

Crossing borders: Introducing Eduardo Galeano

By Erika Zarco

Does history repeat itself? Or are the repetitions only penance for those who are incapable of listening to it? No history is mute. No matter how much they burn it, break it, and lie about it, human history refuses to shut its mouth. Despite deafness and ignorance, the time that was continues to tick inside the time that is. The right to remember does not figure among the human rights consecrated by the United Nations, but now more than ever we must insist on it and act on it. Not to repeat the past but to keep it from being repeated. Not to make us ventriloquists for the dead but to allow us to speak with voices that are not condemned to echo perpetually with stupidity and misfortune. When it is truly alive, memory doesn't contemplate history, it invites us to make it. More than in museums, where its poor old soul gets bored, memory is in the air we breathe, and from the air it breathes us. (Galeano, 1998, p. 210)

Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano first influenced my life when I was just turning fifteen years old. *Las Venas Abiertas de America Latina* (*Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*, Galeano, 1971) was mandatory reading for my high school Spanish language class. I consider myself very fortunate to have been exposed to this caliber of a person, writer, political economist, activist, poet, humanitarian, philosopher, and archivist at such a young age. Galeano made a profound impact on me, and I consider him a mentor of my heart.

Galeano changed my life in ways that are still unfolding, up to and including having the honour of writing this piece. Galeano has shaped my perspectives on social and racial justice and my understanding of the history of America Latina(Latin America). He has illuminated cultural and economic narratives about imperialism, its conquests, and its effects on real people. His writings are what motivated me to complete my undergraduate work in Latin American Studies and Political Economy.

As a Mexican-American woman who immigrated to the United States when I was two years old, the right to remember my first country and its language, roots and traditions is integral to the person I have become. My sense of what I am drawn to read, study, and write about are all derivative expressions, born out of ways I have internalised and continue to metabolise Eduardo Galeano's extensive published works: *Days and nights of love and war* (2000), *Memory of fire trilogy* (2010), *Upside down: A primer for the looking-glass world* (1998), *Voices of time: A life in stories* (2007), and *Mirrors: Stories of almost anyone* (2009), to name just a few.

In my undergraduate coursework, I studied Andre Gunder Frank's Dependency theory, and Immanuel Wallerstein's World Systems theory. Studying the underdevelopment of nations peaked my interest in themes of human development. More specifically, I wanted to understand the landscape of human identity through a family systems-based psychological framework. This path culminated in my decision to become a bilingual (Spanish-English) therapist in the United States. Galeano has gifted me with the necessary hope, dignity, courage and moral outrage/*coraje moral*. His words of advocacy have inspired me to provide a voice of support to Latinos (and others) in the United States. There is a direct correlation to my work with Latino 'immigrants' and trauma work – the demon we most frequently exorcise, at both micro and macro levels. Award winning journalist Naomi Klein, author of *The shock doctrine: The rise of disaster capitalism* (2007), explores states of economic and psychological shock in Latin America due to the direct effects of policies; she quotes Eduardo Galeano from his book, *Days and nights of love and war* (2000): 'The theories of Milton Friedman gave him the Nobel Prize; they gave Chile to General Pinochet' (p. 73).

Galeano's style is deeply ironic, eloquent, and enlightened; he savagely critiques inaccurate ahistorical assumptions and exposes culturally imperialistic narratives that saturates, maintains and upholds the various ideologies of the oppressor as it relates to the dynamics of colonisation. Often times, those assumptions alienate, traumatises, re-traumatises, and promulgates an already excruciating legacy of oppression. Galeano reminds us of the magician's motives behind the imperial curtain; he warns us of the function of the curtain, to stay focused, to pay attention, to care, to learn from the past, and not to have historical amnesia.

Galeano expressed the effects of colonialism in *The book of embraces* (1989), as follows:

Blatant colonialism mutilates you without pretense: it forbids you to talk, it forbids you to exist. Invisible colonialism, however, convinces you that serfdom is your destiny and impotence is your nature: it convinces you that it's *not possible to speak, not possible to act, not possible to exist.* (p. 159)

Galeano's words motivate me to work to re-envision, re-define, re-mold, re-contextualise, and re-inspire. The fact that he has survived imprisonment, dictatorships, state terror, exile, and human rights' violations, are amazing *testimonios* to his life's work. He virulently denounces abuses of powers; and, in so doing, aside from becoming my personal hero, creates the opportunity to envision an alternative world; a more responsible and humane one.

