

## Eduardo Galeano on Haiti

The history of the abuse of Haiti, which in our lifetime has become a tragedy, is also the story of Western civilization's racism

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On Apr. 13, 2015, the influential Uruguayan writer and journalist Eduardo Galeano, 74, died of lung cancer in Montevideo. He wrote over 30 books, including the seminal *"Open Veins of Latin America"* (1971) and the *"Memory of Fire"* trilogy, composed of *"Genesis"* (1982), *"Faces and Masks"* (1984), and *"Century of the Wind"* (1986).

Haiti was a regular theme in Galeano's work, and he wrote an exceptional speech, ["Haiti, Occupied Country,"](#) which he delivered at Uruguay's National Library in Montevideo on Sep. 27, 2011.

This week, we present a few excerpts of Galeano's writings on Haiti.

### **From *"The Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent."***

Three years after the discovery, Columbus personally directed the military campaign against the natives of Haiti, which he called Española.

A handful of cavalry, 200 foot soldiers, and a few specially trained dogs decimated the Indians. More than 500, shipped to Spain, were sold as slaves in Seville and died miserably. Some theologians protested and the enslavement of Indians was formally banned at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Actually it was not banned but blessed: before each military action the captains of the conquest were required to read to the Indians, without an interpreter but before a notary public, a long and rhetorical *Requerimiento* exhorting them to adopt the holy Catholic faith: "If you do not, or if you maliciously delay in so doing, I certify that with God's help I will advance powerfully against you and make war on you wherever and however I am able, and will subject you to the yoke and obedience of the Church and of their majesties and take your women and children to be slaves, and as such I will sell and dispose of them as their majesties may order, and I will take your possessions and do you all the harm and damage that I can."

In the second half of the [18<sup>th</sup>] century the world's best sugar was being raised on the spongy coastal plains of Haiti, a French colony then known as Saint Domingue. Northern and western Haiti became a human antheap: sugar needed hands and more hands. In 1786 the colony brought in 27,000 slaves; in the following year, 40,000. Revolution broke out in the fall of 1791 and in one month, September, 200 sugar plantations went up in flames; fires

and battles were continuous as the rebel slaves pushed France's armies to the sea. Ships sailed containing ever more Frenchmen and ever less sugar. The war spilt rivers of blood, wrecked the plantations, and paralyzed the country, and by the end of the century production had fallen to almost nothing. By

November 1803, almost all of the once flourishing colony was in ashes and ruins. The Haitian revolution had coincided – and not only in time – with the French Revolution, and Haiti bore its share of the international coalition's blockade against France: England controlled the seas. Later, as its independence became inevitable, Haiti also had to suffer blockade by France.

The U.S. Congress, yielding to French pressure, banned trade with Haiti in 1806. In 1825 France recognized its former colony's independence, but only in exchange for a huge cash indemnity. General Leclerc had written to his brother-in-law Napoleon in 1802, soon after taking prisoner the slave armies' leader Toussaint L'Ouverture, "Here is my opinion about this country: all the blacks in the mountains, men and women, must be suppressed, keeping only the children under twelve; half the blacks in the plains must be exterminated, and not a single mulatto with epaulets must be left in the colony."

The tropics took their revenge on Leclerc: "Gripped by the black vomit," and despite the magical incantations of [Napoleon's sister] Pauline Bonaparte, he died without carrying out his plan.... But the cash indemnity was a millstone around the necks of those independent Haitians who survived the bloodbaths of the successive military expeditions against them. The country was born in ruins and never recovered: today it is the poorest in Latin America.

In the first years of our [20<sup>th</sup>] century the philosopher William James passed the little-known judgment that the country had finally vomited the Declaration of Independence. To cite but one example: the United States occupied Haiti for twenty years and, in that black country that had been the scene of the first victorious slave revolt, introduced racial segregation and forced labor, killed 1,500 workers in one of its repressive operations (according to a U.S. Senate investigation in 1922), and when the local government refused to turn the *Banque Nationale* into a branch of New York's National City Bank, suspended the salaries of the president and his ministers so that they might think again. Alternating the "big stick" with "dollar diplomacy," similar actions were carried out in the other Caribbean islands and in all of Central America, the geopolitical space of the imperial *mare nostrum*.

