Arteletra

Bartles, Jason A.

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We stumble on, thinks Jaslyn, bring a little noise into the silence, find in others the ongoing of ourselves. It is almost enough.

Colum McCann, *Let the Great World Spin*

In *Viajes. De la Amazonía a las Malvinas* (2014), Beatriz Sarlo recollects and relates her travels as a young woman of relative means and privilege from Buenos Aires throughout the Amazon and the Andes in the sixties and early seventies. She even visited, a year before, the same region where Che Guevara would be killed. She frequently notes her and her fellow travelers’ youthful enthusiasm to find and become part of a new Latin America in the Sixties: “Sobre todo en los viajes de la década del sesenta, buscábamos un continente en curso de transformación: había que viajar por América Latina porque el desplazamiento nos llevaría hacia formas semiocultas o más o menos visibles del futuro” (95). She summarizes one of their trips, as they imagined it at the time, as follows: “Un viaje hacia un territorio de utopía donde podía vivir un sujeto no contaminado y, en consecuencia, agente de liberación. Ese gigantesco malentendido no nos atrapó sólo a nosotros” (105). Writing fifty years after these travels, more than a narrative of how they forged some sort of complete and total “comunidad imaginaria” among Latin Americans from across the region, Sarlo harshly judges and dismisses her former desires and goals at every turn (99). She constantly refers to her group of travelers and herself as “inexpertos, ignorantes,” even “crédulos” (88, 111). Her frequent recourse to narrating in the first-person plural creates the effect of extending her criticism of these projects to her entire generation: “Viajábamos para conocer pero no estábamos en condiciones de entender lo que encontrábamos” (135).
In retrospect, Sarlo projects her disillusionment on an almost global scale to these types of naïve journeys and futile political projects from the Sixties.

In April of 2017, Sarlo was invited to the University of Maryland, College Park, to give a series of lectures that began with a discussion of *Viajes*. I had the opportunity to explain to her my surprise that she was so judgmental of her younger self and to ask why, as she reflected today on her own experiences in the Sixties, she rejected her former utopianism. Standing with both hands braced firmly on the table, her unflinching answer to me was, and I quote from what I was able to record in my notes at the time: “Éramos sumamente ignorantes y equivocados. No utópicos. No se debe llamar utópico lo que es realmente la estupidez.” Though she explained that she does not reject the projection of a utopian horizon, of maintaining an ethical commitment to the formation of a better world, she remained intent on rejecting the uninformed, naïve framework, the foundational ignorance, that led her and her companions to take those trips in the first place. Furthermore, she refuses to call what they did “utopian.” That word will have to be left to name some other type of practice not found in her own travels or in the superficial, essentializing ideology that motivated them at the time. In this sense, what she narrates in *Viajes* are her own failures and those of certain members of her generation.

Sarlo’s self-criticism might seem harsh, but her evaluation of her younger self and of her failed politics from the Sixties is convincing. For my purposes, the itinerary she and her fellow travelers took did not, either intentionally or by chance, produce the sort of unnoticed thresholds I have studied in the works of Casey, Filloy, and Somers. The politics I have studied in their texts, though not explicitly committed, resonate with the failed projects of the Left. However, these writers, their works, and their protagonists went unnoticed in the Sixties, which is a different sort of failure altogether. Almost all of the protagonists I have studied fail at the end of their narrative. Casey’s anonymous narrators are jailed or executed. Filloy’s Konsideransky has the details of his refuge revealed to the world, and the military conscript cannot prevent the General’s coup. Somers unleashes that terrifying scorpion on the least suspecting individuals, and the last image of Rebeca Linke is of her dead, bruised body face down in the river. Perhaps this is why these stories were paid so little attention at the time.
They did not provide a clear map of a newly visible subject who would rise from the darkness, awaken the consciousness of those still chained in the shadows, and prevail over the biopolitical machines that structure their inequality and strip them of their potentiality. For precisely this reason, I suggest these writers be read today as one possible way to return to the Sixties while considering what political, aesthetic, and ethical tools could be relevant in the twenty-first century.

Despite these failures, an outright rejection of utopianism is not what I propose. In *Spaces of Hope*, David Harvey argues for the need to keep utopian thought alive: “The rejection, in recent times, of utopianism rests in part on an acute awareness of its inner connection to authoritarianism and totalitarianism […]. But rejection of utopianism on such grounds has also had the unfortunate effect of curbing the free play of the imagination in the search for alternatives” (163). Utopian thought and the potentiality I have studied share an open character; they cannot guarantee *a priori* any particular politics, aesthetics, or ethics; yet without them, there is nowhere to turn, no alternative to imagine, no hope to build a better community. In this sense, it would be inaccurate to characterize the writings of Casey, Filloy, and Somers as anti-utopian or devoid of hope just because of the many failures they narrate.

Briefly, I would like to return to one of the final paragraphs of Casey’s “Notas de un simulador.” These notes that comprise the narrative are a diary written from his jail cell. Because of the narrator’s proximity to all of those dying, abandoned bodies to which he attended along his errant path, he is accused of having murdered each of them. This text is his attempt to set the record straight, explaining why he was creeping around the city at night, with the hope that someday someone might stumble across his version of the events. After his failure, he explains:

