Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

LA's 1st Indigenous Peoples Day

Eric · Wednesday, October 10th, 2018

September 8, 2018 was Los Angeles' inaugural Indigenous Peoples Day. Bravo, Councilman Mitch O'Farrell, who worked long and hard to create this celebratory new day in our City, which has finally and officially replaced our long-standing, but beleaguered national holiday, Columbus Day, with an indigenous one of its own.

I went to the festivities in front of City Hall, and I could hardly believe it. Down with Christopher Columbus, the man who "discovered" America, and up with the historic Tongva-Gabrielino people who greeted the Spanish along the Los Angeles River. Down with Hernan Cortes and the Spanish conquistadors, and up with conquered Montezuma and the entire Aztec empire. And down with Francisco Pizarro, his treacherous and murderous soldiers, and up with the betrayed Atahualpa and his conquered Peruvian Incas.

Eduardo Galeano, the Uruguayan writer and "the literary giant of the Latin American left" would be both proud and amazed.

In his well-read books, *Open Veins of Latin America* and the *Memory of Fire Trilogy*, Galeano was the provocative re-interpreter of American history, calling the colonizing Europeans things like blood suckers, disease-spreaders, and exploiters, rather than explorer-adventurers, conquering heroes, or religion-spreading do-gooders. And perhaps, in this virulent and angry time of right-leaning, Kavanaugh-confirmed, conservative Trumpism, a re-named national holiday like this one, if only re-named *locally*, can indeed be considered a welcome victory for all of us morally-outraged and politically-challenged progressive liberals.

Not that my childhood self wouldn't feel ultimately betrayed or confused by this historic re-naming. I mean, I was brought up in a 1950s education system that celebrated and force-fed me and my classmates the names of Columbus, Cortes, Pizarro, Magellan, Da Gama, La Salle, De Soto… all those brave and adventurous European sailors of the high seas, dreamers and discoverers of the New World, founders and forefathers of the great US of A. I mean, these were our pre-virtual super heroes, our gods in human form, not our revisionist syphilis-spreaders, gold and silver stealers, slave sellers, or religious and spiritual bullies.

In light of this historic day, I went back to a blog post I wrote in 2005 during my drive though Mexico from Cuidad Juarez in the very north, all the way to Porto Escondido, directly south of Oaxaca, a journey of thousands of miles. At the time, and significantly, I was reading *Genesis*, the first of Galeano's *Memory of Fire Trilogy*, the book that shockingly re-educated me and re-taught me "American" history, and which simultaneously stripped me forever of my romantic, conquistadoring, Christopher Columbus fantasies. A book, and therefore a blog post, about "indigenous people".

Here, below, is a somewhat-edited version of that long-winded blog post from 2005.

Soy Zapatista

13 de Junio, 2005

San Cristobal de Las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico

The thing I like best about travel is the education it offers. Of course, it depends on what you're interested in learning. Unfortunately, we can only see the world through the narrow frame through which we look. Coincidentally and developmentally, that frame is usually focused on specific things at different times of our lives. Things change, we change, and hence we are able to see, absorb, synthesize, and thus learn, about certain things at certain times in our lives. Walking, playing ball/dolls, learning about girls/boys, acquiring knowledge, school, sex, love, career, self, partnership, responsibility, parenthood, aging, dying — we learn as we grow. We all go though the same stages, but the glasses we wear, the frames, are different. And ever-changing. Nobody sees the same, thinks the same, is interested in the same thing – as another.

The other thing I like best about travel is inputting, absorbing, and trying to synthesize all the new information about a different culture. A different history. A different people. A different time, way of thinking, eating, dancing, making music … a different way of seeing.

Sure, I like looking at the scenery, the beauty, the squalor. Riding the buses, eating the food, seeing the ruins, getting *borracho* (drunk), dancing, walking, meeting new people, going to the local market, getting a new look at the world from outside America, not reading the news, going to internet shops, getting lost, trying to speak the language, finding a place to sleep, buying souvenirs, taking photos, trying to go with the flow of the trip rather than planning everything in advance. Getting so *borracho* that I waste a whole day having to sleep it off….

