

**FIRE OF MEMORY:
THE GEOGRAPHICAL LEGACY OF EDUARDO GALEANO (1940-2015)**

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ABSTRACT: The death of Eduardo Galeano on April 13, 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 inimitably versed in documenting the world's weary ways and unrivaled in celebrating its myriad, marvellous joys. Participation in a forum paying homage to Galeano organized by the Fundación Viviani Trías in his native Montevideo in October 2016 affords the opportunity to look back, take stock, and engage his legacy, part of which has a decidedly geographical resonance, especially in relation to the part of the world he cherished most: Latin America.

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

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

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one of Latin America's most eminent men of letters but a global citizen of immense stature, a writer inimitably versed in documenting the world's weary ways and unrivaled in celebrating its

myriad, marvellous joys. He held true to a “fugitive faith,” not in any deity but in humanity itself, above all else its subversive inclination to thrive even in the face of dire adversity.

“Courage is born of fear, certainty of doubt,” wrote the Uruguayan maestro. “We are the sum of our efforts to change who we are.”¹ He confronted terminal illness stoically, but it wore him down, in the end keeping him close to home in Montevideo and curtailing his often far-flung travels, including being unable 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.” An invitation from the Fundación Vivían Trías in Montevideo, requesting that I participate there in a forum paying homage to Galeano, affords me the opportunity to look back, take stock, and engage his legacy, part of which has a decidedly geographical resonance -- especially in relation to the part of the world he cherished most, Latin America.²

Uruguayan Origins and Guatemalan Trajectories

¹ From “Celebration of Contradictions/2,” in Galeano ([1989] 1991, 126).

² The “Homenaje a Eduardo Galeano” took place in Montevideo on October 27, 2016 at the Fundación Vivían Trías (1922-1980), named after a prominent figure in the Uruguayan Socialist Party whose ideas and writings had a formative influence on Galeano.

Born September 3, 1940, in Montevideo, Eduardo Hughes Galeano chose to be

identified by his maternal surname as opposed to his paternal one, “Hughes” indicating immigrant Welsh ancestry, “Galeano” Italian roots in Genoa. His formal schooling ended at age fourteen, when -- according to the dustjacket of his book *Guatemala: Occupied Country* ([1967] 1969) -- he began earning his keep “as a bill collector, commercial artist, caricaturist, stenographer, bank clerk, and fashion-page artist” before embarking on a career in journalism with the Uruguayan weeklies *El Sol* and *Marcha* and the daily *La Época*. He was in his mid-twenties in the mid-1960s when he ventured to the Oriente of Guatemala. There, in the Sierra de las 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 the heavy-handedness of their superiors. Idealist insurrection, however, proved no match for the clout of those long in control, whose reaction to any clamor for justice was repression in the extreme. What Galeano experienced living in Guatemala alongside the Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes scarred and shaped him, for government response to any form of dissent 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. Guatemala became a model laboratory for the

continent's military dictatorships to learn from. Galeano the dogged investigative reporter bore witness in *Occupied Country*, Galeano the innovative writer in *Days and Nights of Love and War* ([1978] 1983), a journal of sorts based on his time in Guatemala, in which his mastery of the literary vignette first became evident. Other countries and other struggles commanded his attention, but Guatemala exerted on him a peculiar, unrelenting hold.

It was Guatemala that first connected us, and kept us in touch thereafter. My love affair with the country began ten years or so after Galeano's when, in 1974, I found myself drawn not to the Sierra de las Minas but to the Sierra de los Cuchumatanes, a remote highland area in the far northwest adjacent to the border with Mexico. The fate of Maya peoples under Spanish rule in a beautiful but tormented land was the focus of my doctoral research (Lovell [1985] 2015, [1990] 2015). 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* ([1989] 1991), I approached him to thank him, clutching a Spanish-language monograph I had written to gift him.