### **From "Memory of Fire: Genesis"**

#### **1459: La Isabela**

#### **Caonabó**



**Eduardo Galeano: "Haiti is the country that is treated the worst by the world's powerful. Bankers humiliate it. Merchants ignore it. And politicians slam their doors in its face."**



**Christopher Columbus "personally directed the military campaign against the natives of Haiti, which he called Española. A handful of cavalry, 200 foot soldiers, and a few specially trained dogs decimated the Indians."**

Detached, aloof, the prisoner sits at the entrance of Christopher Columbus's house. He has iron shackles on his ankles, and handcuffs trap his wrists.

Caonabó was the one who burned to ashes the Navidad fort that the admiral had built when he discovered this island of Haiti. He burned the fort and killed its occupants. And not only them: In these two long years he has castigated with arrows any Spaniards he came across in Cibao, his mountain territory, for their hunting of gold and people.

Alonso de Ojeda, veteran of the wars against the Moors, paid him a visit on the pretext of peace. He invited him to mount his horse, and put on him these handcuffs of burnished metal that tie his hands, saying that they were jewels worn by the monarchs of Castile in their balls and festivities.

Now Chief Caonabó spends the days sitting beside the door, his eyes fixed on the tongue of light that invades the earth floor at dawn and slowly retreats in the evening. He doesn't move an eyelash when Columbus comes around. On the other hand, when Ojeda appears, he manages to stand up and salute with a bow the only man who has defeated him.

### **1496: La Concepcion**

#### **Sacrilege**

Bartholomew Columbus, Christopher's brother and lieutenant, attends an incineration of human flesh.

Six men play the leads in the grand opening of Haiti's incinerator. The smoke makes everyone cough. The six are burning as a punishment and as a lesson: They have buried the images of Christ and the Virgin that Fray Ramon Pane left with them for protection and consolation. Fray Ramon taught them to pray on their knees, to say the Ave Maria and Paternoster and to invoke the name of Jesus in the face of temptation, injury, and death.

No one has asked them why they buried the images. They were hoping that the new gods would fertilize their fields of corn, cassava, boniato, and beans.

The fire adds warmth to the humid, sticky heat that foreshadows heavy rain.

### **From "Memory of Fire: Faces and Masks"**

#### **1758: The Plains of Northern Haiti**

##### **Makandal**

Before a large assembly of runaway slaves, François Makandal pulls a yellow handkerchief out of a glass of water.

"First it was the Indians."

Then a white handkerchief.

"Now, whites are the masters."

He shakes a black handkerchief before the maroons' eyes. The hour of those who came from Africa has arrived, he announces. He shakes the handkerchief with his only hand, because he has left the other between the iron teeth of the sugar mill.

On the plains of Northern Haiti, one-handed Makandal is the master of fire and poison. At his order cane fields burn, and by his spells the lords of sugar collapse in the middle of supper, drooling spit and blood.

He knows how to turn himself into an iguana, an ant, or a fly, equipped with gills, antennae, or wings; but they catch him anyway, and condemn him; and now they are burning him alive. Through the flames the multitude see his body twist and shake. All of a sudden, a shriek splits the ground, a fierce cry of pain and exultation, and Makandal breaks free of the stake and of death: howling, flaming, he pierces the smoke and is lost in the air.

For the slaves, it is no cause for wonder. They knew he would remain in Haiti, the color of all shadows, the prowler of the night.

#### **1772: Léogane**

##### **Zabeth**

Ever since she learned to walk she was in flight. They tied a heavy chain to her ankles, and chained, she grew up; but a thousand times she jumped over the fence and a thousand times the dogs caught her in the mountains of Haiti.

They stamped the *fleur-de-lis* on her cheek with a hot iron. They put an iron collar and iron

shackles on her and shut her up in the sugar mill, where she stuck her fingers into the grinder and later bit off the bandages. So that she might die of iron they tied her up again, and now she expires, chanting curses.

Zabeth, this woman of iron, belongs to Madame Galbeaud du Fort, who lives in Nantes.

### **1791: Bois Caïman**

#### **The Conspirators of Haiti**

The old slave woman, intimate of the gods, buries her machete in the throat of a black wild boar. The earth of Haiti drinks the blood. Under the protection of the gods of war and of fire, 200 blacks sing and dance the oath of freedom. In the prohibited Voodoo ceremony aglow with lightning bolts, 200 slaves decide to turn this land of punishment into a fatherland.

