Arteletra

Bartles, Jason A.

Published by Purdue University Press

Bartles, Jason A.
Arteletra: The Sixties in Latin America and the Politics of Going Unnoticed.
Purdue University Press, 2021.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/82025.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/82025
within a democratic framework. Similarly, “ethics” is not the equivalent of any “morality” or “moral code,” nor anything that resembles a “normative ethics” built on empty signifiers or totalizing, seemingly transparent language. The ethics of being perceived is not an attempt to reconfigure the world into new distinctions between good and bad actions, between the proper and the improper, between the norm and the exception, or between us and them. Moral values are not autonomous, intrinsic to individuals, or universal; in fact, they are among the most powerful tools employed from above and below to secure the hegemonic status of any individual who exercises his will to power. Furthermore, I do not prescribe a path of action that must be followed in all circumstances; none of the protagonists studied in this chapter rise as universal heroes. Rather, the ethics of being perceived names the unending, arduous task of restoring the conditions of possibility for an inclusive, political space wherein dissent and disagreement among individuals and communities can come to take place through dialogues in which no other is cast as the enemy to be obliterated but rather as an adversary to be debated.
Chapter Ten

Exposure through Dialogues

Somers’s novel, *De miedo en miedo (Los manuscritos del río)* (1965), opens with the phrase, “Estábamos bailando” (7). This “we” announces a common identity between the male narrator and an anonymous woman, suggesting an *a priori* origin of this plural subject already in the middle of a shared activity. However, the brief story of this “we” is really a flashback to the time the narrator lied about his identity in order to trick a guest into dancing with him at the hotel where he worked as a bellhop. He speaks for himself but only narrates the woman’s direct dialogue once, when she asks him, “¿Y tú, qué estudias?” (7). She has been consumed by this “we.” She does not speak of or for herself or for both of them at any moment; her voice is only used as a device to elicit more information about the narrator. Meanwhile, he explains how he dodged her questions to keep her close and continue dancing: “Seguimos desplazándonos durante el resto de la noche, con mi sexo primeramente a quemarropa, y luego casi a cuerpo traviesa, único dato seguro sobre mí que podría ofrecerle por el momento” (7). Threatened by his weaponized sex, the woman literally becomes a warm object on which he grinds his body, and the “we” he uses to bind her to him poorly masks the lies that found their experience as common. In this flashback, the woman was appropriated both physically and rhetorically by a man who hid his true identity in order to trick her into doing as he pleased. No ethical encounter takes place in this opening scene.

**Being-With**

Going unnoticed cannot be a permanent position inhabited forever by an individual. Jean-Luc Nancy describes how the notion of being an individual commonly implies that one is “closed off
from all community” and detached “from a formless ground,” but he insists that in actuality “there is no singular being without another singular being” (Inoperative Community 27–28). No such thing as an individual exists; there is no life outside or detached from another life but only “the network, the interweaving, and the sharing of singularities” (27). In this sense, he argues that the only possible ontology, which will no longer be understood as ontology, is the always shared co-existence of singular plural beings: “Existence is with; otherwise, nothing exists” (Being Singular Plural 4; italics in original). This existence is no longer Heidegger’s Being but a being-with, a sharing of the world between singular plural beings that cannot become detached from one another.

Of course, this does not mean each of us communicates clearly and transparently with one another. Rather, each of us can only attempt to communicate with others through language, which he defines as “the exposing of plural singularity” (Nancy, Being Singular Plural 84). Language is the imperfect, incomplete, and transitory medium by which a (singular plural) I becomes exposed in dialogues to (singular plural) others; these fleeting dialogues allow only for the perception of brief glimpses into one another’s existence. Furthermore, language is incorporeal. It does not exist in the world as if the world were a receptacle or body that contained it, but rather it is the outside of the world that opens thresholds in which these singular pluralities can expose themselves to one another:

It [Language] is the whole of the outside of the world; it is not the eruption of an Other, which would clear away or sublimate the world, which would transcribe it into something else; instead, it is the exposition of the world-of-bodies as such, that is, as originarily singular plural. The incorporeal exposes bodies according to their being-with-one-another; they are neither isolated nor mixed together. (84)

