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## Seeing in *Embraces*

Eduardo Galeano's *The Book of Embraces* is an unconventional work, a collection of brief anecdotes, or vignettes, that are as short as thirteen words and at most span two pages. Interspersed are Galeano's own images—black and white line drawings of people, animals, musical instruments, angels, hands, and a host of other things. This unusual book has been called a “mosaic,” and a “book of wonders,” and Galeano's method has been likened to collage (back cover). Indeed, *The Book of Embraces* has the feel of a collection or compilation. The slight stories and flat line drawings are like flowers pressed between the pages of a heavy tome. The title itself connotes a gathering together of things—of embraces. Perhaps given the book's autobiographical strain and Galeano's inclusion of the etymology of the word *remember* as a kind of epigraph (the Latin *re-cordis* means “to pass back through the heart”) the title may refer to Galeano's having looked back over his life and embraced—drawn to his heart—the people, events, and moments that appear in this book. In other words, the book may be a collection not only of anecdotes and images, but of Galeano's acts of remembrance and appreciation. The title's “embraces” also suits the close proximity of the multifarious creatures and objects represented on the book's pages as well as the book's disintegration of dualities such as self and other, fact and fiction.

Yes, *The Book of Embraces* is a collection, a compilation of wonders and memories, a mosaic and a collage. But Galeano's use of images in conjunction with text is more than an assortment of items or a composition technique. It is the point and power of the book. In addition to everything else, *The Book of Embraces* is a book about seeing, or perception. Through its anecdotes and illustrations, readers see the

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world through Galeano's own sensitive and insightful vision. But more than that, the anecdotes and illustrations heighten the readers' awareness of seeing and suggest lessons on *how to see*.

On the surface, Galeano's drawings appear to be mere illustrations; there is usually one image for each anecdote, and text and image often correlate thematically. That the images have significance beyond illustrating the anecdotes is indicated through the attention they are given in the book as a whole. Each illustration is surrounded by significant negative space, like a piece of art on a museum wall, suggesting that the drawings are meant to be seen in their own right and not merely as an accessory to text. The autonomy of the images is also communicated in the fact that they appear without text on several pages and even on a few full spreads, just as there are some anecdotes that appear without illustrations. These gestures in the book's layout indicate that the drawings are not merely supportive of and subordinate to the anecdotes. Rather, this is a book in which text and images play equal, autonomous, and integrated roles, requiring readers to be viewers and viewers to be readers, appreciating the graphic and visual qualities of text and the symbolic and semantic qualities of images.

But Galeano's use of text and images does more than highlight the similarities between the written and the visual; it draws readers into an exploration of perception and reality. Galeano's illustrations are symbols or signs like the text's letters and numbers, which they resemble in their typographic quality. The images are rendered with some shading, but as black and white line drawings, printed and repeated, they do not strive for verisimilitude. Similarly anecdotes' titles are repeated and numbered, underscoring the representational function of text. In these ways *The Book of Embraces* draws attention to itself as a collection of representations, signs, and symbols, making us conscious of our activities of perception and interpretation, our sovereignty over the world of thought—a place in which everything is at our disposal and reality is a matter of conception.

## Help Me to See!

*The Book of Embraces* resists the idea of an objective reality and brings out the complexity of experience, not only in the variety of people whose stories and perspectives it embodies but also in its visual content. There is no pictorial field on the pages of *The Book of Embraces*, as flat images float on a white background. The rules of realism and nature are broken, as cows stand on dinner plates, ships sail in wine goblets, and a shoe grows from a woman's neck. In their wildly various and hybrid subject matter, the images express the same open-armed and boundary-defying approach to the world as the vignettes. Self and other are merged in a composite drawing of a woman and lizard (82-83). Good and evil are confused in a collision of naively-rendered devils and a superficial-looking Superman (126-127). In the spacious white atmosphere of the book's pages on which figures float without context or shadow, text and images exist as in a free-flowing dream state where things proceed in unexpected ways and relate through intuitive leaps of association and alogical juxtaposition. This is a world where everything—from the political to the personal—and anything—from a shoe-headed woman to a bespectacled donkey—coexist in an unbounded realm of perception and playful composition.

At the very outset of *The Book of Embraces*, Galeano initiates his readers into an exploration of perception and seeing as early as the dedication page. About a third of the way down, four lines descend to the middle of the page, each line indented a bit more than the one before it:

This book is dedicated  
to Claribel and Bud,  
to Pilar and Antonio,  
to Martha and Eriquinho (14)

Below the dedication is an illustration. From the left edge, a man's arm enters the page, paralleling the diagonal line of the dedication. The palm is held out flat, facing up. Just above it is a bird with large wings lifted in flight and a long, curved neck. The bird is positioned on the page in line with the

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dedication, as if in its spotlight, or as if a continuation of the dedication—its last line. The bird is the focal point of the page; the lines of the dedication text and of the illustrated arm both guide the eye to the bird. What is it? Does it stand for the people whose names seem to glide down and come to rest in its boldly outlined form? Or for the dedication itself, winged with gratitude? Does the bird stand for the book, the focal point of the dedication, held out in the hand like an offering? Perhaps it stands for the love at the heart of such inspired transactions as the support of an author, the dedication of a book, and the sharing of stories. Maybe with the S curve of the bird's form and its uplifted wings, it embodies beauty and victory or the victory of beauty. Perhaps its flight represents a soaring of the spirit or transcendence through beauty and love. Resisting a single interpretation, this deceptively simple image quietly argues against fixed meanings and for the complexity of perception.