Haiti is based on the Creole language. Like the drum, Creole is the common speech of those torn out of Africa into various Antillean islands. It blossomed inside the plantations, when the condemned needed to recognize one another and resist. It came from African languages, with African melody, and fed on the sayings of Normans and Bretons. It picked up words from Caribbean Indians and from English pirates and also from the Spanish colonists of eastern Haiti. Thanks to Creole, when Haitians talk they feel that they touch each other.

Creole gathers words and Voodoo gathers gods. Those gods are not masters but lovers, very fond of dancing, who convert each body they penetrate into music and light, pure light of undulating and sacred movement.

### **1794: Paris**

#### **“The Remedy for Man is Man,”**

say the black sages, and the gods always knew it. The slaves of Haiti are no longer slaves.

For five years the French Revolution turned a deaf ear. Marat and Robespierre protested in vain. Slavery continued in the colonies. Despite the Declaration of the Rights of Man, the men who were the property of other men on the far plantations of the Antilles were born neither free nor equal. After all, the sale of blacks from Guinea was the chief business of the revolutionary merchants of Nantes, Bordeaux, and Marseilles; and French refineries lived on Antillean sugar.

Harassed by the black insurrection headed by Toussaint L’Ouverture, the Paris government finally decrees the liquidation of slavery.

### **1794: Mountains of Haiti**

#### **Toussaint Louverture**

He came on the scene two years ago. In Paris they called him the Black Spartacus.

He was a coachman on a plantation. An old black man taught him to read and write, to cure sick horses, and to talk to men; but he learned on his own how to look not only with his eyes, and he knows how to see flight in every bird that sleeps.

## **1802: The Caribbean Sea**

### **Napoleon Restores Slavery**

Squadrons of wild ducks escort the French army. The fish take flight. Through a turquoise sea, bristling with coral, the ships head for the blue mountains of Haiti. Soon the land of victorious slaves will appear on the horizon. General Leclerc stands tall at the head of the fleet. Like a ship's figurehead, his shadow is first to part the waves. Astern, other islands disappear, castles of rock, splendors of deepest green, sentinels of the new world found three centuries ago by people who were not looking for it.

"Which has been the most prosperous regime for the colonies?"

"The previous one."

"Well, then, put it back," Napoleon decided.

No man, born red, black, or white can be his neighbor's property, Toussaint L'Ouverture had said. Now the French fleet returns slavery to the Caribbean. More than 50 ships, more than 20,000 soldiers, come from France to bring back the past with guns.

In the cabin of the flagship, a female slave fans Pauline Bonaparte and another gently scratches her head.

## **1803: Fort Dauphin**

### **The Island Burned Again**

Toussaint L'Ouverture, chief of the free blacks, died a prisoner in a castle in France. When the jailer opened the padlock at dawn and slid back the bolt, he found Toussaint frozen in his chair.

But life in Haiti moved on, and without Toussaint the black army has beaten Napoleon Bonaparte. Twenty thousand French soldiers have been slaughtered or died of fevers. Vomiting black blood, dead blood, General Leclerc has collapsed. The land he sought to enslave proves his shroud.

Haiti has lost half its population. Shots are still heard, and hammers nailing down coffins, and funeral drums, in the vast ash-heap carpeted with corpses that the vultures spurn. This island, burned two centuries ago by an exterminating angel, has been newly eaten by the fire of men at war.

Over the smoking earth those who were slaves proclaim independence. France will not forgive the humiliation.

On the coast, palms, bent over against the winds, form ranks of spears.

## **1816: Port-au-Prince**

### **Pétion**

Haiti lies in ruins, blockaded by the French and isolated by everyone else. No country has recognized the independence of the slaves who defeated Napoléon.

The island is divided in two.

In the north, Henri Christophe has proclaimed himself emperor. In the castle of Sans-Souci, the new black nobility dance the minuet – the Duke of Marmalade, the Count of Limonade – while black lackeys in snowy wigs bow and scrape, and blacks hussards parade their plumed bonnets through gardens copied from Versailles.