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

I nodded. The graphic artist in him was quick to respond. "That's a striking cover," he remarked, alluding to the reproduction of a mural painted on the wall of a Guatemalan church, depicting a Spanish *conquistador* overseeing the labor of his Indian charges.

The bustle of other aficionados cut short our exchange. 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 work, words that have inspired me throughout my trip and that are with me now. Abrazos, Eduardo.”

Handwritten on a scrap of parchment paper, emblazoned with a red god-like figure, that card was the first of many such missives sent from Montevideo in the years that followed, all of them playfully illustrated and signed off with an iconic pig -- a flower in its mouth.

The Queen’s Connection

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 contributions from a host of other Latin American and Latin Americanist luminaries. He was quite taken by the outcome. Among a dozen or so contributors were two eminent CLAG-istas, Karl W. Butzer (1934-2106) and James J. Parsons (1915-1997). Butzer (1992) urged that the Columbus landfall, and its ongoing legacy, be engaged as an opportunity for meaningful reflection, not mindless recrimination. Adorning the cover of the journal is an image of a

magnolia, its beauty a complement to the ode Parsons (1992) wrought in praise of “Southern Blooms: Latin America and the World of Flowers,” one of Galeano’s favorites.

By then I had been teaching at Queen’s for thirteen years, requiring students in the courses I offered on the geography of Latin America read standard regional texts. Then I hit on the idea of incorporating Galeano into student reading fare: with no disrespect to Preston James (1942) or West and Augelli (1969), I reckoned Galeano would shake things up. I assigned his most celebrated book, *The Open Veins of Latin America* ([1971] 1973) -- assertive, bold, vast and sweeping in scope, quick-paced, and urgently written, the work of an angry young man. A copy of it was gifted famously by the late Venezuelan president, Hugo Chávez, to President Barack Obama in April 2009, when the Summit of the Americas convened in Port of Spain, Trinidad. Chávez was a great admirer of the book, as are millions the world over; Obama’s opinion of it is anyone’s guess. While Galeano, in an interview in June 2014, expressed his pleasure that *Open Veins*, “written ages ago, is still alive and kicking,” he had previously (and discreetly) voiced some reservations, 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.”³ Truth be told, I felt that way too, which is why I replaced *Open Veins* with Galeano’s magnum opus, his trilogy *Memory of Fire* ([1982-1986] 1985-1988), after the books became available in English translation. It was a decision that was to reap bountiful reward.

³ Galeano, in conversation with Majifud (2014). His earlier remarks having been skewed out of context by a pack of detractors, Galeano adds: “The dogs are barking, Sancho. The voices that have been raised against me and against *The Open Veins of Latin America* are seriously ill with bad faith.”

The Making of *Memory of Fire*

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hereas *Open Veins* was penned in a matter of months, *Memory of Fire* took

Galeano painstaking years.”⁴ His political views having forced him to flee his native Uruguay after a military coup on June 27, 1973, and Argentina three years later, *Memory of Fire* was composed in the decade between 1976 and 1985 when he lived in exile near Barcelona. “One has to turn exile into an act of creation,” he asserted, which is precisely what he did. The opening volume of *Memoria del fuego, Los nacimientos*, “origins” or “genesis,” I had noticed when it was reviewed by Mario Merlino (1983) in the literary supplement of the Spanish daily *El País*. As soon as I got hold of a copy, I realized I was dealing with a unique approach to the study of the past. Gone was the illusion of objectivity, replaced by a passion for narrating with vivid economy. All sorts of emotions run high – raw, stark, uncompromising, in no way apologized for. 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, could not help but be struck by the impressive bibliography upon which Galeano’s

⁴ Asked in an interview with José Guerrero Martín (1983) how *Open Veins* came to be, Galeano replied: “I wrote it toward the end of 1970. It took me ninety nights, and a lot of coffee.”

work was founded, 227 sources for that initial volume alone. By the time *Los nacimientos* (“Genesis”) was followed, in 1984, by *Las caras y las mascararas* (“Faces and Masks”) and *El siglo del viento* (“Century of the Wind”) in 1986, Galeano’s consultation of 1,063 published titles had resulted in the honing of over 1,200 elegantly wrought cameos of time, place, and episode.