Facing the dedication page is the book's first anecdote: four short paragraphs of text fill the top half of the page. On the bottom of the page is an illustration. The same bird from the dedication page appears twice but smaller than on the dedication page. One bird, almost in the middle, is about half the size of the bird below the dedication, and even smaller is the second bird, to the right and lower than the first. Looking at all three birds, the eye draws an arc across the spread. The way the birds are laid out, the way they face the same direction, and the way they increase in size suggest the flight of a single bird. It comes from the right and flies, appearing larger and larger as it gets closer to the outstretched hand—a perfect landing pad—on the left. With this image of flight in mind, the hand no longer appears to be offering but receiving something. Perhaps the hand is not the author's but the reader's, receiving the book. Or perhaps the bird stands for the stories Galeano heard from others and shares in the following pages. Maybe the hand is both receiving and giving at the same time, or both the author's and the reader's, and we are meant to question conventional distinctions and begin to sense the possibilities of the world of consciousness within *The Book of Embraces*.

The seeming simplicity of Galeano's pictorial line drawings is deceptive. The visual composition of these opening pages is complex, dynamic, and riveting. The largest bird does not stay still. One moment it hovers above the hand; the next moment it descends from the dedication; and then it swoops across the pages, right to left, landing in the open hand. It is as if Galeano is playing in this deceptively simple spread, hinting at the falseness of appearances and engaging his readers—whether they know it yet or not—in creative acts of perception because the bird and hand never actually meet on the page. The bird doesn't really swoop or descend or come closer either, but the viewer creates these movements—these interpretations—by imagining lines where they are only implied, by focusing on one part of the layout instead of another, by perceiving a change in size as a change in distance, by associating birds with freedom and flight and an open palm with giving and receiving. Yet this is also the work of the image upon the reader. The attentive reader notices both the ambiguity of Galeano's bird and also how its meaning shifts depending on how it's viewed—in relation to the dedication, the hand, or the other birds. The attentive reader notices both Galeano's depiction and her own perception. With these opening pages, Galeano is inducting readers into the creative art of seeing and welcoming them into the boundless world of perception where things, like thoughts, take limitless form like the floating- flying words and birds or the giving-receiving hand.

Galeano continues this induction in the book's first two anecdotes. "The World" tells of a man who climbed to the sky and "contemplated human life from on high" (15). When he returned to earth, he reported that the world is "*a heap of people, a sea of tiny flames*" (15). The story continues with this fourth and final paragraph:

Each person shines with his or her own light. No two flames are alike. There are big flames and little flames, flames of every color. Some people's flames are so still they don't even flicker in the wind, while others have wild flames that fill the air with sparks. Some

foolish flames neither burn nor shed light, but others blaze with life so fiercely that you can't look at them without blinking and if you approach, you shine in fire. (15)

“The World” is a brief and beautiful story that speaks to the power of perspective and transcendent vision because it is through gaining a higher vantage point that the man is able to discern the simultaneous diversity and wholeness of human life in his perception of the world as a sea of flames. From the altitude of the sky climber’s perspective, the reader discerns how a human life is like a flame, an immaterial kind of substance existing more in light than in form, an expression of energy and heat that provides illumination and joins its vitality with that of others, something that can flicker, spark, stay still, or die out. By seeing people as flames—by seeing human life from a new and inspired perspective—readers gain a new depth of insight into the world and realize it is more than it appears to be from the ground—from a conventional point of view.

The book’s second anecdote, “The Origin of the World,” also illumines the power of perspective and the complexity of seeing. It begins, “The Spanish war had ended only a few years back, and the Cross and the Sword reigned over the ruins of the republic” (16). It tells of “an anarchist worker fresh out of jail,” his pious wife who upbraids him for his atheism, and his son, “a desperate child who wanted to save his father from eternal damnation” (16). The anecdote ends with this conversation between the son and father:

*“But papa,”* Josep said to him, weeping. *“If God doesn't exist, who made the world?”*

*“Dummy,”* said the worker, lowering his head as if to impart a secret. *“Dummy. We made the world, we bricklayers.”* (16)

To the father once jailed for the cause of labor, who takes pride in being a bricklayer, it is workers like himself who made the world. To his wife and son, who never helped construct a building and whose labor was never so exploited as to make them rebel against the government, it is easier to forget the importance of human labor and to believe in the existence of an all-wise God. Each perspective is partial

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—both limited and biased. And because of that, each perspective causes pain. The “saintly wife” rains down “reproaches” on her husband, making “wine . . . the only friend he had left” (16). Meanwhile, the worker’s stubborn atheism turns his son into “a desperate child who wanted to save his father from eternal damnation” (16). Whether either perspective is right is beside the point in this anecdote that shows how people hurt the ones they love through their limited viewpoints. Ultimately, this story suggests the world and its origin are too complex to be comprehended from a single perspective, and the effort to do so is not only futile but harmful.

