

IMAGE COURTESY OF NATION BOOKS, PHOTO BY MARCELO ISARRUALDE, 2008.

A Man and an Island: *Eduardo Galeano and the Cuban Conundrum*

*Recordar: to remember, from the Latin, re-cordis,
to pass back through the heart.*

Eduardo Galeano, *The Book of Embraces* (1991)

THE DEATH of Eduardo Galeano (1940–2015) removed from our midst not only one of Latin America’s most eminent men of letters but a global citizen of immense stature, a writer unrivalled in documenting the world’s weary ways and celebrating its myriad, marvellous joys. He held true to what he called a “fugitive faith,” not in any deity but in humanity itself, above all its subversive inclination to thrive even in the face of dire adversity. “Courage is born of fear, certainty of doubt,” asserted the Uruguayan maestro. “We are the sum of our efforts to change who we are.” He confronted terminal illness stoically, but it wore him down, keeping him close to home in Montevideo. This meant not being able to come to Canada, where he had been nominated to receive an honorary degree from Queen’s University. “That’s the only way I’ll get a doctorate,” Galeano

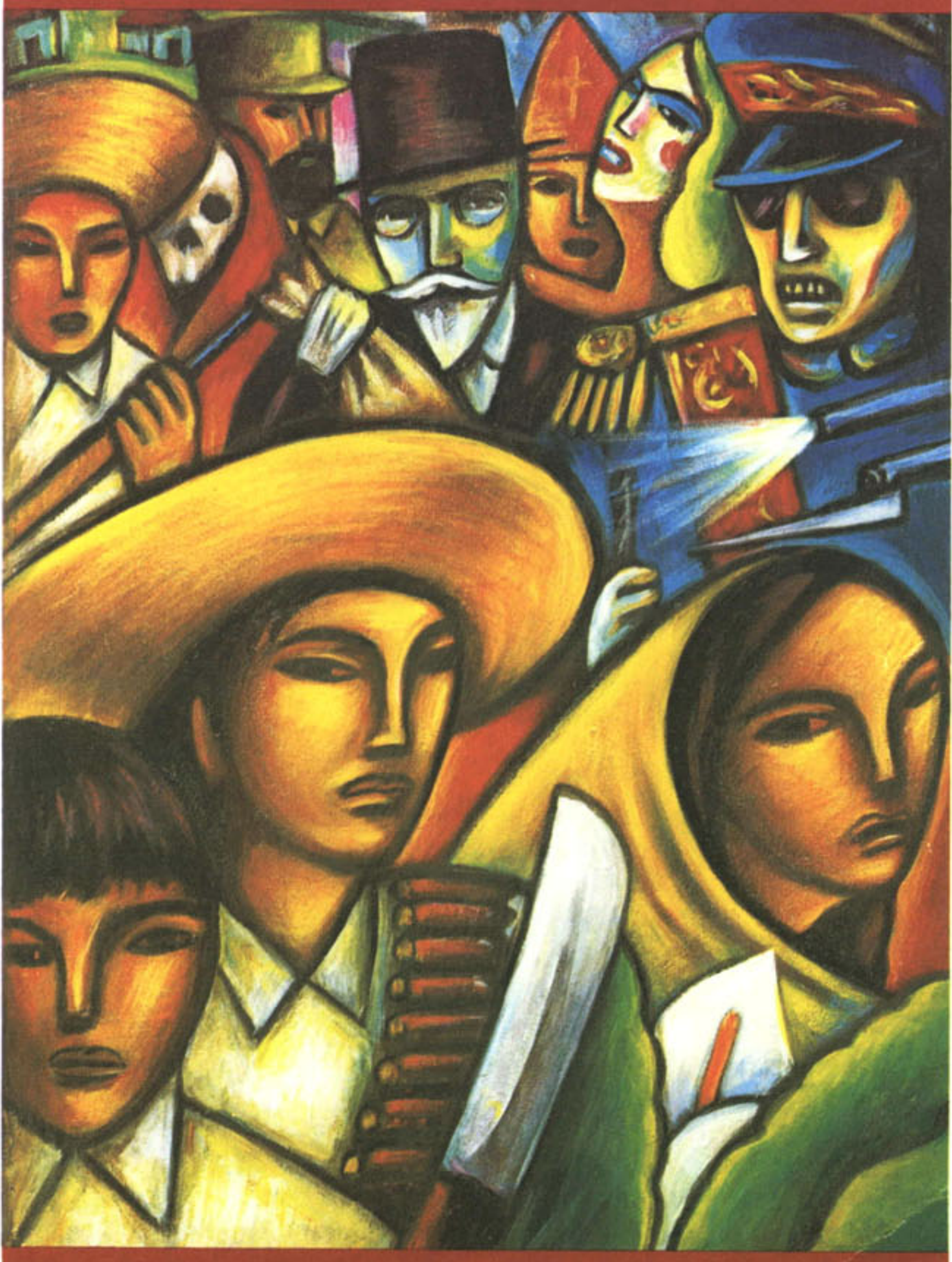
joked with me once in Cuba, on the occasion of his being awarded one from the University of Havana. “Someone will have to give it to me.” The death of Fidel Castro also affords us opportunity to reflect on developments in the country that honoured Galeano with that doctorate, the enigmatic Cuba, whose revolutionary leadership he took pains to criticize as much as whose revolutionary achievements he was prone to laud.

