

alization of northern Europe might not have occurred, and certainly the present human population of that area could not exist in their absence. Although they originated in the Americas, today two-thirds of the world's production of potatoes and maize are produced in Europe and Asia and 80 per cent of the world's sweet potatoes are harvested in China. Native Americans may object to the term "New World" as Eurocentric and perhaps racist. These lands were familiar to their ancestors for many millennia before Europeans came. But while they have a point, their case misses the far more important fact that the biological exchange created a new world that their ancestors would not recognize.

Six major quadrupeds – cattle, sheep, goats, hogs, asses, and horses – probably did more than man to alter the ecology of the Western Hemisphere forever. Aided by European forage plants and many others that spread explosively, they undoubtedly destroyed more native biotic species than man himself, though we will never know.

THE LINKING of the Western Hemisphere to the other continents after a hiatus of 20 to 40 thousand years unleashed an invasion of pathogens that killed millions of human beings. But that, too, was a process marked by phases, and not confined to the Americas, which were not disease free before the Columbian voyages. A century and a half before Columbus, bubonic plague arrived from Asia and struck Europe with similar devastating impact. And nearly three centuries after his voyage, another disease – cholera – struck the continent again. The point is not that millions died, but that the major consequences of the Columbian voyage were unsought and unforeseen, and they still remain poorly understood. In an increasingly interdependent, multicultural, and ecologically fragile world, where individual men and women risk being ignored by the continual processes to which they are subjected, the greatest challenge remains how to preserve freedom when process, system, and movement seem to govern Earth's unfolding. In such a world as this, the meanest insect on obscurest leaves may matter more than ever before.

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Re-membering America: The Historical Vision of Eduardo Galeano

MEMORY OF FIRE. Eduardo Galeano.
Translated by Cedric Belfrage. Volume
One: *Genesis* (1985); Volume Two: *Faces
and Masks* (1987); Volume Three:
Century of the Wind (1988). New York:
Pantheon Books.

TEN YEARS AGO in Seville, after a long and rather frustrating day grappling with the past in the Archivo General de Indias, I inquired at a local bookstore about a publication that notices in the Spanish press had brought to my attention. Written by a Uruguayan then living in exile near Barcelona, the book was announced as the first in a trilogy which the author, Eduardo Galeano, called *Memoria del fuego*, "Memory of Fire."

Some time passed before I was able to get hold of *Los nacimientos*, meaning "origins" or "genesis," but as soon as the book fell into my hands I realized that I was dealing with an approach to the study of history markedly different from any other I had been exposed to previously. Gone was the illusion of objectivity, replaced by a passion for telling the truth simply and clearly but with breathtaking powers of expression, ones in which all sorts of emotions run high – visible, stark, in no way apologized for. I felt liberated, as liberated as the subject matter rendered by Galeano not in lofty, pedantic jargon but in

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short, free-flowing, anecdotal form, gems of discourse released at last from the tyranny of conventional means of scholarly narration.

The academic in me, however, could not help but be struck by the extensive bibliography upon which Galeano's work was founded, by the authority and breadth of knowledge from which evidence was so gracefully and so perceptively gleaned. Ever since being exposed to Galeano's artistry I have believed that every document in every archive, every book in every library, no matter how dry, dull, or crusty, could be rescued from its author or itself and given back to the world in life-enhancing form.

Galeano's first volume was followed in 1984 by *Las caras y las máscaras*, "Faces and Masks," and his trilogy completed two years later with the appearance of *El siglo del viento*, "Century of the Wind." All three books are available in English, beautifully translated by Cedric Belfrage, who coaxes from Spanish with the same love and attention to detail in which Galeano writes. To my mind, nothing I have encountered in print this haunted quincennial year explores as effectively as does *Memory of Fire* the meaning and consequences of the New World landfall Columbus made five centuries ago.

For all the Americas, but especially for Latin America, Galeano has shaped a living history that never will die. *Genesis* covers the period from time immemorial through the era of European entry up until the year 1700. *Faces and Masks* is anchored in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. *Century of the Wind* spans the years between 1900 and 1984. The events Galeano writes about are rooted in a specific time and a specific place, with each episode in the first two volumes attributed to one or more documentary sources. Most episodes in the third volume are similarly referenced, with an occasional recounting of more recent happenings based on interviews, journals, or personal exchanges. Few of Galeano's evocations run more than 500 words in length, the majority of them considerably less. He cuts always to the quick, searching for essence. If we flick through the pages of *Memory of Fire*, what do we find?