Below “The Origin of the World,” is an image that also seems to illustrate the importance of perspective: a man in a ranger’s uniform holds a telescope to his eye, and three birds appear to be flying from the instrument. In light of the neighboring vignette, the telescope looks like a tunnel through which the birds have flown. In other words, what the ranger sees comes from within himself, just as what the bricklayer and his family believe about the origin of the world is influenced by their individual experiences. And as in the anecdote, the individual perspective depicted in the image is limited, for the three birds fill the ranger’s narrow view through the telescope—all he can see are the birds. Moreover, the flight of the birds from the telescope suggests that what we see is something we actively impose on the world, such as the anarchist’s view of the importance of labor. Alternately it may appear that the birds are being sucked into the telescope, suggesting that seeing is a powerful act of selection, but also a limited perspective. Like “The World,” “The Origin of the World,” and the illustration of the dedication, this image speaks to the power of seeing, the importance of perspective, and the limitations of a single viewpoint.

From the very beginning of his book, Galeano teaches his readers about seeing, and this becomes even more apparent in the third story, “The Function of Art/1.” In this vignette, Santiago Kovadloff takes his son Diego to the sea for the first time. They walked south until they reached the sand dunes behind which lay the sea. They scaled the dunes, and when they finally reached the top, “the ocean exploded before their eyes” (17). The text continues and concludes with the following lines:

And so immense was the sea and its sparkle that the child was struck dumb by the beauty of it.

And when he finally managed to speak, trembling, stuttering, he asked his father:

“*Help me to see!*” (17)

In light of its title, this story seems to suggest that the function of art is either to help people to see, or to move them to the point that they want help to see, or both. The first interpretation is suggested mainly by the force of the last line in conjunction with the anecdote’s title but also by the context of the book as a whole—its use of images and the importance of seeing on the pages discussed thus far. Galeano may be hinting here that *The Book of Embraces* (a work of art) is meant to help people to see. The second interpretation comes from the anecdote’s focus on the ocean and what it does. It is beautiful like a work of art, and when Diego looks upon it he is overcome with a strong desire, or even need, to see better. The implication may be that *The Book of Embraces*, and art in general, is meant to inspire an *urgency* to see, that art changes people in a way that makes them need to improve their seeing, perhaps by waking them to the possibilities of seeing. This anecdote further suggests that seeing better and wanting to see better are inseparable. Like the anarchist and his wife, people may only see what they want to see, so to improve seeing, they must first want to improve it. But more than that, wanting and seeing may be inseparable the way desire and vision are one or the way a love of something (a project or relationship) leads to the realization (or seeing) of it.

But what is meant by *seeing*? Given the meaning and titles of the first two anecdotes, *seeing* may be meant in a general but essential way as trying to understand “the world,” the complexity of which makes insufficient a single or conventional perspective. Or seeing may refer specifically to a perception of beauty and immensity—a perception of the sublime—since in “The Function of Art/1” it is Diego’s first view of the ocean and its size and beauty that makes him want help in seeing, as though he realized that he hadn’t been truly seeing until he beheld that sublime view. Yet maybe it’s not just seeing beauty and immensity



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that matters but feeling it because when Diego sees the ocean, it is more than a visual experience. He is struck “dumb” by the sight. And then, as though moved by a feeling of awe or oneness with the sublime, he implores, “Help me to see!” The opening of *The Book of Embraces* suggests all of these meanings at once—seeing as trying to understand the world, as perceiving beauty and immensity, and as experiencing a transcendent feeling. These definitions coexist and blend in Galeano’s anecdotes, suggesting that the meanings overlap, that feeling is part of perceiving and that perceiving beauty is part of understanding the world.

Below this anecdote the man with the telescope from the previous page appears, but several times larger than before, and in the context of “The Function of Art/1,” the image appears different. Now this illustration seems to bring home the idea that seeing is something far different from the quotidian physical faculty we take for granted. Like Diego, the ranger recognizes that he needs help to see, for he uses a telescope. Like the man in “The World” who climbed to the sky and saw a sea of flames, the ranger knows that seeing requires effort, escaping personal limitations, and a spirit of adventure. The reward of such spirited effort is that the birds are brought incredibly close. They virtually merge with the seer in his active, forward-leaning gaze. Just as the man and birds are one in Galeano’s self-contained drawing, the seer and seen are one in the act of seeing. This unity may be the kind of possibility Diego felt at the ocean and that moved him to ask for help in seeing. This illustration suggests that seeing is ultimately a drawing together—an embrace, an act of love, a perception that is a conception in that it creates a union.