For Nancy, there is no such thing as an individual who waits alone for the language of an other to erupt in their life and either transform or annihilate them. Instead, each singular plural being, which is always a being-with, is limited to exposing their plural singularity to others through language. What is exposed is neither an essence nor a fixed identity but the necessary co-existence between these plural singularities and the ways in which they establish relationships among themselves.
Exposure through Dialogues

In my analysis, those who go unnoticed inhabit thresholds that temporarily allow them to avoid perception along their lines of flight. However, thresholds are not self-sustaining caves or isolated chambers that can protect a singular or bare life; they open between and within spaces and leave those inhabiting them exposed on multiple sides to other bare lives, to others who are exposed to them as well. This exposure is not the same as granting visibility to that person or to the identity they are said to represent; in this sense, “to expose” is not a synonym for the verb “to reveal,” because the latter implies the possibility of a clear and total comprehension of the self and the other. Rather, these exposures take place through language in the instant of a flash, in the same instant that can create a photograph as easily at it can destroy an entire roll of film. Only through such exposures of language can an ethical dialogue take place, and only through ethical dialogues can the infinite task of creating community even begin.

That I do not exist alone in the world is the most challenging lesson at stake in the contemporary world. To this point, going unnoticed has opened a series of political and aesthetic tools for deactivating the binary divisions of biopolitics that isolate bare lives into clearly defined, brightly lit spaces. Somers’s fiction in particular allows me to take a next step toward the ethics of being perceived that becomes possible as all of these singular plural bodies begin to dialogue with one another as the non-essentialized, radically heterogeneous, and constantly disagreeing pluralities that each of us together has always been.

And

The flashback at the beginning of De miedo en miedo provides a contrast to the dialogues that Somers’s narrator, now older and married, establishes with another woman who comes into the bookshop where he works. “Busco cierto libro raro,” she says, initiating their first dialogue (De miedo 11). Both the man and the woman begin their encounter as a singular I approaching another. The first time the narrator uses a first-person plural verb, it is introduced not with “nosotros” or an assumed “we” as in the flashback, but rather with “ella y yo” (12). The narrator briefly links them together, not as one plural entity whose union predates the narrative, but rather as two people exposed to
one another. To borrow a phrase from Nancy, this type of “and” marks “the appearance of the between as such: you and I (between us)—a formula in which the and does not imply juxtaposition, but exposition” (Inoperative Community 29; italics in original). This exposure of the common space between them only takes place for an instant. Once she pays, the “and” connecting them disappears: “Ella salió con su libro. Yo fui por mi chaqueta [...] y me lancé tras el rastro” (De miedo 13). However, the narrator now recognizes his place within the common space that simultaneously links and separates them, and he chooses to follow her and to engage with her across and throughout that space.

In the bookshop, possibly set in Paris, the owner sits on the upper floor, “un lugar estratégico,” from which he watches over every aspect of the business, including the narrator’s interactions with customers (De miedo 12). In order to talk to her, the narrator must follow her into the street to ask her about the handkerchief she keeps sealed in an envelope in her purse that he glimpsed as she paid. Now outside and away from the all-seeing eye of the owner, he explains his interest in what he perceives to be their shared fear of germs, microbes, and contamination, but he also tells her about his wife and son; he is not trying to conquer her as he had done with other women in his youth. Their conversation is a bit awkward, but eventually she smiles, “iniciando [...] una especie de frente común, mientras la muchedumbre [les] enviaba gratuitamente sus vapores de cuerpo” (13). These two hypochondriacs make an exception for one another and strike up a random conversation in the middle of the street at midday surrounded by so many other unknown bodies. Each shares their different approaches for avoiding the most used parts of coffee cups at cafes and the parts of doors with the most fingerprints. Despite their precautions, they agree they still feel sick all the time. Their constant fear of germs that drives their desire to go unnoticed leads them to being perceived by one another for a brief moment before they go their separate ways.