But here I am in Me-hee-co, and I'm trying to figure out what this place is and how it got that way. Not just what it's "like." But what it "is." What was Mexico before it was Mexico? What's the difference between Aztec and Mayan? What happened to the indigenous people when Columbus and then Cortes set forth in the "new world"? And what happened to the indigenous people for the next 3 centuries? In all of the Americas? To the people of Mexico, Peru, Guatemala, Cuba, Bolivia, Ecuador, Brazil, the Antilles, Chile, and then – to those indigenous people of our own, self-centered and Numero Uno, "America": Virginia (named after the sacred virgin), Massachusetts Bay (founded not only by people "looking for religious freedom", but by convicts, prostitutes, derelicts, and vagabonds looking for the same gold, wealth, and opportunity as the rest of the

gang), New Amsterdam (the biggest slave market in America in the early 17th century), New Mexico, Montana, Oregon… California (hey, that's where I live!).

Books are sometimes good for augmenting one's education, and the one at my side on this trip is the first of Uruguay's Eduardo Galeano's copious and poetic trilogy, *Memory of Fire*. *Genesis* begins with the landing of Columbus on Guanahanii (a small island in the Bahamas) in 1492, and being 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 greedily 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," enabled by the crowns of Spain and empowered by the King of kings and his Catholic liturgy in Rome, Columbus and his soon-to-be famous conquistador brethren have begun to subjugate the kind and helpful natives and demand tribute from them, either in the form of currency or labor. Thus benignly on one side, and malignantly on the other, begins the precedent of ownership, annihilation, and exploitation in "the New World."

I know. You think you know the sad and painful story. But believe me, you don't. They don't teach it to us in history class. Yeah, we know some bad shit happened during the nearly 300 hundred years between Columbus' sailing the ocean blue in 1492 and the Boston Tea Party. But what exactly happened? Believe me, it's a brutal, almost unbelievably savage story. And guess who's committing most of the savagery? Read Senor Galeano's books if history interests you at all. Know how, where, and by whom, every indigenous people in both North and South America were chronologically, systematically and brutally conquered, humiliated, and destroyed by the thrones of Europe. For gold, for silver, for sugar, tobacco, copper, corn, timber, turquoise… always more gold.

Enough, you say, you left-leaning, neo hippie of the privileged American academy. What does it matter at this point? Shit happens. Why should you care? But I *do*. Because here's the thing. I grew up as a young boy scout-to-be in the 1950s, thinking men like Columbus, Pizarro, Cortez, Balboa, Ponce de Leon, Magellan – were all super human heroes. Like Moses and David, biblical characters I learned from comic books. The word "conquistador" was a powerful and magical word. These guys were like Babe Ruth and Mickey Mantle, before we found out that the damn Yankees were drunken womanizers, as well as the Sultans of Swat. But hell… Hudson, La Salle, De Soto – they named friggin' cars after these guys. We learned their friggin' names as the old roadsters zipped by on the suburban roads along Eisenhower Park and MacArthur field. But now I learn that each and every one of these guys were rogues, profiteers, pilferers, thieves, and that they did brutal and inhuman things to a race of people who they did not even think of, or treat, as human.

Sure, the dudes were adventurers, great sailors; they were bold dreamers who led their crews with iron wills, religious zeal, and personal sacrifice, but almost each and every one of them ended up dead or humiliated well before their time. Karma? The great Columbus, after his fifth journey to the new world, died blind in Valladolid, Spain, groaning and muttering to himself, long after the court had tired of his desperate rants and entreaties. Balboa, only six years after "discovering" the

Pacific Ocean, was murdered by his own double-crossing father-in-law – and his partner in crime, the executioner, Francisco Pizarro. Magellan, the great Portuguese sea captain who was the first to circumnavigate the globe, never returned from the three year journey. Of the 237 sailors and soldiers who left Seville in 1519, only 18 returned. Magellan died of a poisoned arrow shot into his leg, a trophy of the Filipino natives. Ponce de Leon, wanting to dwarf the memory of Columbus by discovering the Fountain of Youth in Florida, died in 1521 with an arrow in his chest, murmuring like a new born baby. Pizarro, the mighty conqueror of Atahualpa and the Inca Empire in 1533, beheaded his colleague in crime, Almagro, only to have his own head taken by Almagro's son 15 years later.