That seeing is essentially creative is expressed directly in “The Function of Art/1.” Not only does seeing the ocean create a desire to see (to understand, perceive, and experience a transcendent sense of the world), it also creates silence and then an utterance. The vision of the ocean first seems to steal Diego’s ability to express himself, striking him “dumb,” and then it is as if his power of expression returns to him out of this silence, and he speaks “trembling [and] stuttering,” as if for the first time or as if the words are

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breaking through the silence by a force of their own. It is as though Diego is overwhelmed with what he has seen, and the result is an inspired and urgent expression: “Help me to see!”

Significantly, Diego’s utterance is preceded by silence. Standing on the sand dunes, looking out over the sparkling water completely silent, absorbed in the vision of the ocean and the feelings it inspires, Diego’s seeing and silence seem to be one. This suggests that Diego’s seeing is a kind of active receptivity, and it is this receptivity (and not mere visual stimulation) that precedes and results in expression. It is also significant that Diego is a child. In fact Galeano specifies “the child” (not “he” or “Diego”) “was struck dumb by the beauty of it,” suggesting it is a childlike receptivity—a humbleness of mind and capacity for wonder—that perceives beauty and is moved to respond through expression. Seeing and creativity require a free imagination innocent of the learned prejudices and rationalizations that limit vision and chill enthusiasm. It is the trust of a child that allows beauty to work upon a person and call forth an utterance. In the dynamic suggested by this vignette, receptive vision and expression exist in a loop of self-perpetuation. Creation affords vision, which affords further creation. Or to put it another way, vision answers creation with more creation, and this brings more opportunity for vision. Thus seeing is not only perceiving and understanding but ultimately reimagining and recreating the world.

In just four pages, Galeano introduces seeing as a central topic with complex meaning, illustrates with both images and anecdotes the importance and limitations of perspective, and announces the book’s function as helping readers to see. These purposes are interrelated and not entirely separable. Understanding the power of perspective is part of understanding the complexity of seeing, and vice versa. Similarly part of helping readers to see is making them aware of the complexity of seeing, and being aware of the complexity of seeing is part of seeing better. Furthermore, these opening pages of *The Book of Embraces* suggest that the complexity of seeing is part and parcel to the complexity of the world. In fact, the world and perception are shown to be inseparable: what the world is and its origin depend on how one looks at it; the birds are in the telescope. The things in this world are as hard to pin down as a bird, and

the world is as beautifully ambiguous, as unbounded and fluid, as the sky, the ocean, or a sea of flames. This complex world of seeing is the world of *The Book of Embraces*—a veritable menagerie of visions in which Galeano is playing with seeing and through which he seeks to make his readers playful seers as well.

### **Divorces and Embraces**

The purpose of *The Book of Embraces* is nothing less than saving the world. This becomes apparent in “Divorces,” a vignette in which Galeano describes what he calls “the system” and how it has created tears in the fabric of our lives:

Our system is one of detachment: to keep silenced people from asking questions, to keep the judged from judging, to keep solitary people from joining together, and the soul from putting together its pieces.

The system divorces feeling from thought as it divorces sex from love, private life from public life, past from present. (123)

Galeano often writes about South America in *The Book of Embraces*, but the setting of “Divorces” is unidentified, and while he sometimes writes about history and politics, one senses that “the system” transcends political and geographical boundaries. Since Galeano’s world is ultimately a world of consciousness, the separation and detachment endemic in this world may stem ultimately from ways of thinking. The separation of sex and love might spring from commercialization and objectification. Attempts to dominate and disenfranchise others might come from hatred, fear, and greed. And all of these ways of thinking may ultimately stem from materialism—a sense of reality as physical and limited, leading to the conclusions that people must compete to survive and that one person’s interests are separable from those of others. But whatever their ultimate root, Galeano looks at the problems of the world and discerns they boil down to divorce—a division of what was whole, a separation of something once unified, and a dissolution of love.

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If divorces are the problem then embraces are the solution—not merely physical embraces (for the problem with divorce is much more than physical separation) but embraces of the thought, heart, and spirit, enacted through seeing, which encompasses not only physical vision but also perception, empathy, imagination, and creation. Galeano’s drawings and stories show us how to create embraces through these powerful forms of seeing, how to draw things closer to ourselves and to each other, not only repairing the divisions and separations caused by the system of divorce but creating things precluded by this system. In this way perhaps we can realize the wholeness, unity, and love that eludes a purely material vision.

Moving people immersed in a system of divorce to take up the work and play of seeing and embracing begins with showing those people both the fallibility and possibilities of seeing. For they must come to question the separations they have been taught to see, and they must be empowered to see things differently and for themselves. Enter the artist. Galeano takes up the challenge by opening *The Book of Embraces* with lessons on the complexity of seeing and the power and limitations of perspective, as discussed above. But like waking someone from a deep sleep, rousing readers to the artificiality of divorce and equipping them to see freely and playfully may take some doing. Thus it is not surprising that the book’s images and anecdotes continue the work of its opening pages, reiterating their crucial lessons.