Given the size of the city, the narrator recognizes how difficult it would be to find her: “En una ciudad llena de cuevas de la que cada cual sacará su cabeza a la mañana, ella se me acababa de perder como la pequeña piedra de un anillo, en esa forma tan insidiosa de dejarnos con el aro vacío” (De miedo 17). After their exchange, he is left only with the absence that takes the shape of
her former presence. Since he does not know very many details about her, he decides it is best to forget her: “Pero uno no se echa en busca de pequeños fragmentos incapaces de recomponer el todo” (17–18). His obsessive-compulsive instincts leave him resigned to ignore those seemingly unimportant details that he does remember—her voice, her smile, her handkerchief—since a more complete and totalizing encounter, something more like the perfect palindrome, could not be formed from them.

Somers’s narrator may have approached this second woman in a very different manner than the one from his youth, but he mistakenly rejects the idea that—as Casey’s narrator in “Notas de un simulador” states—seemingly unimportant details offer splendid clues. Resigned to never see the woman again, that evening at home he begins writing fragmented journal entries to record his most intimate, untoward thoughts, the type that cross everyone’s minds but are rarely spoken for fear of how others might react. In his first entry, for example, he is frustrated by his screaming infant son, and he asks in writing “¿será preciso suprimir al niño?” (De miedo 19). He does not regret the thought: “Me quedé fascinado sobre la concreción de aquella voluntad exterminadora” (19). However, he is well aware of the moral outrage that would result from anyone who might find his manuscripts full of reflections on murder, suicide, and death—acts which he will never commit. He considers eating his texts, flushing them down the toilet, or asking his wife to burn them, but he decides to throw them in the river every night once he is finished writing. In the process, he comes to appreciate a sort of piecemeal acquisition of an imperfect knowledge:

Es decir que yo, que he tenido siempre tanto miedo de morir por inmersión, comencé a guardar más de mí en aquel fondo lleno de ahogados azules que por encima. […] La vida había sido un acontecer lineal, como una novela fuera de moda dividida en capítulos. Pero el río, siempre hambriento de mí, quería mis pedazos, fueran o no consecutivos. (19–20)

He begins to understand the ravenous desire to approach and listen to the words of another person even when those are only bits and fragments of ideas randomly tossed around. He expresses an emergent appreciation of the narrative modes made possible by the avant-gardes in their attempt to smash institutions and
conventions, those same texts that by the Sixties were being published within cultural markets. Simultaneously, he undergoes an opening toward the type of incomplete, errant dialogues that he comes to have with the woman he met at the bookshop in which their lines of communication always exceed what is said out loud.

On a random day, the woman returns to the bookshop, and throughout the novel, they continue to meet in other places and talk about their lives, an activity the narrator describes as “componiendo nuestro mundo compartido” (De miedo 21). This common space has to be built from their mutual confessions, by exposing their most intimate thoughts, those unimportant, but destructive ideas that continually haunt them. Nevertheless, there is always some distance between them. The narrator describes a pause in one of their early encounters: “Nos quedamos unos minutos más como suspendidos de un hilo, incapaz [yo] de resistir si alguno de los dos no disminuía la tensión de algún modo” (23). A subtle, almost imperceptible shift between subjects—characteristic of Somers’s syntax—manifests itself here; the sentence begins in the first-person plural by which the narrator describes what he and the woman are experiencing together, but it quickly jumps mid-sentence to his limited, interior experience through the singular adjective, “incapaz.” Only he is incapable of maintaining this dialogue. He refuses to speak for the woman on this topic, thereby recognizing the distance that still exists between him and her.

**Exposing Infinity**

Dialogues, either those written in the narrator’s river manuscripts or spoken with the woman, become a possible tool for bridging the gap toward new forms of community. Of course, this one man has been very slow to arrive at a moment in his life when he is prepared to expose his thoughts and engage in dialogue with another person, and only this random stranger is willing to attempt to dialogue with him. The narrator does attempt to have this type of conversation with his wife: “Quiero que hablemos ahora mismo —le supliqué— de esas cosas sin importancia que nos han sucedido alguna vez, pero que siguen provocando destrucción como la bomba de Hiroshima” (De miedo 37). She mumbles something in return and ignores him. Caught in the
details of their everyday life, they never speak of anything so intimate and dangerous. *De miedo en miedo* will not end with a utopia of shared dialogues among happy citizens. This novel remains within a tiny threshold between two strangers who meet in public and go unnoticed by everyone else as they embark on the arduous task of establishing a dialogue just among themselves by exposing their fears to one another.