Francisco Pizarro

And so on, down the line. Murder. Greed. Revenge. Not a pretty picture. And this they call, the "deconstruction" of history. Not exactly what we young baby boom boys of summer were fed down on the farm, is it?

The conquest of America was accomplished physically — and militarily. The Aztecs, Incas, Zapotecs, Hopi, Araucanians (Chile), Kayapos, Huexotzingo, Texcoco, Tukuna, Sioux, up and down the two continents, had little or no means to defend themselves. They died by the thousands to the lances, swords, canons, and diseases of the European colonizers. They were lied to, cheated, robbed, tortured, raped, imprisoned, lashed, interbred with, and killed by the impotent kings, punishing inquisitors, and hypocritical bishops of Europe. They were paid to hunt and kill their own people. They had black slaves from Angola, Capetown, and Senegal brought to their native lands and saw these people treated as badly, or worse, than themselves. They were mutilated, hacked, burned, and exterminated by the greed of Europe, which needed to feed its insatiable war and religious machines back home.

And finally, and even more sadly, the indigenous people were conquered… spiritually. Their "primitive, uncivilized, stupid, and devil-worshipping" form of worship was replaced by god-fearing and wrathful Catholicism. How could the Papacy allow a people to live in harmony with nature? Worship natural gods and spirits? Share material wealth (bartering/trading for things, sometimes using the invaluable cocoa bean as currency)? How could Rome let the heathens fornicate for pleasure, wherever and whenever they wanted? (Certain tribes made love in plain daylight, believing that a child conceived at night would be born blind.) The answer to each and all forms of this pagan worship? NO. The Church could not permit it. They had to eradicate it. And so they burned the codices of the Aztecs and Mayans, so as not to promote or perpetuate this kind of idolatry. They burned thousands of years of codified knowledge of astronomy, geology, hieroglyphics, agriculture, mathematics (the Maya were the first civilization to use the concept of zero), and more. And they replaced it, or tried to replace it, with the all-suffering son of God, Jesus Christ!

Am I exaggerating? Romanticizing? Mythologizing? Certainly the great warrior kings, Huaina Capac of the Inca empire in Cuzco by 1533 (when Pizarro ransomed and killed his son, Atahualpa,

to grab the Incan throne), and Montezuma of the Aztec empire in Tenochtitlan (what became Mexico City after it was paved over by the Spaniards) by 1521 (when Cortes was bizarrely greeted by Montezuma as the returning god, Quetzalcoatl) stretched their empires across each of the south and central American continents respectively, by using bloodthirsty and brutal force to conquer countless rival tribes.

The Aztecs were especially brutal in their ritual human sacrifice of thousands of their enemies (and even their own) to their ravenous god of the sun. The warrior priests would plunge obsidian daggers straight into the chests of captured enemies and tear the heart right out of its cavity. Then the bodies would be hurled from the place of sacrifice down to the masses, and as oral memory tells, the Aztecs would hungrily devour their fallen enemies.

It is too easy to simplify the lives of the entire indigenous population of the Americas as “peaceful” and “harmonious.” Although all the pre-colonial tribes had to live and worship in direct communion with nature, there were simply too many different tribes to make blanket statements about them all. However, the question that constantly arises is: “was all this bloodshed and deceit – from Columbus to Cortez, Pizarro, then the Puritans – a necessity for the human race to progress from ‘savagery’ to ‘civilization’?” And whereas the Western historical apology always offers the irreversible answer “yes,” I believe it is at least an answer left to the poetic and personal imaginations of each of us. Different frames, different vision, si?

Be that as it may, many native Americans, by turn, helpless, rebellious, or dutiful (ultimately compliant or exterminated), couldn’t understand by what right the Europeans thought they could possess the land and its bounty.