Take, for example, Galeano’s illustrations of swimmers and an archer towards the end of the book. They appear on facing pages with no text, and the spread consists mostly of negative space. In the upper left hand corner is an image consisting of a figure repeated three times in decreasing size from the corner towards the center of the page. The figures (who are identical except in size) appear to be men in swimsuits. With arms outstretched, legs straight back, and toes pointed, they seem to be diving or swimming. But then one notices the illustration on the bottom right hand corner: an archer in the act of drawing his bow, his arrow pointed in the direction of the men on the facing page. Suddenly in light of the archer, the swimmers appear to be flying in the air. In fact, a flock of birds receding into the distance may even appear in the swimmers’ configuration. In this embrace—this drawing together of swimmers

and archer—the swimmers transform into flyers. This may seem like hyperbole, but as the presence of the archer changes the meaning of the swimmers, a real transformation takes place in thought and is experienced in a visual way as when looking at optical illusions. This transformation powerfully demonstrates the changeability and fallibility of perception—a crucial lesson—for only by realizing that they should second guess their vision and understanding can readers begin to second guess the system's divorces that they take for granted.

This changeableness of vision, which might also be called the fluidity of the world, is also illustrated in the relationship between the anecdotes immediately before and after the swimmers and archer. The anecdote “Death” is quite brief: “Not ten people went to the final recitals of the Spanish poet, Blas de Otero. But when Blas de Otero died, many thousands went to the homage held in his memory in a Madrid bullring. He had no idea” (213).

“Weeping” is also quite short. It is about a group of Shuar Indians in the Ecuadorian Amazon who are sitting and crying at the side of a dying woman. The story concludes with the following lines:

An observer from another world asked them:

*“Why are you crying in front of her when she is still alive?”*

And the ones who were weeping responded:

*“So she knows how much we love her.”* (216)

The significance of the second anecdote is brought out by the first. The value of making a loved one know how much he or she is appreciated is apparent in “Weeping” because the tragedy of failing to do so is highlighted in the cutting final line of “Death”: “He had no idea” (213). While “Death” does not transform the meaning of “Weeping” the way the archer transforms the swimmers, the first vignette does impact the way the second is perceived and experienced. “Weeping” is arguably more powerful because of “Death.” And readers, like the “observer from another world,” are likely to question stock ideas about weeping as a sign of despair when they see how it expresses appreciation in this series of anecdotes.

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Again the lesson is to not be too hasty in seeing and understanding the world. In fact readers should realize that, like an observer from another world, they might be misinterpreting much of what they see. They might even question whether they really know what world they're from. And this is the kind of open thought Galeano seeks to cultivate in his readers, so they can begin to question how they have always seen the world and start seeing more intentionally, playfully, and creatively—that is, they can learn how to embrace.

Learning how to embrace means learning how to see because seeing can draw things together even while they remain physically apart. For example, Galeano draws his readers together with Josep Verdura, the son of the bricklayer in “The Origin of the World.” This tender vignette helps readers see the “desperate child who wanted to save his father from eternal damnation.” The reader feels especially close to Josep when reading the dialogue: “But papa,” Josep said to him, weeping. “If God doesn’t exist, *who made the world?*” (16). Readers can hear the desperation in the question, see the tears on Josep’s cheeks, and imagine the strife in his heart. By causing readers to see Josep, Galeano helps them empathize with a person they’ve never met. The anecdote is like the ranger’s telescope, helping people see farther than their eyes allow. It brings a stranger into view, that is, into consciousness and heart. Galeano creates an embrace that bridges distance in time and space, and perhaps in culture and class as well.

Through his text and images, Galeano can help readers see—understand and care about—the people, places, and things of which the system of divorce would keep them ignorant. He can even cause them to reimagine the world. For example, they might conceive of a place where people understand they exist as in a sea of flames, conscious of their crucial part in one stunning, seamless whole. They might begin to ask themselves what that world might look like and how its inhabitants might behave. Such imagining is important, for like Diego, Galeano’s readers may need vision to precede expression—seeing others more clearly and being conscious of new possibilities may be necessary first steps to recreating the world and solving its problems. But who is to say that the embrace in consciousness does not have a

direct effect as well? Thoughts and feelings may play a greater role than the physical senses can perceive. It may be that Josep Verdura feels a bit happier, sees a bit more beauty in the world each time one of Galeano's readers embraces him in his or her thought. The embraces Galeano elicits from his readers may be like prayers—earnest hopes and inspired visions—that wing their way in a world of consciousness where receptive hearts hear their silent songs.