BORN September 3, 1940, in Montevideo, Eduardo Hughes Galeano chose to be identified by his maternal surname, “Galeano,” one with Italian roots in Genoa, not his paternal line, “Hughes,” indicating immigrant Welsh ancestry. His formal schooling ended at age fourteen, when – according to the dust jacket of his book *Guatemala: Occupied Country* (1969) – he began work “as a bill collector, commercial artist, caricaturist, stenographer, bank clerk, and fashion-page artist,” after which he embarked on a career in journalism with the Uruguayan weeklies *El Sol* and *Marcha* and the daily *La Época*. He was in his mid-twenties when he ventured to the Oriente of Guatemala. There, in the Sierra de la Minas, a mountain chain in the east of the country, a guerrilla insurgency had sprung up, led by junior officers of the national armed forces outraged by their superiors’ heavy-handedness. Idealist insurrection, however, proved no match for those long in control, who crushed any clamour for justice. Government response to any form of dissent in Guatemala turned out to be a harbinger (the tactic of “disappearance” but one among many) of what was to come in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, and elsewhere in Latin America. The country served as a model laboratory for the continent’s brutal military dictatorships. Galeano the dogged investigative reporter bore witness in *Occupied Country*, Galeano the innovative writer in *Days and Nights of Love and War* (1983), a log in which his mastery of the vignette was pioneered. Other countries and other struggles commanded his attention, Cuba among them, but Guatemala exerted on him a peculiar, unrelenting hold.

It was Guatemala that connected us, and forged a bond. My love affair with the country began a decade after Galeano’s, when in 1974 I found myself drawn to the Sierra de los Cuchumatanes, a remote area in the far northwest close to the Mexican border. The fate of Maya peoples under Spanish rule in a beautiful but tormented land was the focus of my doctoral research. In April 1991, I presented a paper at the Latin American Studies conference in Washington, DC, for which Galeano was a keynote speaker. After he had read to an enthralled audience from *The Book of Embraces* (1991), I approached him, clutching a Spanish-language monograph I had written to gift him.

M E M O R Y O F F I R E

CENTURY OF THE WIND



EDUARDO GALEANO

"An epic work of literary creation!" — Washington Post

Pantheon Books cover illustration by Anthony Russo.



“I thought that was the last of it, until an envelope with a card in it, dated ‘Montevideo, end of May 1991,’ arrived in my university mailbox. The card reads: ‘Dear George: Better late than never, I hereby send my gratitude for your wonderful work, words that have inspired me throughout my trip and that are with me now. Abrazos, Eduardo.’”

“This is your book?” he asked, looking at the copy of *Conquista y cambio cultural* (1990) I handed him.

I nodded. “That’s a striking cover,” he remarked, alluding to the reproduction of a mural from a Guatemalan church, which depicts a Spanish conquistador overseeing the labour of his Indian workers.

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That handwritten card, emblazoned with a red god-like figure, was the first of many items of correspondence, most playfully signed off with an iconic pig, a flower in its mouth.