As Chief Adario of the Huron Indians spoke to Baron de Lahontan, French colonizer of Newfoundland in 1691, after almost 200 years of European subjugation of the Americas:

> “*What sort of men must Europeans be? What species of creatures do they retain to? The Europeans, who must be forced to do good, and have no other prompter for the avoiding of evil than the fear of punishment… who gave you all the countries you now inhabit? In earnest, my dear brother, I’m sorry for thee from the bottom of my soul. Take my advice and turn Huron; for I see plainly a vast difference between thy condition and mine. I am master of myself and my condition. I am master of my own body. I have absolute disposal of myself. I do what I please, I am the first and the last of my nation. I fear no man and I depend only on the Great Spirit. whereas Thy body, as well as Thy soul, are doomed to a dependence on thy great Captain, thy Viceroy disposes of thee, thou hast not the liberty of doing what thou hast a mind to; thou art afraid of robbers, false witnesses, and assassins. And thou dependest upon an infinity of persons whose places have raised them above thee. Is it true or not?*”

More than enough, you say. What does all this have to do with my trip to Me-hee-co? Or Columbus Day? Why can’t I just kick back, drink the mescal, Negro Modelo & tequila, enjoy the

charm of the colonial towns, the colorful dress and handicrafts of the natives, bring back some Zapotec reproductions & some photos, and call it a great vacation? Well, I'm afraid that's too simple. Too "first world" – here in the heart of the "third world". The *indigenos* are not stupid. Were not stupid. Were not uncivilized, heathen, devil-worshiping, evil, or threatening.

Why not look at a land, a people's history, and try to understand who they are, what their ancestors were like, what their practices really meant? What's the relationship of your "dominant" culture to the "poor people" of Mexico and Latin America? Learn history to understand the present.

I go to the "Catholic" church outside of San Cristobal de las Casas in Chiapas (the southern and most eastern state in Mexico, adjacent to Guatemala), in the not so little village of San Juan (Saint John) Chamula (population 59,000; South Pasadena has 20,000), and I'm admitted to their sacred, but daily, church ceremony. Where, like their ancestors for centuries since colonization, they have transferred the qualities of their "pagan" gods to the names of the Christian saints. Whereby, when the whole family sits on a bed of pine needles that cover the floor of this seemingly small Catholic village church, and they sacrifice a live chicken in the presence of their personal family shaman, they drink coca cola and *cheecha* (local distilled corn), burn candles, and murmur amongst themselves in Tzeltal or Tzotzil, they are in fact worshiping in the same way they did in pre-Hispanic times.

Only the names are changed. The sun god, the god of war, the goddesses of the moon and the earth, the god of sheep & shepherds, of corn… they all since have names like John, Peter, Santiago, Mary, Guadalupe, and Paul. Clever, if you ask me. If you can't beat the oppressor, adapt his ways to yours. Preserve your culture; teach your children. That may be the only way you stop being exterminated. The only way you live on….

No, the "Indians" of Chamula don't worship Coke, Sprite, Fanta, or Pepsi. It's just that along the way, over the humiliating centuries, they replaced the fermentation of the pineapple for the sacred ceremonies – with the ready-made "refrescos" of the West. Practical, as they most certainly are, they figure you get the same sweetness from the Coke and Pepsi, and it too, makes you belch out the evil spirits. Clever… as I said.

I have one more fantasy, beyond the spreading of Indigenous Peoples Day throughout the Americas. Beyond replacing the tarnished and traditional Columbus Day holiday – with a more worthy and appropriate day of respect for ALL Native Americans who were here first.

My fantasy is… the tearing down of the statue of Christopher Columbus' standing at 59th Street and Columbus Circle in New York City. Right across from a Trump Tower. Even more than the tearing down of the statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad after 9/11, I can imagine the ghost of poor Cristobal Colon (Columbus' name in Spanish) facing the final indignity from a country that once worshiped and adored him. What a day that would be…

Until then, I'll settle for Indigenous Peoples Day – even if for now, it's only in my adopted City of Angels.

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Go to his podcast, "e-travels with e. trules" HERE.

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