First we are informed about why the project was embarked on in the manner it was:

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 imprisoned 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. (*Genesis* IV)

Galeano begins with a series of fables and folktales called "First Voices," which includes an engaging version of the story of Adam and Eve:

In the Amazonian jungle, the first woman and the first man looked at each other with curiosity. It was odd what they had between their legs.

"Did they cut yours off?" asked the man.

"No," she said, "I've always been like that."

He examined her close up. He scratched his head. There was an open wound there. He said: "Better not eat any cassava or bananas or any fruit that splits when it ripens. I'll cure you. Get in the hammock and rest."

She obeyed. Patiently she swallowed herb teas and let him rub on pomades and unguents. She had to grit her teeth to keep from laughing when he said to her, "Don't worry."

She enjoyed the game, although she was beginning to tire of fast-fasting in a hammock. The memory of fruit made her mouth water.

One evening the man came running through the glade. He jumped with excitement and cried, "I found it!"

He had just seen the male monkey curing the female monkey in the arm of a tree.

"That's how it's done," said the man, approaching the woman.

When the long embrace ended, a dense aroma of flowers and fruit filled the air. From the bodies lying together came unheard of vapors and glowings, and it was all so beautiful that the suns and the gods died of embarrassment. (*Genesis* 14)

That fateful day – 12 October 1492 – has Galeano picture Columbus and his crew, in multilingual confusion, on the shores of Guanahani Island thus:

He falls on his knees, weeps, kisses the earth. He steps forward, staggering because for more than a month he has hardly slept, and beheads some shrubs with his sword.

Then he raises the flag. On one knee, eyes lifted to heaven, he pronounces three times the names of Isabella and Ferdinand. Beside him the scribe Rodrigo de Escobedo, a man slow of pen, draws up the document.

From today, everything belongs to those remote monarchs: the coral sea, the beaches, the rocks all green with moss, the woods, the parrots, and these laurel-skinned people who gaze dazedly at the scene.

Luis de Torres translates Christopher Columbus's questions into Hebrew, tries out his small stock of Chaldean, then his Arabic, the little he knows of it: "Japan? China? Gold?"

The interpreter apologizes to Columbus in the language of Castile. Columbus curses in Genoese and throws to the ground his credentials, written in Latin and addressed to the Great Khan. The naked men watch the anger of the intruder with red hair and coarse skin, who wears a velvet cape and very shiny clothes.

Soon the word will spread through the islands:

"Come and see the men who arrived from the Sky! Bring them food and drink!" (Genesis 45-6)

Italics, as deployed in the last two sentences of the Columbus vignette, are used whenever Galeano chooses to lift words directly from his sources. This he does with dramatic effect throughout *Memory of Fire*, often allowing the voices he borrows to have the final, unmediated say. The strategy, at times, serves only to increase our astonishment,

The arrival of Columbus in the New World, as depicted in a 1594 engraving by Theodore de Bry



while at the same time keeping us grounded in historical fact, not human invention. It works particularly well when Galeano introduces us to the survivors of the ill-fated expedition to Florida led by Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca. The year is 1528, the place called Bad Luck Island:

The shipwrecked men, naked specters, tremble with cold and weep among the rocks of Mal Hado Island. Some Indians turn up to bring them water and fish and roots and seeing them weep, weep with them. The Indians shed rivers of tears, and the longer the lamentations continue, the sorrier the Spaniards feel for themselves.

The Indians lead them to their village. So that the sailors won't die from the cold, they keep lighting fires at rest stops along the way. Between bonfire and bonfire they carry them on litters, without letting their feet touch ground.

The Spaniards imagine that the Indians will cut them into pieces and throw them in the stewpot, but in the village they continue sharing with them the little food they have. As Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca will tell it, the Indians are horrified and hot with anger when they learn that, while on the beach, five Christians ate one another until only one remained, who being alone had no one to eat him. (*Genesis 82*)

Cabeza de Vaca, who wandered between November 1528 and July 1536 6,000 miles from the scene of his misfortune, near the present site of Galveston, across Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and northwestern Mexico before arriving in Mexico City, is only one of a cast of hundreds treated by Galeano not as anomalies or eccentrics but as individuals whose personal dilemma, whose personal tragedy, whose personal courage reflect the complexities and contradictions of the age in which they lived. We hear of rebellious Indians, demented conquistadors, tired kings, good priests and bad, runaway slaves, ruthless pirates, of the weak and poor not just the strong and rich, of women and children, of men and dogs, of gods and demons.