Puntarenas, fin de mayo / 91
Querido George:
Aquí te envío mis
fratitudes, más vale tarde
que nunca, por tus
estupendos trabajos
— palabras que me estimu-
laron durante el viaje y
ahora están conmigo.
Un abrazo,
— *MARTIN*
— GALEANO

IN 1992, to mark the anniversary of a fateful intrusion, the fall issue of the *Queen's Quarterly* was dedicated to "America and Europe: 500 Years after Columbus." As guest editor, I requested Galeano's permission to highlight some of his trademark vignettes along with other contributions, including a poem of Jorge Luis Borges translated by Alastair Reid, a conversation between Isabel Allende and Alberto Manguel about what makes Latin American fiction so emblematically Latin American, and a fantasy by Ronald Wright, in which he imagines the Old World being conquered by the New. Galeano ends a note of thanks by invoking Rigoberta Menchú, expressing his delight at the Nobel Peace Prize being awarded to an indigenous woman from Guatemala. "Cause for joy the recognition given Rigoberta," he declares, adding "the only decent commemoration of these past 500 years."

By then I had been teaching at Queen's for thirteen years. Students in my courses on the geography of Latin America read standard regional texts to complement topics covered in the lecture hall and film theatre. To liven things up, I hit on the idea of incorporating Galeano into course readings.

Montevideo, viernes 12/92
Josep querido:

Gracias mil por
en trabajo tuyo, tan bueno,
que se publicó en la
"Queen's". La revista
continúa, desde sea de
paso, muy buen material.
Me gusta especialmente el
viaje al revés de Ronald
Wright.

Un abrazo!



Si, fue muy digna la
de Rigoberta. La única
comemoración decente de
los 500 años.



“Cause for joy the recognition given Rigoberta,’ Galeano declares, adding ‘the only decent commemoration of these past 500 years.’”

I experimented with perhaps his most famous book, *The Open Veins of Latin America* (1973) – bold, sweeping in scope, quick-paced, and urgently written, the work of an angry young man. The late Venezuelan president, Hugo Chávez, gifted it to President Barack Obama in April 2009 at the Summit of the Americas in Trinidad. Chávez was a great admirer of the book; Obama’s opinion of it is anyone’s guess. Interviewed in *Le Monde Diplomatique* in June 2014, Galeano expressed pleasure that *Open Veins*, “written ages ago, is still alive and kicking,” but he had long since voiced reservations about it, believing himself “simply honest enough to admit at this point in my life [that] the old writing style seems rather stodgy, and that it’s hard for me to recognize myself in it since I now prefer to be increasingly brief and untrammelled.” Truth be told, I felt that way too, which is why I replaced *Open Veins* in my courses with Galeano’s epic trilogy, *Memory of Fire*.