Galeano's penchant for embracing—connecting--separate things is especially evident in his serial anecdotes—stories that share titles, such as his five pieces called "Bureaucracy." In "Bureaucracy/1" readers learn about a one-armed prisoner of the military dictatorship in Uruguay who was absurdly punished for failing to walk in proper form with two hands behind his back (62). When the prisoner asks to have his arm returned to him (presumably a prosthetic arm), he is told to fill out a request form, and when he says he can't because he has no pencil, the absurdity mounts as he's told to fill out a request form for a pencil. In "Bureaucracy/2" a bald prisoner is punished "for entering the dining room uncombed" while other prison rules prohibit "drawing birds" and using "flowered towels" (63). And in "Bureaucracy/3" soldiers dutifully guard an empty bench without knowing or caring why. In the end the reader learns that the order to guard the bench was originally issued thirty-one years prior when the bench had a fresh coat of paint.

On its own each "Bureaucracy" anecdote is a sad and amusing story, but Galeano connects them, helping readers see something they would otherwise miss. They see how the ultimate problem in these appalling situations isn't individuals but the bureaucracy that blinds and binds them. It is bureaucracy that causes people to ignore realities, such as the impossibility of a one-armed man to hold two hands behind his back and the needlessness of guarding an empty bench. It is bureaucracy that causes people to dehumanize each other. But readers might miss this if they looked at each story in isolation. By connecting these incidents, or creating an embrace, Galeano helps readers see another dimension in these events. He helps them better understand their world and its problems, which puts them in a better

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position to solve those problems. For example, noticing the failure of the anecdotes' characters to question rules, readers might begin to do so in their own lives and societies. Or they might begin to forgive perpetrators of injustice for whom following the rules may be their best sense of doing right. Through this series of anecdotes, Galeano models how to see embraces and provides insight that can help people understand (embrace) each other better.

In another series of vignettes called "The Walls Speak," Galeano demonstrates how to see an embrace by collecting. In these vignettes Galeano gathers graffiti he has come across in different locations. For example, "The Walls Speak/3" reads as follows:

In Montevideo, in the neighborhood of Brazo Oriental:

*Here we sit, watching them kill our dreams.*

And on the breakwater facing the Montevidean port of

Buceo:

*Old fart: you can't live your whole life in fear.*

In red letters along an entire block on Colon Avenue in

Quito:

*What if we got together and gave that big gray bubble a kick? (165)*

Perhaps Galeano has an eye for graffiti because its articulation of private thoughts in public places remedies the separation of private life and public life that he identifies in "Divorces." Or maybe he sees in graffiti the manifestation of a world of signs and symbols. Or maybe it reminds him of Diego's urgent utterance inspired by a particular vision of the world. Galeano amplifies these utterances and leverages this embrace of public and private life by publishing them in his book. And he creates another embrace as well. By collecting the graffiti along with their locations in one place, Galeano creates a sense of community. Montevideo comes across as a beleaguered and dispirited city, but one that is trying to rouse itself. Montevideo has an identity and a voice because Galeano's embrace of separate parts has created a



wholeness. Like the graffiti artists, Galeano has published his vision of the world for the consideration of others.

Galeano also strives for wholeness in “The Nobodies,” which begins arrestingly, “Fleas dream of buying themselves a dog, and nobodies dream of escaping poverty” (73). By comparing fleas and nobodies, this sentence initiates empathy for the poor by helping readers appreciate the nobodies’ tragic predicament: their dream to escape poverty is as urgent, ambitious, and unrealistic as the fleas’ dream to buy a dog. Yet while the fleas would be pro-active, the nobodies have no such sense of self-determination but merely dream that “one magical day good luck will suddenly rain down on them” (73). If the nobodies are parasites they are pitiable ones because it would seem that fleas have more hope than they do. Galeano brings out this hopelessness in the following litany: “The nobodies: nobody’s children, owners of nothing. The nobodies: the no ones, the nobodied, running like rabbits, dying through life, screwed every which way” (73). Then as if to elaborate on that last phrase, Galeano presents the following list:

Who are not, but could be.

Who don’t speak language, but dialects.

Who don’t have religions, but superstitions.

Who don’t create art, but handicrafts.

Who don’t have culture, but folklore.

Who are not human beings, but human resources.

Who do not have faces, but arms.

Who do not have names, but numbers.

Who do not appear in the history of the world, but in the police blotter of the local paper.

(73)

Each sentence fragment presents a distinction that is made between nobodies and everyone else (the somebodies, presumably). But by now the reader understands that such distinctions are artificial, that the

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poor are only nobodies in a relative sense within society, not in any absolute sense. They are treated and regarded as nobodies in the ways outlined in the list, but the reader understands and feels that they are somebodies because Galeano has made the reader know and care about them. Galeano has embraced the nobodies in his book, causing his readers to embrace them in their thoughts and hearts. And part of this embracing is realizing that the differences between the nobodies and somebodies are neither natural nor inevitable but ultimately artificial—part of what the anecdote reveals to be a systematic effort to create and perpetuate inequality.

