

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Eduardo Galeano, Latin America's Leftist Literary Giant and Poet Laureate

Eric · Wednesday, April 29th, 2015



The great, subversive, political, and poetic Uruguayan writer, Eduardo Galeano died on April 13, 2015, after losing his second bout with lung cancer. Galeano was one of my favorite writers. He was little known in *America* (of course he would poignantly call us, the rapacious and hegemonic “the United States of *America*,” in contrast with his own, much-maligned and violently-exploited “Latin *America*,” but that made sense since he always compared the European rape and conquest of the New World in the 15th-18th centuries to the USA’s current exploitation and subjugation of Latin America in the 20th-21st centuries. Precious metals like gold and silver from the mines of 16th century Cuzco, Potosi and Zacatecas, the prized currency of the former *conquistadors*, have nowadays been replaced with the current currency of rubber, timber, and oil from the Amazon.



From one *gringo*’s point of view, Galeano made me re-see the Spanish conquest of the Americas. I had fallen in love with Cortez, Pizarro, the whole lot of syphilis-spreading “conquistadors” that I was educated to love and admire. They were heroic and romantic. Conquistadors! Super men. But Galeano’s OPEN VEINS OF LATIN AMERICA (1971), and even more so, his epic trilogy, MEMORY OF FIRE (1982-86), shocked and enlightened me. Told in concise, poetic vignettes, MEMORY OF FIRE made me re-see the entire history of pre-Columbian America. I hung on every tale. Each was so beautiful, so violent, and seemingly... so true. I had been duped, just as *los indigenos* in Potosi and Mexico and Cuzco had been duped. Just like we Americans are being duped by our modern media and government. I empathized with Atahualpa, the last Inca king ransomed and killed by Pizarro in 1533, and I wanted to crucify the whole lot of duplicitous Europeans who came to rape, sicken, Christianize, colonize, and economically exploit the peoples of the Americas.



I took MEMORY OF FIRE with me and read it for the first time when I went to Mexico City in 2005. I found it beautiful, haunting, violent, poetic, and almost incredible. So hard to believe that I just had to write about it:



“Genesis” (the first book of MEMORY OF FIRE’S trilogy) begins with the landing of Columbus on Guanahani (a small island in the Bahamas) in 1492, when he is met by naked, open-mouthed natives who say to their brothers, “Come see the men who arrived from the sky! Bring them food and drink”. Columbus, seeing shiny, metal adornments all over their naked, “red-skinned” bodies, and thinking he’s discovered the back door to Asia, queries hungrily through his unsuccessful interpreter, “Gold? Temples? China? Japan? Gold?” His questions are not understood by the amiable and awestruck inhabitants, but by his second and third trip to “the Indies” (today’s Haiti and Dominican Republic, named “Hispanola”, by the great and noble Queen Isabella of Spain, re-conqueror of the Muslim hordes in Granada and expeller of all Jews from her country in 1492), Columbus has begun to subjugate the kind and helpful natives into slaves and demand tribute from them, either in the form of currency or labor. Like his soon-to-appear, Spanish Conquistador brethren, Cortez, Alvarado, & Pizarro, Columbus’ geographical skills, ownership of iron, horse, and gun powder, not to mention his bottomless greed for gold, allow him to begin the subjugation, annihilation, and exploitation of “the New World”, of, what today is known as, Latin America.



I had always wanted to do an epic theater piece on the MEMORY OF FIRE, but I never met, or even wrote to Galeano, to get the rights. I wish I had known that my poet-journalist friend, [Rubén Martínez](#), might have introduced me. I wonder if Señor Galeano would have agreed. And I wonder, with terror, what I would have come up with. It’s not only my loss, but the theater’s loss that I, or someone else, never brought his eye-opening and revolutionary piece to the theater and film world. Certainly the books speak for themselves, but I would have liked to see how other *gringos* would have reacted to Galeano’s subversive truth.

The world of literature has lost a great warrior and poet. I will miss his next books dearly.

R.I.P., Eduardo Galeano.....



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