For example, he begins to tell the anonymous woman how he feels when she is not around, explaining that he imagines her nearby and writes stories about her: “me compongo mis novelas con tu sombra” (*De miedo* 66). He had never told anyone about his manuscripts, and realizing what he had inadvertently blurted out to her, he says, “Sentía que alguien había proyectado una luz fugaz sobre mi cabeza como a un ladrón escondido en las sombras” (66). This brief flash of light exposes a tiny bit of him to her momentarily. Since this exposure was unplanned and unannounced, she was not prepared to focus her attention on it; rather, she only managed to glimpse, ever so slightly, something he had been keeping hidden. This fleeting exposure through fragmented dialogues that can never completely reveal one person to another will serve as my entry point into the ethics of being perceived named in these final chapters.2

They continue their dialogues over the following years as they meet in public, write letters that end with ellipses, and cut off their conversations abruptly, leaving so many other stories forever untold. One day, as they walk from their meeting place back to the bookshop, the woman recommends the following to start their dialogue anew: “Tú eliges algo que te haya quedado inexpresado, sin poderlo comunicar a nadie. Y lo vamos desplazando como si estuviésemos solos” (67). They do not plan to fully state or comprehend exactly what the other wants to express. Rather, they attempt to pass their ideas back and forth across the gap separating them, shifting and slipping around on the surface of their stories in no particular order, while trying to avoid groups of boy scouts and other strangers in the streets who keep crossing their path.

Their confusing, fragmented, non-linear conversations exceed what is actually said. In this sense, their dialogues are similar to a form of communication that Emmanuel Levinas calls “saying.” As opposed to “the said” that states an essence as if it were a fact or a piece of easily transmittable information, saying is the condition
of possibility for the unending communication of the other's alterity: “Saying is communication, to be sure, but as a condition for all communication, as exposure” (Otherwise than Being 48). Insofar as it unblocks communication and exposes the other’s alterity, saying requires a temporalization other than succession and regression, other than “a linear regressive movement, a retrospective back along the temporal series toward a very remote past” (10). The said pretends to be definitive; it falsely claims to have revealed visible and known others to the self by reducing the other to the self. In contrast, saying more closely describes the dialogues between the man and the woman in Somers’s novel, wherein one self engages with another self in unending dialogues through which tiny bits of their experiences and ideas flash briefly, even incomprehensibly, before one another's eyes.

Exposure, being perceived by another person, creates enough anxiety on its own. Though Somers’s narrator seeks out these dialogues with the woman, the lack of answers to his existential queries at times exacerbate his fears: “Me había acogotado una ansiedad mortal de aclaración, de desciframiento” (De miedo 36). But similar to ArteletrA, the Sator Square, and all of Somers’s enigmas, there is no true meaning to be deciphered or unveiled; there will always remain an excess to what is capable of being said across this distance through language. Refusing to calm him by pretending she now understands, the woman describes those parts of him that she can only approach distantly as his “infinity”: “No sé de lo que estás hablando, pero se trataba también de tu infinito” (70). Even if over time he were to expose every single aspect of himself to her, still she would have to be capable of perceiving and comprehending an infinite amount of information. Instead of working toward a total representation of the other, they opt for gradually exposing ever smaller fragments of their experiences, which they still find overwhelming to comprehend.