Multiple layers of embrace in “The Nobodies” repair the separations created by a system of divorce. Embraces happen at the sentence level, moving readers’ thoughts and feelings in certain directions. For example the opening comparison of fleas and nobodies is an embrace that helps readers see the nobodies in a light that reveals their sad predicament and arouses empathy. A system of divorce would keep people from understanding or even thinking about the nobodies (thus the label). Each sentence fragment in the list is an embrace of two contraries that causes readers to question the difference between them. A system of divorce would keep contraries distinctly apart and out of the focal beam of critical thought. And as mentioned above, the piece as a whole is an embrace that brings the nobodies to the readers’ attention and humanizes them, drawing them closer to the readers’ hearts. A system of divorce would perpetuate inequality through distance, distrust, alienation, and dislike. In this vignette Galeano shows how seeing embraces can create empathy, erase difference, and inspire love. In short, seeing embraces is seeing humanely.

While “The Nobodies,” the “Bureaucracy” series, and “The Walls Speak” series promote understanding of fellow humans, “Fuga the Fast One” teaches people to widen their embrace to include non-human creatures. It begins with the following lines:

Maite Pinero, who had just arrived from El Salvador, brought me the news:

*“He’s dead.”*

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An enemy plane was quicker than he was. After the attack, his companeros buried him. They buried him at nightfall. Everyone looked away. They could not face each other. (237)

The piece goes on to explain that “he” had arrived three or four years before in a rainy season, “installed himself in the middle of camp” and “stayed put” despite the rain (237). And then, almost a third of the way through the anecdote, Galeano reveals “him” to be a donkey. Until this moment, the subject of the anecdote seems to be a man. News of his death is shared like the news of a man’s death. He receives a burial like a man, and his companeros are deeply moved at their loss. And then he—this brave and loyal hero—suddenly transforms into a donkey—a stupid and stubborn animal, an unfeeling beast of burden, a lowly laborer. Yet the rest of the anecdote further develops how Fuga the donkey was like a man and fellow soldier, crossing enemy lines on dangerous missions, knowing the secret locations of headquarters, and remaining loyal to the army.

Like the list of fragments in “The Nobodies,” this anecdote erases difference. The distinction between human and animal dissolves as Fuga expresses qualities many think of as human—courage, sacrifice, and loyalty—qualities perhaps misinterpreted as mere instinct for self-preservation when manifested by animals. Moreover readers might wonder about the so-called animal nature of the men in the anecdote, such as the guerrillas who “insulted [Fuga], kicked him, [and] shoved him” or even Fuga’s companeros who likewise engage in violence, perhaps driven by as strong an instinct for self-preservation as that of any animal (237). In this story conventional distinctions between humans and animals give way to a sense of commonality and brotherhood between living creatures.

If the embraces of the previous anecdotes are seen by connecting or collecting separate things or by drawing together different things, perhaps the embrace of “Fuga the Fast One” is seen by transforming things because the power of this piece is in how Fuga morphs from a man into a donkey the way one person or place becomes another in a dream. Perhaps this suggests that to truly see an embrace across a

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divide as great as the one conceived between humans and animals requires the kind of unrestricted dream-seeing that could transform a man into a donkey—not just the intellectual kind of seeing that makes connections, or the empathetic kind that draws things close, but an imaginative and intuitive kind of seeing that scales the fences of logic and empiricism to romp around in the wilds of fancy. Perhaps from this wild place within, people can better recognize their kinship with the earth and its creatures and enact other such bold embraces that affirm an all-encompassing unity of being denied and obscured by the system of divorce. The system of divorce itself may stem from a failure of seeing—a purely analytical seeing that can judge, sort, and divide but fails to unite and create because of its poverty of empathy and imagination.

### **Playful Embraces**

Galeano illustrates the kinds of seeing that create embraces in his images as well as text. Many of his images dissolve difference, especially between humans and animals. For example Galeano presents a dog, snake, frog, insect, and donkey in human clothes and, in all but one case, with human appendages (or maybe these are humans with the heads of other creatures). As in “Fuga the Fast One,” Galeano is using imagination in these images to bridge the gap between humans and animals. In as far as readers follow Galeano’s lead, they may find themselves on the shore of revived perception. For example, if readers can imagine a frog in a suit and what it might say at a dinner party maybe they can overcome a sense of dissimilarity with the amphibian and begin to relate to this fellow being—see the world through its protruding eyes and feel the croak of a rain call rising in their throats. Maybe they can see themselves and the frog as running in the same circle and realize that, in fact, they already do, though the earth’s ecosystems are not often perceived by eye or intellect. If readers can imagine what it would be like to have the head of a donkey, how their ears would catch the wind and their teeth would long for grass, they might not only empathize but feel an intimate connection with this kindred mammal. Such radical acts of

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imagination may allow people to overcome assumptions of difference and separation to sense their own creaturely kinship in earth's community.