For the Americas in their entirety, but especially for Latin America, Galeano has shaped a vibrant, living history. *Genesis* covers the period from time immemorial through the era of European entry up to the year 1700. *Faces and Masks* anchors readers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, *Century of the Wind* in the twentieth. Few vignettes run more than 500 words in length. He cuts to the quick, searching for essence, creating a form of art in which much is said by resorting to as few words as possible. Of why he took on the project, when equally worthy but less demanding endeavors were begging, Galeano ([1982] 1985: xv) writes:

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.

Regarding his decision to put pen to paper in the mode he did, Galeano ([1982] 1985: xv) is equally forthright:

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.

Galeano closes *Memory of Fire*, in its English-language incarnation, with a letter to his friend and translator, Cedric Belfrage. With an almost palpable sense of relief that the mammoth task is over, and that he finds himself back home in Montevideo, Galeano ([1986] 1988: 278-79) 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 ([1989] 1991, 9) lauded in tribute, “a part of him lives with me” -- the reins of translation were passed on to Mark Fried, who had collaborated with Belfrage in rendering *Memory of Fire* into English. Fried, who began working directly with Galeano in 1991, now has seven titles to his laurels as Galeano’s translator, with a posthumous one to come.⁵

Classroom Resonance and Return of Memory

⁵ Galeano (2016). The book’s title, *El cazador de historias*, is a fitting one: Galeano, above all else, was a hunter (and gatherer) of stories, besides being a master at telling them.

Students in my Latin American classes at Queen's still read mainstream texts, but

nothing compares with the enthusiasm they generate, the creativity they are exposed to and become part of, when grappling with *Memory of Fire*. No other exposition about the history and geography of Latin America, at least one that I'm aware of, guarantees such a rich return, emotionally as much as pedagogically. I know this because of the quality of the student assignments I get to grade, in which Galeano's trilogy not only informs but moves and inspires them to undertake a project based on its contents. I know this also because of their answers to one question that often features in their final exam. Here it is in a recent incarnation:

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 I met him in Havana in December 2001, I took pleasure in handing the freshly minted "Dr. Galeano" a selection drawn from student responses over preceding years. He looked at the top copy quizzically, flicking through the rest. Once he realized what I'd presented him

with, he nodded his head and smiled. “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 bid him farewell by sharing a vignette called “Four Angels,” composed by Fiona Akins when she was as an undergraduate student in geography at Queen’s from 1998 to 2003. Fiona’s vignette contemplates, and puts into context, the iconography of *Guatemala: Nunca Más*, a massive human rights project embarked on by the Catholic Church to document what took place during the armed conflict in Guatemala between 1960 and 1996.⁶ It also engages *Haunted Land* (2001), a documentary by filmmaker Mary Ellen Davis. In both works, the image of an angel is a hovering presence, the creation of photographer Daniel Hernández-Salazar -- hence Fiona’s title.

It is 1998. A peace accord that is supposed to be “firm and lasting” was signed barely fifteen months ago. After three arduous years, the toil of 600 trained investigators responsible for gathering together 1,500 eyewitness 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-

⁶ Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala (1998)/Human Rights Office of the Archdiocese of Guatemala (1999). In Spanish, the former constitutes four thick tomes; in English, the latter is a one-volume distillation.

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, heartbreak, and recovery, *para que todos lo sepan*.⁷

“So that all shall know” – and remember, an apt epitaph for Eduardo Galeano, whose fire of memory, coruscating, shines on.

⁷ Fiona Akins handed in her take-home exam on December 17, 2002. This excerpt from it appears with her permission.

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