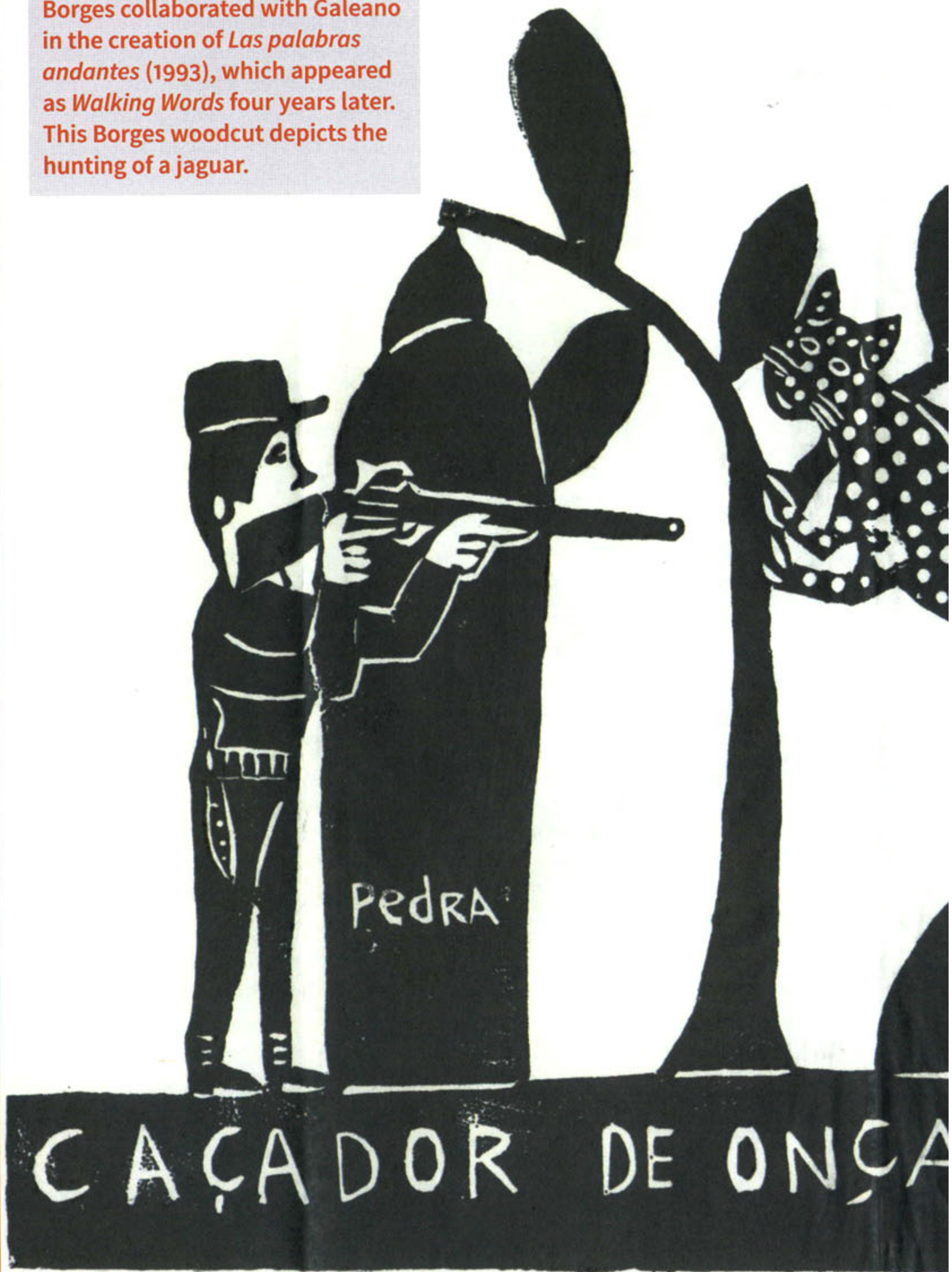
WHEREAS *Open Veins* was penned in months, *Memory of Fire* took him laborious years. Forced to flee Uruguay after a military coup in June 1973, and Argentina three years later, Galeano composed *Memory of Fire* between 1976 and 1985 when he lived near Barcelona. “One has to turn exile into an act of creation,” he maintained. After dipping into *Los nacimientos* (“Genesis”) I realized that I was dealing with a unique approach to history. Gone was the illusion of objectivity, replaced by a passion for narrating with vivid economy. All sorts of emotions run high – raw, stark, unapologetic. I felt liberated, as liberated as the subject matter rendered by Galeano in short, superbly crafted vignettes, unbound from the tyranny of conventional scholarly discourse.

The academic in me, however, was struck by the solid base upon which the magnum opus is constructed, 227 sources for that first volume of the trilogy alone. By the time *Los nacimientos* was followed, in 1984, by *Las caras y las máscaras* (“Faces and Masks”) and *El siglo del viento* (“Century of the Wind”) two years later, Galeano’s consultation of 1,063 titles had resulted in the honing of over 1,200 elegantly wrought distillations of time, place, and episode.

For the Americas in their entirety, but especially for Latin America, Galeano shaped a living history. *Genesis* stretches from time immemorial to the year 1700. *Faces and Masks* is anchored in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, *Century of the Wind* in the twentieth. Few vignettes exceed 500 words. He searches always for essence, telling much in few words. “I don’t know to what literary form this voice of voices belongs,” he confesses. “*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.”