In some images humans and animals don't transform into one another so much as merge with each other. On the tenth-to-last page of the book, the body of a bird blends with a human hand. The hand appears where the bird's head would normally be and resembles a bird's head, the index finger extending like a beak. This finger points upward suggesting the bird is swooping into the sky, and there is no mistaking that in this image the human and animal merge as one unified whole. This image does not excite the imagination in quite the same way as the previous ones. What it presents is as fantastic as a frog in a suit, if not more, but it doesn't ask readers to swap heads with animals. Instead it invites a contemplation of hands and birds and how they might be seen as unified. A starting point may be suggested by the anecdote on the same page. It ends with a moment of applause: "We clapped until our hands were sore" (155). This points to the idea that hands and birds are similar in that the applause of the one and the flight or song of the other lift the heart and swell the spirit. In fact, both are remarkably expressive in their gestures. The white-knuckled fist, the drumming fingers, the open palm, the pinched fingertips symbolize anger, anxiety, receptivity, and precision. The soaring glide, the rhythmic wing beat, the foraging hop, and the steady circle suggest freedom, endurance, energy, and intention. The pointing hand guides the eye like the bird's flight, and even the toughest hand is a delicate, feathered flourish of the human body. Both hands and birds minister to others, disseminating gifts of song and sustenance, color and comfort. Both are points of connection, conduits of spirit. In all these ways birds and hands are similar, or unified, and this illustration ultimately suggests that seeing metaphysically, identifying something by the qualities it expresses and the feelings it inspires, throws the arena of embrace wide open.

Seeing metaphysically brings down all kinds of barriers and eliminates all kinds of limitations. It is the antipode of materialism and divorce because its sense of reality is unlimited; qualities, feelings, and ideas have very real and recognizable forms, but they are not material or limited in nature. Seeing

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metaphysically, people can make all kinds of embraces: connect drums and tattoos in their rhythmic rumble; become one with the wind in mutual wanderlust; unite roller bags and alley ways in their pedestrian melancholy. In the end, this illustration comes back around to the sense that Galeano's world is ultimately a world of consciousness where things exist in perception rather than physical matter. And it may be that in teaching readers to see embraces, Galeano is really teaching them to see metaphysically or spiritually, and that such transcendent vision is the antipode of a system of divorce.

All of Galeano's images, whether they ignite the imagination or provoke contemplation, take readers to that wild place of fancy, but none so much as his incongruous combinations. On one page a hummingbird emerges from the index finger of a human hand that reaches out from a mustachioed mask, while on another a fragment of a human face sits atop a corn stalk. Elsewhere a fully grown man with an octopus for a head wears a boy's school uniform and holds a hula-hoop, while another illustration provides a partial view of a cow: udder, hind legs, tail, and where one would ordinarily see the cow's right hoof, a human hand holding a paintbrush. Like the image of the hand-bird hybrid, this last one is a merging of human and animal that may suggest similarity. But nothing in the facing anecdote provides a clue the way the reference to applause did. And to suggest that a cow's hoof is artful like a painter's hand feels like a stretch. But perhaps that's the point.

Maybe this absurd image, lacking an anecdotal clue as to its meaning, is a challenge to accept the merging of cow and hand on some basis other than logic. The eye senses a similarity of shape in the painter's pinched fingers and the cow's pointed hoof. The heart might feel the same certain tenderness or awe for the hand and hoof as intimate and capable expressions of individuality. The spirit might be similarly stirred by the spontaneous brush stroke and unselfconscious footfall. The ear may hear the same thunder in a Kandinsky painting and a stampede. The inner and outer senses, as well as the intellect, might perceive a unity in this incongruity. But would these modes of perception necessarily explain the

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compilation of mask, hand, and hummingbird or the octopus-headed man with a hula-hoop? To understand or explain these images seems beside the point.

When it comes to these surprising, incongruent images, *why* they are doesn't seem as important as the fact *that* they are—that these outrageous, funny, playful inventions exist. They are new creations—curious hybrids—that make us realize the limitations of intellect and the value of playful embraces that create things heretofore unseen. Playful embraces—associative, intuitive, nonsensical combinations—result in new conceptions. Playful embraces are unlimited embraces capable of uniting anything. They aren't beholden to limiting rules that would say a man can't have an octopus for a head or that a bird can never be a hand. Seeing playfully means seeing beyond such rules to the possibilities they would preclude, the ideas they would make inconceivable.

In its transcendence of limitations, seeing playfully partakes of the metaphysical or spiritual seeing that perceives non-material, essential qualities and makes possible an infinity of embraces. Playfulness may be a fast track to this metaphysical kind of seeing and embracing. “The Function of Art/1” suggests as much, for Diego's heightened sense of vision comes from his childlike wonder and open-mindedness, his un-self-conscious and un-resistant receptivity, in other words, from a playfulness. Moreover, playfulness seems to lead to the most powerful kinds of embraces—the limitless and creative embraces. While embraces that connect and draw things together help to repair the ruptures and tears created by divorce, embraces that create new things counteract the ultimate consequence of divorce—destruction. Creation keeps the world going, ensures that there is a world to save in the first place. It also renews the world, not only sustaining it but further developing it, creating new possibilities, new meanings, and new views. A world where nothing is new may essentially be a dead world, especially if that world is a world of consciousness, where conceiving things—creating things—is the essence of liveliness. The playful embrace is the ultimate embrace and antidote to divorce.

## Works Cited

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