To the south, Alexandre Pétion presides over the republic. Distributing lands among the former slaves, Pétion aims to create a nation of peasants, very poor but free and armed, on the ashes of plantations destroyed by the war.

On Haiti's southern coast Simón Bolívar lands, in search of refuge and aid. He comes from Jamaica, where he has sold everything down to his watch. No one believes in his cause. His brilliant military campaigns have been no more than a mirage. Francisco Miranda is dying in chains in the Cadiz arsenal, and the Spaniards have reconquered Venezuela and Colombia, which prefer the past or still do not believe in the future promised by the patriots.

Pétion receives Bolívar as soon as he arrives, on New Year's Day. He gives him seven ships, 250 men, muskets, powder, provisions, and money. He makes only one condition. Pétion, born a slave, son of a black woman and a Frenchman, demands of Bolívar the freedom of slaves in the lands he is going to liberate.

Bolívar shakes his hands. The war will change its course. Perhaps America will too.

### **From “*Memory of Fire: Century of the Wind*”**

#### **1937: Dajabón**

##### **Procedure Against the Black Menace**

The condemned are Haitian blacks who work in the Dominican Republic. This military exorcism, planned to the last detail by General Trujillo, lasts a day and a half. In the sugar region, the soldiers shut up Haitian day-laborers in corrals–herds of men, women, and children–and finish them off then and there with machetes; or bind their hands and feet and drive them at bayonet point into the sea.

Trujillo, who powders his face several times a day, wants the Dominican Republic white.

#### **1937: Washington**

##### **Newsreel**

Two weeks later, the government of Haiti conveys to the government of the Dominican Republic its *concern about the recent events at the border*. The government of the Dominican Republic promises *an exhaustive investigation*.

In the name of continental security, the government of the United States proposes to President Trujillo that he pay an indemnity to avoid possible friction in the zone. After prolonged negotiation Trujillo recognizes the death of 18,000 Haitians on Dominican territory. According to him, the figure of 25,000 victims, put forward by some sources, reflects the intention to manipulate the events dishonestly. Trujillo agrees to pay the government of Haiti, by way of indemnity, \$522,000, or \$29 for every officially recognized

death.

The White House congratulates itself on an agreement reached within the framework of established inter-American treaties and procedures. Secretary of State Cordell Hull declares in Washington that *President Trujillo is one of the greatest men in Central America and in most of South America.*

The indemnity duly paid in cash, the presidents of the Dominican Republic and Haiti embrace each other at the border.

### **1943: Milot**

#### **Ruins of Sans-Souci**

Alejandro Carpentier discovers the kingdom of Henri Christophe. The Cuban writer roams these majestic ruins, this memorial to the delirium of a slave cook who became monarch of Haiti and killed himself with the gold bullet that always hung around his neck. Ceremonial hymns and magic drums of invocation rise up to meet Carpentier as he visits the palace that King Christophe copied from Versailles, and walks around his invulnerable fortress, an immense bulk whose stones, cemented by the blood of bulls sacrificed to the gods, have resisted lightning and earthquakes.

In Haiti, Carpentier learns that there is no magic more prodigious and delightful than the voyage that leads through experience, through the body, to the depths of America. In Europe, magicians have become bureaucrats, and wonder, exhausted, has dwindled to a conjuring trick. But in America, surrealism is as natural as rain or madness.

### **1969: Port-au-Prince**

#### **A Law Condemns to Death Anyone Who Says or Writes Red Words in Haiti**

Article One: Communist activities are declared to be crimes against the security of the state, in whatsoever form: any profession of Communist faith, verbal or written, public or private, any propagation of Communist or anarchist doctrines through lectures, speeches, conversations, readings, public or private meetings, by way of pamphlets, posters, newspapers, magazines, books, and pictures; any oral or written correspondence with local or foreign associations, or with persons dedicated to the diffusion of Communist or anarchist ideas; and furthermore, the act of receiving, collecting, or giving funds directly or indirectly destined for the propagation of said ideas.

Article Two: The authors and accomplices of these crimes shall be sentenced to death. Their movable and immovable property shall be confiscated and sold for the benefit of the state.