Galeano closes *Memory of Fire*, in its English-language incarnation, with a letter to his friend and translator, Cedric Belfrage. With a palpable sense of relief that the mammoth task is over, and that he finds himself back in Montevideo, Galeano states: “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.” After Belfrage’s death in June 1990 – “a part of me died with him,” Galeano lauded in tribute, “a part of him lives with me” – the reins of translation passed to Ottawa writer Mark Fried. He began working one-on-one with Galeano in 1991, and to date has translated seven Galeano titles, with a posthumous one to come.

The Brazilian artist José Francisco Borges collaborated with Galeano in the creation of *Las palabras andantes* (1993), which appeared as *Walking Words* four years later. This Borges woodcut depicts the hunting of a jaguar.



Desde Montevideo, en el cari vauano
del 93

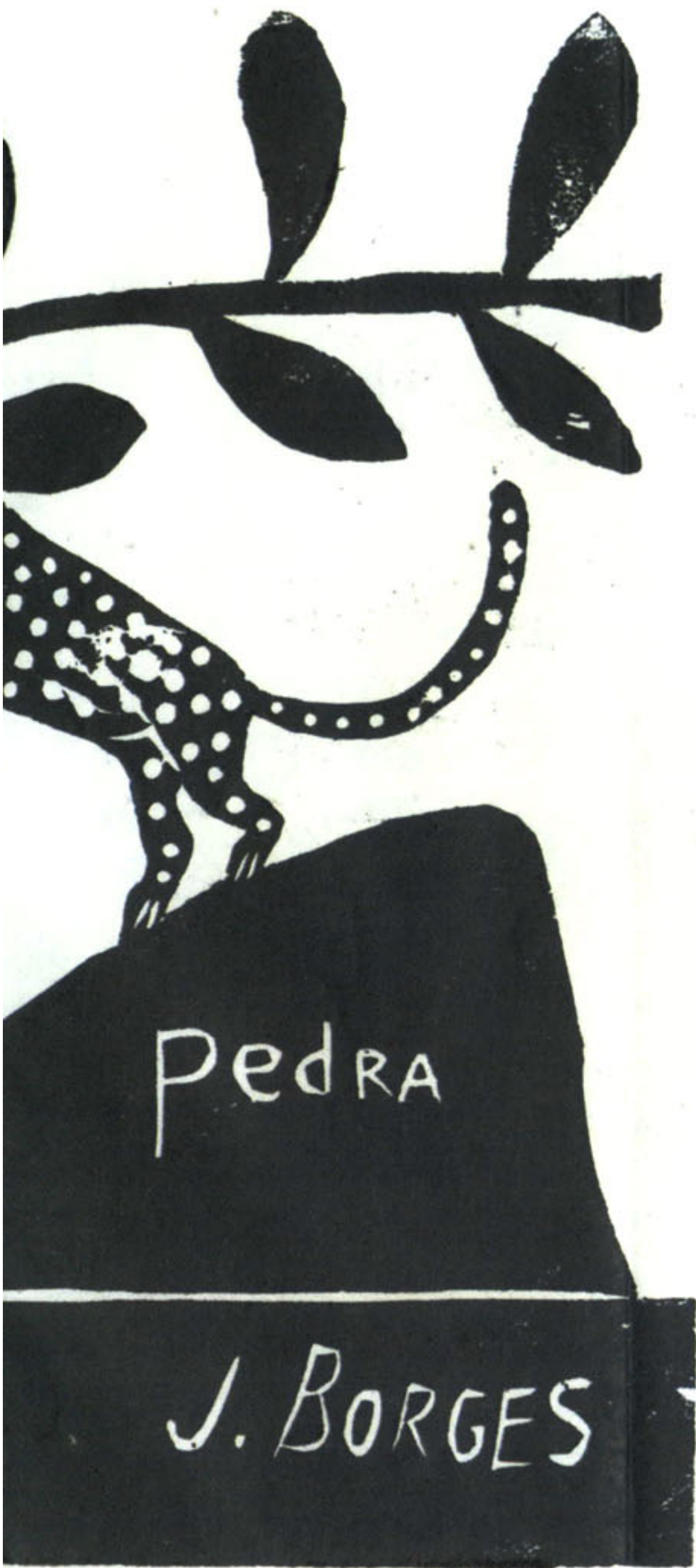
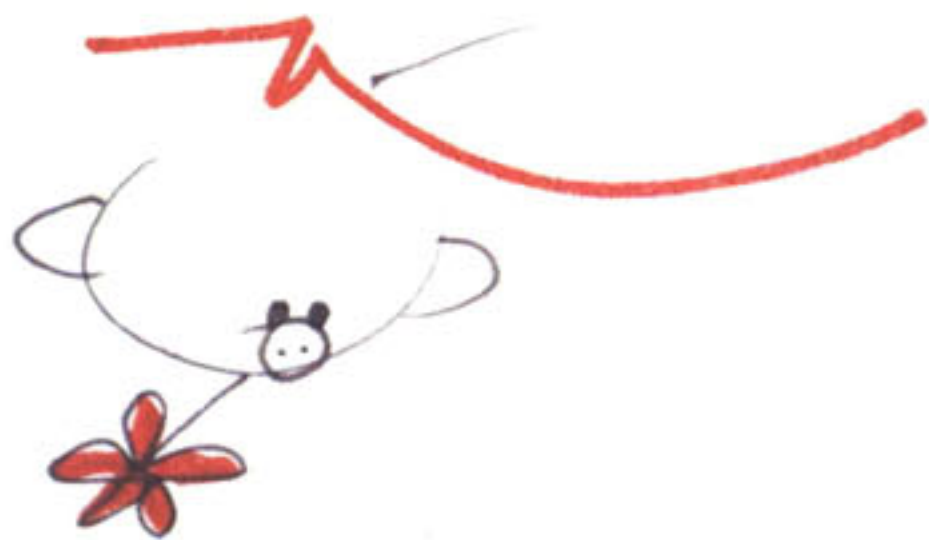
Mi querido Jorge:

¡francés!

Aquí te envío
este frabado del
brasileño J.
Borges, que me
ha acompañado
en la aventura
de "Las palabras
ardantes", unos
cuantos cuentos
logritos que se
publicarán a
fin de año.

Y con el
frabado va mi
abrazo,

Amor



Students in my Latin American classes still read mainstream texts, but nothing compares with the enthusiasm and creativity they show when engaging *Memory of Fire*. No other exposition about the history and geography of Latin America guarantees such a bountiful return. I know this because of the quality of student assignments, in which Galeano's trilogy informs and inspires them. I know this also because of their answers to one question that often features in their final exam. Here it is in a recent rendering:

Now it's your turn! Having heard about how prominently his work features in our classes, 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 it into the third millennium. He asks that you furnish him with ideas about what to include. For the years between 1984 and the present, provide Galeano with five options, rendering them (as best you can) in the vignette format your study of Memory of Fire indicates he might prefer.

When we met in Havana in December 2001, I took pleasure in handing the freshly minted "Dr Galeano" a selection of student responses from preceding years. He looked at the top copy quizzically, flicking through the rest. Once he realized what I'd given him, he smiled. "What a wonderful idea, George," he said. "Your students are finishing the book for me."

NOT LONG AFTER accepting his honorary doctorate from the University of Havana, Galeano's relationship with Cuba, or more precisely his views of the island's political establishment and the directives of its leaders, soured. The parting of ways was the result of Galeano speaking his mind in an op-ed piece, "Cuba duele – Cuba is Hurting," which circulated widely and to which the regime of Fidel Castro took exception. "In defence of the word," Galeano put pen to paper in April 2003 following the execution of three men who had failed in a hijacking attempt and in the wake of widespread imprisonment of dissidents. "Throwing opponents in jail and conducting executions by firing squad," he wrote,

plays right into the hands of the United States, the global superpower that has imposed a crippling blockade on the island, as well as a thousand other forms of aggression, and that longs to be rid of the Cuban thorn stuck in its side. It's very bad news, however, for those of us who admire the courage of that small country, capable of so much grandeur, but who also believe that freedom and justice walk side by side, or do not walk at all.