The actions of the Franciscan Friar Diego de Landa provide Galeano with one of his most vivid portrayals, as well as the opportunity to observe what it is that allows people to transcend even the darkest despair, a resolve that greatly concerns him. The year is 1562, the place a town in the Yucatán called Maní:

Fray Diego de Landa throws into the flames, one after the other, the books of the Mayas.

The inquisitor curses Satan, and the fire crackles and devours. Around the incinerator, heretics howl with their heads down. Hung by the feet, flayed with whips, Indians are doused with boiling wax as the fire flares up and the books snap, as if complaining.

Tonight, eight centuries of Mayan literature turn to ashes. On these long sheets of bark paper, signs and images spoke: They told of work done and days spent, of the dreams and the wars of a people born before Christ. With hog-bristle brushes, the knowers of things had painted these illuminated, illuminating books so that the grandchildren's grandchildren should not be blind, should know how to see themselves and see the history of their folk, so they should know the movements of the stars, the frequency of eclipses and the prophecies of the gods and so they could call for rains and good corn harvests.

In the center, the inquisitor burns the books. Around the huge bonfire, he chastises the readers. Meanwhile, the authors, artist-priests dead years or centuries ago, drink chocolate in the fresh shade of the first tree of the world. They are at peace, because they died knowing that memory cannot be burned. Will not what they painted be sung and danced through the times of the finds?

When its little paper houses are burned, memory finds refuge in mouths that sing the glories of men and of gods, *songs that stay on from people to people* and in bodies that dance to the sound of hollow trunks, tortoise shells, and reed flutes. (*Genesis* 137)

Wilful and wanton destruction, the deliberate obliteration of one culture by another, attracts much of Galeano's attention – and not only when vile acts are perpetrated by Europeans on Native Americans but also when the latter unleash their venom on the invader or on each other. So too, however, does his eye catch the intensity of certain forces brought into being more by accident than by design, as in the murderous erosion of New World populations by the scourge of Old World disease. The year is 1586, the place somewhere in the Andes of Peru:

Influenza does not shine like the steel sword, but no Indian can dodge it. Tetanus and typhus kill more people than a thousand greyhounds with fiery eyes and foaming jaws. The smallpox attacks in secret and the gun with a loud bang, amid clouds of sparks and sulphurous smoke, but smallpox annihilates more Indians than all the guns.

The winds of pestilence are devastating these regions. Anyone they strike, they blow down: they devour the body, eat the eyes, close the throat. All smells of decay. (*Genesis* 158)

Likes and dislikes are apparent, for Galeano refuses to conceal for whom his heart is open and for whom his heart is closed. Among the former is the old man whom he calls "the fanatic of human dignity."

The year is 1566, the place a convent in Madrid:

Fray Bartolomé de las Casas is going over the heads of the king and of the Council of the Indies. Will he be punished for his disobedience? At ninety-two, it matters little to him. He has been fighting for half a century. Are not his exploits the key to his tragedy? They have let him win many battles, but the outcome of the war was decided in advance. He has known it for a long time.

His fingers won't obey him anymore. He dictates the letter. Without anybody's permission, he addresses himself directly to the Holy See. He asks Pius V to order the wars against the Indians stopped and to halt the plunder that uses the cross as an excuse. As he dictates he becomes indignant, the blood rises to his head, and the hoarse and feeble voice that remains to him trembles.

Suddenly he falls to the floor. (*Genesis* 143)

Galeano also cherishes the tenacious and quite remarkable Guamán Poma. The year is 1615, the place Lima, the City of Kings:

At seventy, he leans over the table, wets the pen in the horn inkpot, and writes and draws defiantly. He is a man of hasty and broken prose. He curses the invader in the invader's tongue and makes it explode. The language of Castile keeps tripping over Quechua and Aymara words, but after all, Castile is Castile for the Indians, and *without the Indians Your Majesty isn't worth a thing* ...

