new edition of *Memory of Fire* is to be published, and he wants to update *Century of the Wind* to bring his readers through to the present. He asks you to furnish him with ideas about what vignettes of time, place, and episode to include. For the years between 1984 and the present, provide Galeano with five Middle American options, rendering them (as best you can) in the vignette format your study of *Memory of Fire* indicates he might prefer.

The exam answers I handed Galeano in Havana were a selection drawn from student responses to the above question written over the past several years. He flicked through them. Once he realized what I had presented him with, he nodded his head, smiled, and looked up.

"What a wonderful idea, George," he said. "Your students are finishing the book for me."

By way of returning Galeano's gift of memory back to him, I close by offering a vignette called "Four Angels," composed by Fiona Akins when she was an undergraduate student in geography at Queen's University. Fiona's vignette contemplates, and puts into context, the iconography of *Guatemala: Nunca Más*, a massive human rights project undertaken by the Catholic Church (*Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala*, 1998). Her subject matter also pertains to *Haunted Land*, a documentary film I show in class, with its film-maker Mary Ellen Davis in attendance. The covers of all four volumes of *Nunca Más* are adorned by the likeness of an angel, hence Fiona's title.

It is 1998. A peace accord that is supposed to be "firm and lasting" was signed barely 15 months ago. After three anxious years, the labour of 600 trained investigators responsible for gathering together 1500 testimonies, four out of five of them those of Maya Indians, are finally over:

The wings are beautiful: sleek and white, clean and startling. They are the wings of angels. They are born from the death of a nameless victim, one more in a litany of silent deaths that have haunted the Guatemalan landscape. Daniel Hernández Salazar, the mother who gave birth to these angels, cradled the broken, quieted, discombobulated body, and from the pieces chose the wings, the smooth carved shoulder blades. He gives these dead parts to a living body, and thus creates an image of all Guatemalans: life in concert with

death, hope with despair, the dark of the past with the light of the future. His angels startle the viewer, in four heart-stopping images, two promised words: *Nunca más*. Never again, the angels plead, and then promise, will Guatemala be so violently, painfully, and repeatedly beaten. The first three angels lived silent, deaf, and blind for 36 years of crippling atrocities. The fourth, brother to the three, remembers and screams in anger, heart-break, and recovery, *para que todos lo sepan*.³⁰

"So that all shall know"—and remember. The man entrusted with the Recovery of Historical Memory behind *Nunca Más* was Monseñor Juan Gerardi. Two days after he tabled the findings of *Nunca Más*, which foreshadowed and later were confirmed by those of the Truth Commission, Bishop Gerardi was bludgeoned to death. The trial of those accused of his murder, which involves three former military officers, has yet to be resolved. Still to be brought to any semblance of justice are the murderers of countless thousands of innocent Guatemalans like him.

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³⁰ Fiona Akins handed in her take-home exam on December 17, 2002. This excerpt from it appears with her permission, as do all excerpts from *Memory of Fire* with Eduardo Galeano's. I thank them both for their cooperation and Michael K. Steinberg for inviting me to participate in this special "Guatemala issue" of *Geoforum*. The support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada is also gratefully acknowledged.

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