QUEEN'S Quarterly

FALL 1992

A CANADIAN REVIEW

America & Europe 500 YEARS AFTER COLUMBUS

Antonine
MAILLET

Isabel
ALLENDE

Ronald
WRIGHT

Eduardo
GALEANO

Victor
KIERNAN

Jorge Luis
BORGES

Karl
BUTZER

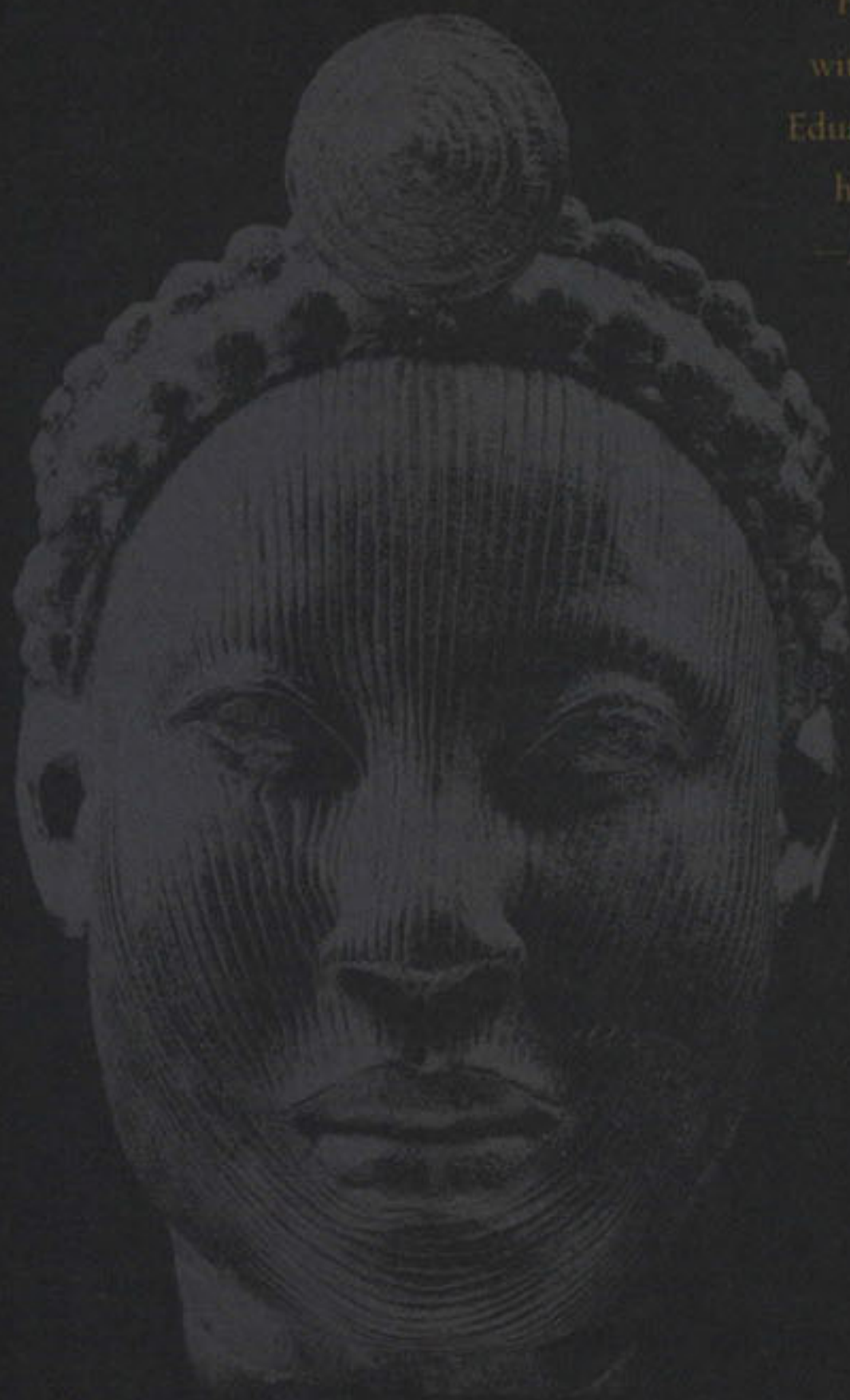


“That issue of *Queen’s Quarterly*,” Galeano wrote, “has very good material indeed. I especially liked the journey in reverse that Ronald Wright took us on.”

NATIONAL BESTSELLER

"Heroes rub shoulders
with villains and apes in
Eduardo Galeano's magical
history of mankind."