To write this letter is to weep. Words, images, tears of rage. *The Indians are the natural owners of the realm.* The apostle Santiago, in military uniform, tramples on a fallen native. At banquets, the plates are heaped with miniature women. The muleteer carries a basket filled with the mestizo children of the priest. *Also it is God's punishment that many Indians die in mercury and silver mines. In all Peru, where there were a hundred not ten remain.* "Do you eat this gold?" asks the Inca, and the conquistador replies: "This gold we eat."

Today, Guamán finishes his letter. He has lived for it. It has taken him half a century to write and draw. It runs to nearly twelve hundred pages. Today, Guamán finishes his letter and dies.

Neither Philip III nor any other king will ever see it. For three centuries it will roam the earth, lost. (*Genesis* 184-5)

The chronology of conquest means that, in Galeano's scheme of things, it is not until *Faces and Masks* and *Century of the Wind* that Canada and the United States appear with greater frequency. From the wintry bite of New France comes the following snapshot. It is 1717, somewhere in Quebec:

The way Rabelais told it and Voltaire repeats it, the cold of Canada is so cold that words freeze as they emerge from the mouth and are suspended in midair. At the end of April, the first sun cleaves the ice on

the rivers and spring breaks through amid crackings of resurrection. Then, only then, words spoken in the winter are heard.

The French colonists fear winter more than the Indians, and envy the animals that sleep through it. Neither the bear nor the marmot knows the ills of cold: they leave the world for a few months while winter splits trees with a sound like gunshots and turns humans into statues of congealed blood and marbleized flesh.

The Portuguese Pedro da Silva spends the winter carrying mail in a dog sled over the ice of the Saint Lawrence River. In summer he travels by canoe, and sometimes, due to the winds, takes a whole month coming and going between Quebec and Montreal. Pedro carries decrees from the governor, reports by monks and officials, offers by fur traders, promises from friends, secrets of lovers.

Canada's first postman has worked for a quarter of a century without asking winter's permission. Now he has died. (*Faces and Masks* 15)

Farther west we contemplate the approach of the frontier in the company of Chief Seattle. It is 1855 in Washington Territory:

Is anyone really listening to old Chief Seattle? The Indians are condemned, like the buffalo and the moose. The one that does not die by the bullet dies of hunger or sorrow. From the reservation where

George Russell Dartnell:
*Crossing the Frozen Saint-
Lawrence near Montreal* (1839)



he languishes, old Chief Seattle talks in solitude about usurpations and exterminations and says who knows what things about the memory of his people flowing in the sap of the trees.

The Colt barks. Like the sun, the white pioneers march westward. A diamond light from the mountains guides them. The promised land rejuvenates anyone sticking a plow in to make it fertile. In a flash cities and streets spring up in the solitude so recently inhabited by cacti, Indians, and snakes. The climate, they say, is so very healthy that the only way to inaugurate cemeteries is to shoot someone down.

Adolescent capitalism, stampeding and gluttonous, transfigures what it touches. The forest exists for the ax to chop down and the desert for the train to cross; the river is worth bothering about if it contains gold, and the mountain if it shelters coal or iron. No one walks. All run, in a hurry, it's urgent, after the nomad shadow of wealth and power. Space exists for time to defeat, and time for progress to sacrifice on its altars. (*Faces and Masks* 179)

Galeano sweeps through the present century, from the inventions of Thomas Edison to the interventions of Ronald Reagan, meditating on failed revolutions, soccer players, archbishops and gangsters, painters and writers, riots and fiestas, music and movies, coups and elections, and dozens of other diverse topics and equally diverse characters. He ends, appropriately, with a letter to his translator. The year is 1986, the place Montevideo:

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.

Forgive me if it came out too long. Writing it was a joy for my hand; and now I feel more than ever proud of having been born in America, in this shit, in this marvel, during the century of the wind.

No more now, because I don't want to bury the sacred in palaver.

Abrazos,
Eduardo

(*Century of the Wind* 278-9)

Galeano's labours in total amount to almost 1,000 printed pages. From more than that same number of books, and from the hive of his imagination, he furnishes approximately 1,200 textual miniatures, bits and pieces of wonder. From these precious fragments the entire body of American history can now be re-membered.