#### **Dr. François Duvalier**

*President-for-Life*

*of the Republic of Haiti*

**From “Haiti, Despised by All,” an article for the Inter Press Service in September 1996**



Haiti is the poorest country in the Western hemisphere. It has more foot-washers than shoe-shiners: little boys who, for a penny, will wash the feet of customers lacking shoes to shine. Haitians, on the average, live a bit more than thirty years. Nine out of every ten can't read or write. For internal consumption the barren mountain sides are cultivated. For export, the fertile valleys: the best lands are given to coffee, sugar, cacao, and other products needed by the U.S. market. No one plays baseball in Haiti, but Haiti is the world's chief producer of baseballs. There is no shortage of workshops where children assemble cassettes and electronic parts for a dollar a day. These are naturally for export; and naturally the profits are also exported, after the administrators of the terror have duly got theirs. The slightest breath of protest in Haiti means prison or death. Incredible as it sounds, Haitian workers' wages lost 25 percent of their wretched real value between 1971 and 1975. Significantly, in that period a new flow of U.S. capital into the country began.

Haiti is the country that is treated the worst by the world's powerful. Bankers humiliate it. Merchants ignore it. And politicians slam their doors in its face.

Democracy arrived only recently in Haiti. During its short life, this frail, hungry creature received nothing but abuse. It was murdered in its infancy in 1991 in a coup led by General Raoul Cédras.

Three years later, democracy returned. After having installed and deposed countless military dictators, the U.S. backed President Jean Bertrand Aristide - the first leader elected by popular vote in Haiti's history - and a man foolish enough to want a country with less injustice.

In order to erase every trace of American participation in the bloody Cédras dictatorship, U.S. soldiers removed 160,000 pages of records from the secret archives. Aristide returned to Haiti with his hands tied. He was permitted to take office as president, but not power. His successor, René Préval, who became president in February, received nearly 90 percent of the vote.

Any minor bureaucrat at the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund has more power than Préval does. Every time he asks for a credit line to feed the hungry, educate the illiterate, or provide land to the peasants, he gets no response. Or he may be told to go back and learn his lessons. And because the Haitian government cannot seem to grasp that it must dismantle its few remaining public services, the last shred of a safety net for the most defenseless people on Earth, its masters give up on it.

The U.S. invaded Haiti in 1915 and ran the country until 1934. It withdrew when it had accomplished its two objectives: seeing that Haiti had paid its debts to U.S. banks and that the constitution was amended to allow for the sale of plantations to foreigners. Robert Lansing, then secretary of state, justified the long and harsh military occupation by saying that blacks were incapable of self-government, that they had "an inherent tendency toward savagery and a physical inability to live a civilized life."

Haiti had been the jewel in the crown, France's richest colony: one big sugar plantation, harvested by slave labor. The French philosopher Montesquieu explained it bluntly: "Sugar would be too expensive if it were not produced by slaves. These slaves are blacks .... it is not possible that God, who is a very wise being, would have put a soul . . ., in such an utterly black body." Instead, God had put a whip in the overseer's hand.

In 1803, the black citizens of Haiti gave Napoleon Bonaparte's troops a tremendous beating, and Europe has never forgiven them for this humiliation inflicted upon the white race. Haiti was the first free country in South America or the Caribbean. The free people raised their flag over a country in ruins. The land of Haiti had been devastated by the sugar monoculture and then laid waste by the war against France. One third of the population had fallen in combat. Then Europe began its blockade. The newborn nation was condemned to solitude. No one would buy from it, no one would sell to it, nor would any nation recognize it.

Not even Simon Bolivar had the courage to establish diplomatic relations with the black nation. Bolivar was able to reopen his campaign for the liberation of the Americas, after being defeated by Spain, thanks to help from Haiti. The Haitian government supplied him with seven ships, arms, and soldiers, setting only one condition: that he free the slaves – something that had not occurred to him. Bolivar kept his promise, but after his victory, he turned his back on the nation that had saved him. When he convened a meeting in Panama of the American nations, he invited England, but not Haiti.

The U.S. did not recognize Haiti until 60 years later. By then, Haiti was already in the bloody hands of the military dictators, who devoted the meager resources of this starving nation toward relieving its debt to France. Europe demanded that Haiti pay France a huge indemnity to atone for its crime against French dignity.

The history of the abuse of Haiti, which in our lifetime has become a tragedy, is also the story of Western civilization's racism.

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