Galeano's incredible poetry, metaphors and literary irony expose the meat and ravages left behind by capitalism's bloody fangs on individuals and communities. This truly is not like any other account of history I had ever read! He dares to politicise his politics and demonstrates the absurdity and severe exploitation behind dominant narratives that collude to render history both ahistorical and apolitical. He uses his words beautifully to defend those who have been disenfranchised, forgotten, colonised, imprisoned, tortured, robbed, murdered, and harmed. His writings are the consciousness that dares to gnaw through the barriers of systematic justifications, denial, and greed; yes he dares to question empire. Sandra Cisneros, another remarkably important Latina author writing in the United States, wrote about her appreciation for Galeano's work, flair and influence on her, in her forward for the new edition of his book, *Days and nights of love and war* (2000).

While completing my undergraduate work, I was also exposed to the writings of Aurora Levins Morales. Many of her writings that I have read have had a major impact on me as a Latina living in the US; however, *Medicine stories* (1999), and more specifically her chapter, The Historian as Curandera , was the first exposure I had that openly addressed ways to empower and address personal agency. Morales references Galeano's 1976 essay 'En defensa de la palabra' (*In defense of the word*), and quotes him: 'What process of change can move a person that does not know who it is, or where it came from? If it does not know who it is, how can it know what it deserves to be?' (p. 24). Morales provides a model for medicinal storytelling: 'a kind of Curandera's handbook'. Her recipe for creating medicinal histories is as follows:

1. Tell untold or undertold histories
2. Centring women changes the landscape
3. Identify strategic pieces of misinformation and contradict them
4. Make absences visible
5. Asking questions can be as good as answering them
6. What constitutes evidence?
7. Show agency
8. Show complexity and embrace ambiguity and contradiction
9. Reveal hidden power relationships
10. Personalise
11. Show connection and context
12. Restore global context

13. Access and digestibility
14. Show yourself in your work
15. Cross borders

Medicinal history ‘provides an alternative story, one in which oppression is the result of events and choices, not natural law’ (Morales, 1999, p. 24). She reflects and offers that what keeps our work honest, makes it powerful, and keeps us honest in our work, is by acknowledging why we care about it and who we are in relationship to it. I work for a collective of Latina immigrants where a poster in one office reads: ‘If capital can cross borders, so can we!’

While in graduate school, I was exposed to Michael White and David Epston’s writings on narrative therapy. Narrative therapy was the primary clinical theoretical orientation that spoke to me because it allowed support-seekers to maintain their dignity through their own expert stance over their problems. It places the therapist in the non-expert position and, in so doing, facilitates space for curiosity and creative ways to push back against a problem. It turns the world upside down on the problem, and the fascinating fall-out is that many times it renders the problem vulnerable. I was enamored with this approach because it acknowledges that people can maintain a separate identity from the problem’s identity. I was drawn towards the process of collaborative inquiry, which I continue to believe creates and fosters a culture of mutual respect, addresses power dynamics, considers context and culture, and advocates for personal empowerment. Narrative therapy values as one of its primary tenets the praxis of social justice. In Epston’s book, *Down under and up over: Travels with narrative therapy* (2008), in the chapter entitled, ‘On Becoming a Just Practitioner: Experimenting with the final paper of an undergraduate programme as a rite of passage’, Epston valiantly stresses the value and importance of community work and its rightful place in both Narrative Therapy and academia.

While being trained narratively, I benefitted from the exploration of the theoretical underpinnings of social construction, training in a host of social contexts, learning about the culture of different problems, and having many amazing supervisors. All of this assisted me in allowing me to see my clients for the people they wish to become. I now have a deeper connection to the various social systems through which they navigate.

I have been fortunate to be able to attend David Epston’s trainings for three years in a row. While at his last training in Berkeley, California, on the subject entitled, ‘Can a young person’s mischief make trouble for a problem?’, on 2nd December 2011, David stated, ‘We have a whole science about how problems create trouble for people, but nothing much about how people create trouble for problems’.

Throughout the duration of my internship experiences, I have often reflected on the tragic irony problems can create for people. I deeply value that David Epston and Michael White created interviewing techniques such as externalisation, which allows the client to name the problem, imbue it with meaning, and have it take on a separate identity from their own. I appreciate the dignity this affords humanity, and so do many of my clients. Upon learning about Narrative Therapy, I was reminded of the South African proverb with which Morales (1999) begins her chapter, ‘The historian as Curandera’: ‘Until lions write books, history will always glorify the hunter’ (p. 23).

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