—ALBERTO MANGUEL,
THE GUARDIAN



MIRRORS

STORIES *of* ALMOST EVERYONE

TRANSLATED BY MARK FRIED

EDUARDO GALEANO

Espejos ("Mirrors") won Galeano the José María Arguedas
prize for narrative at the Casa de las Américas book fair.

Pulling no punches, he continued:

The Cuban revolution was born to be different. Subjected to constant U.S. sabotage, it survived as best it could, not how it wanted to. The Cuban people, generous and brave, have sacrificed much to stand guard. But on the road hard travelled the revolution has lost the air of spontaneity and freshness that first propelled it. So it grieves me to say, Cuba is hurting.... Signs of decadence are plain to see: centralized power, which equates revolutionary merit with obeying orders, and a rigid bureaucracy, mandated from above.... Democratic change, now more than ever, is essential.

A decade of chilly distance and estrangement ensued.

HIS STATUS as *persona non grata* ended in January 2012, when Galeano returned to Havana, as a “special guest,” to take part in the Casa de las Américas book fair, one of Latin America’s most celebrated literary festivals. On this occasion he was awarded a prize named after the Peruvian writer José María Arguedas (1911–1969) for his book *Espejos* (“Mirrors”), another marvel of creative non-fiction. Upon arrival, when the reason for his having stayed away was raised, he quipped: “A true friend is someone who criticizes you to your face, and pays you compliments behind your back.”

Events in the interim had seen Raúl Castro, younger brother of Fidel, become head of the Cuban state in 2008, having previously served as commander of the Cuban army since the triumph of the revolution in January 1959. “The changes began immediately,” Alma Guillermoprieto observes in the *New York Review of Books* (2016). Since Raúl took over from his brother “cell phones became legal, unused state land was turned over to private farmers, and for the first time in more than half a century ordinary Cubans have been able to purchase and sell property and travel abroad. The Internet, so feared by hard-line conservatives in the government, became accessible to anyone with money to pay for it, or the Cuban skills needed to get around the pay barrier.” She contends that Raúl “has clearly been thinking ahead in a way the aging Fidelistas in the Cuban Communist Party have not, ... trying to modernize Cuban socialism to the point where it is capitalistic and open enough to accommodate the restless generations who are under forty-five years of age,” adding for good measure, “Perhaps he has the sense that the revolution is finished, that there is no future in the old dogmas and failures, that sixty years of poverty and repression are enough ...”

How might Galeano have responded to what Guillermoprieto has to say? Incisive and pertinent though her reporting may be, she overlooks or

downplays the remarkable record that Cuba has achieved, the benchmark for all Latin America, in education, health, and social development, advances not lost on even the most vehement (or cynical) of critics. Galeano would surely have pointed that out.

THE CONUNDRUM REMAINS, as do concerns about what happens next. Will the rapprochement between Cuba and the United States begun in March 2016 after the visit to the island of President Obama be respected or reversed by his successor, Donald Trump? “It has to be Cubans, and only Cubans, without any outside interference, who open new democratic spaces and who champion the cause of liberty,” asserted Galeano in his op-ed piece of thirteen years ago, which still rings true. “This they will do in the context of the revolution they themselves forged for the land they love deeply, which is the most passionate I know when it comes to expressions of solidarity.”

His fire of memory, coruscating, shines on.

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Homenaje a Eduardo Galeano

Jueves 27 de octubre

17 horas | Eduardo Galeano y Vivian Trías: discípulo y maestro

Palabras de apertura del Dr. José E. Díaz | Exponen: Prof. Carlos Machado, Prof. Pedro Weinberg
Testimonio inédito de Galeano sobre Vivian Trías, filmado en 2013.

19 horas | Eduardo Galeano: miradas académicas sobre su obra

Exponen: Dr. George Lovell de la Universidad Queen's (Canadá), Prof. Ricardo Pallares, Academia Nacional de Letras (Uruguay), Dr. Eduardo Velásquez, Universidad San Carlos de Guatemala

Lugar: Fundación Vivian Trías | Colonia 1456 5º piso, esq. Barrios Amorín

A tribute to Eduardo Galeano, celebrating his life and work, took place in Montevideo on October 27, 2016.