*A las toneladas de papel y los ríos de tinta que narrarán mi caso, impreso junto a otras deformaciones de la verdad para que lo lean millones de ojos extrañamente ávidos de novedades, sólo puedo oponer estos párrafos que redacto con dificultad a la mala luz que llega hasta donde trabajo. Los obstáculos son tremendos pero sé que alguna vez llegarán estas líneas a conocerse. Esperemos.* (90)
Whereas the juridical system wrongly accused him of murder and the mass media promptly circulated the official story, he writes so that future readers might read against the current of this river of ink in order to recognize him as the philanthropic caretaker he claims to be. I interpret his condemnation of the mass media as a rejection of a certain reliance on easily consumable bits of entertaining information that falsely offer easy access to the total knowledge of an other, or in this case, of an other’s alleged crime. Casey’s narrator writes and exposes his own version that cannot be assimilated by the mass media or the legal system. He locates, to borrow a phrase from José Esteban Muñoz, “a kernel of potentiality” after and despite this failure (173). That is, he refuses to give up, thus opening the potential to continue moving, erring, and engaging in dialogues, at least through his writing. He offers his own, externally unverifiable, narrative that he writes under the poor light of his jail cell, not under the total light of knowledge or the supposedly transparent language of the newspapers. His notes become an incomplete narrative that opens this seemingly unimportant, already closed case to further interventions and reconfigurations. Despite his failure and the unlikeliness that he will be exonerated, he remains hopeful that his version of the story, this trace of the past, will be disseminated to future readers.

The failure of the politics of going unnoticed is not an unfortunate outcome but rather the necessary condition for dissent and disagreement to continue into the future. Muñoz conceives of failure in contemporary performances by queers of color who engage in future-oriented projects as “not so much a failure to succeed as it is a failure to participate in a system of valuation that is predicated on exploitation and conformity” (174). Following Muñoz’s definition of failure “as active political refusal,” the tactics of those who go unnoticed is only unsuccessful when interpreted from within a normative, moralizing framework that delineates the distinction between the proper and the improper, the timely and the untimely (174). The failure of all those who go unnoticed is an active refusal to participate in exploitative or universalizing projects as well as in any identity politics that would seek to homogenize its community in the name of political expediency.

Going unnoticed was already in the first place a failure by those who arrived too late and traced untimely itineraries through the already occupied cultural cartographies of their era. The next
failure of those who go unnoticed takes place as a refusal to subscribe to such normative demands. Instead of pretending to be social heroes who move in Platonic fashion from the darkness of ignorance to the light of knowledge and the good, these subjects wander along errant lines of flight that pass through the swirling shadows and lights of their era. They go about opening a space for dissent from which they write an alternative arrangement of the political in plain sight, thus becoming exposed both to others who are going unnoticed and to the vigilant eyes and violent obstacles they previously desired to evade. By being perceived, one might argue that they have failed to remain unnoticed; however, staying unnoticed, as opposed to going unnoticed, would vacate their political gestures of its ethics, of its potential to keep open a space for dialogue. Therefore, these failures become the condition of possibility for keeping the future open and stumbling into other political, aesthetic, and ethical tools that will continue to be necessary to tear down the walls constantly erected by the biopolitical machines that show no signs of slowing down today.

Reading ArteletrA al vesre and al verse—an imperfect reversal that allows for a different, but still contingent arrangement of texts and discourses to face one another and engage in dialogue—has served as the heuristic for reading against the currents of the cultural maps of the era. Without ever leaving the space of the Sixties in Latin America, I have caught a glimpse of this cast of mostly anonymous protagonists spread throughout the works of Casey, Filloy, and Somers who go unnoticed within the cultural and political landscapes of their fictional worlds. What I have located is how this refusal to participate in a political landscape by going unnoticed within it—as even Casey attempted in his actual life in Cuba—can generate the conditions of possibility to reconfigure that inescapable space. Each of these authors has imagined and created alternative forms of political participation in the midst of an era when almost every individual and every group was vying for visibility. When almost everyone else rushes onto the stage, behind are left those who choose not to fight and shout their way into the spotlight. Instead, they may stumble on in the darkness and begin to perceive a different type of political arena that opens the potential for dialogue among adversaries.

Without a doubt, a utopian ethos underwrites this desire to imagine models for non-violent political spaces in the Sixties.
and to attend to those discourses today; in this way, these texts appear to be very much of their own time, to be contemporary texts, and I contend that such a revival of hope is also necessary today. However, those who go unnoticed never fall into the trap of assuming that a perfect, conflict-free political space will come about simply by going unnoticed and later being perceived. Knowing that their community is always a coming community and that their individual desires are never universal sets them apart from those who would use violence to obtain a hegemonic position in the political arena. Going unnoticed opens a space in which it becomes possible to imagine alternatives that may end in failure but also have the potential to be successful.

Going unnoticed is not by necessity limited to the Sixties in Latin America, the time and place in which I was able to catch a glimpse of these practices. The politics of going unnoticed, despite its contemporaneity, was cast aside, but these gestures still can point toward possible alternatives within the contemporary political landscape today. They may become successful tools for opening paths toward that unforeseen horizon of democratic dialogues to come. They will fail to ever see that moment materialize into a static regime, but this was never their goal. Every time those who go unnoticed arrive at an end or an obstacle, it becomes necessary to turn around again. In one final, imperfect rearrangement of vesre and verse, I will end by looking at ARTELETRA from a new perspective: re-ves la ARTELETRA. As one unnoticed protagonist emerges, engages in dialogue, and fails to fix everything, others can go unnoticed and start over again. Their failures set in motion a radically democratic process of continually re-seeing (“re-ves, you re-see”) the political landscape and the art of writing about it in order to keep walking down the errant paths toward greater social and economic equality. What I find necessary today is to shake off the disillusionment of those who saw their political projects fail in the Sixties and to take up once more this type of utopian thinking. Now is the time to ask what other futures, instead of dwelling in the tragedies of the past, are possible today. As Casey’s protagonist says from his jail cell toward the end of “Notas de un simulador”: “Esperemos” (90).