Parallel to the concepts of saying and the said, Levinas theorizes the discursive interactions between a self and an other using the terms infinity and totality. In sum, he argues that there are two approaches to establishing this interaction, both of which require language. The totalizing approach is the one that “reduces the other to the same” (Totality and Infinity 42). To totalize is to swallow up the other by annihilating anything that stands out as different from the self. The narrator’s approach to the woman
at the hotel in the flashback could be understood as totalizing in this regard. In contrast, “infinity” is the word Levinas uses to evoke the untraversable distance that always separates a self from an other and to demonstrate that every other is irreducible to any self. Despite this distance, he insists that language can serve as a medium across infinity, but only in certain circumstances: “Mediation (characteristic of Western philosophy) is meaningful only if it is not limited to reducing distances. For how could intermediaries reduce the intervals between terms infinitely distant?” (44). An infinite distance can never be traversed, and for Levinas the ethical relationship takes place during the face-to-face interaction wherein each self recognizes the impossibility of fully reaching the other and, importantly, refuses to reduce the other to the self’s experience and knowledge. Language, in the form of dialogue, can limit its function to that of an imperfect medium—an exposure or a saying, but not a revelation or the said—that allows for a self and an other to approach one another face to face.

This type of exposure in which a self can be perceived by another opens the potential for an ethics of going unnoticed. In the case of Somers’s narrator and the woman, they expose their faces to one another in an asymmetrical relationship and remain separated by an infinite distance. Nevertheless, once the narrator accepts this infinite, untraversable gap separating himself from the woman, he notices that they both experience an insatiable desire to continue their dialogues instead of going back to their everyday routines: “Mi costumbre de mostrarme las entrañas y su desesperación por revolverlas y encontrar símbolos, nos empezó a fanatizar, a impedir el curso hacia adelante de la vida” (De miedo 34). Yet, it is precisely their eagerness to pay attention to these fragments of conversations that allows them to continue exposing their faces to one another, thus opening and reopening the potential for dialogue.

Both Levinas and Somers approach a similar ethics; however, an important difference should be noted. Levinas frequently writes from the perspective of the same—referencing, for example, the other’s “irreducibility to the I” (Totality and Infinity 43). Alternately, Somers’s fiction exceeds the interpretation that would identify the man speaking in the first person as the same and the woman as the Other. The man’s interiority is inaccessible to the woman. This is not due to his totalizing will to power,
but to his “infinity,” to his and every person’s irreducibility to a singular essence. Although he speaks in the first person and is the narrator, she is not consumed by him as was the woman in the flashback; rather, this woman points out his irreparable alterity to her, his “infinity.” In my analysis, the woman exceeds any attempt to read this structure as if the interlocutor, an anonymous woman, is a way of conjugating the Other as Woman, that is, as Man’s radical alterity. Nor is it simply an inversion of binary values wherein the Other becomes Man as Woman’s radical alterity. Rather, each of them experiences the infinite distance from knowing him or herself and from knowing the other person.

When read alongside La mujer desnuda, the anonymous man in De miedo en miedo becomes a sort of “nude man” whose journey allows him to err from prescribed paths and moral duties toward a radical divesting of himself in the face of this woman and all the readers of the parts of his fragmented narrative—the novel itself, the river manuscripts—that are thrown into the river. For example, the narrator says: “Sentí [...] que nos habíamos puesto al desnudo interiormente como bajo un relámpago” (De miedo 74). Similar to the anemic Rebeca Linke after cutting off her own head, he later feels as if he has lost all of his blood: “Sentí durante algunos segundos que había quedado anémico, debilitado por mi hemorragia definitoria” (90). Without the fantastic elements of La mujer desnuda, the narrator here experiences the same bloodletting and nude exposure to the world as Linke. Both the nude woman and the nude man share parts of themselves in brief flashes to those around them; both can be constituted as someone’s other, and both will find it impossible to fully know themselves.

In this way, Somers’s protagonists refuse to be elevated to the status of universal representatives of their respective genders. The politics of going unnoticed, and the ramifications it has for an ethics here, does not allow for the type of visibilization of the exposed subject or of the identity group; the subjects who go unnoticed attempt to open up a dialogue with others—or with the others within themselves—by refusing to assimilate the other to the self and by constantly exceeding any line of communication that might try to identify the self with any other. Yet, this is not to say that this ethics does not have implications for feminist, queer, and other forms of subaltern critique, for it opens the possibility of forming a community between people despite their differences.
Nancy argues that there is a common “that precedes all solitude and all exception, all sexual differences or people, a common without which no isolation or separation would take place” (*Disavowed Community* 71). This common “only takes place in an instant,” which he defines as “the infinitesimal suspension of time where gazes—voices, silence—are exchanged and bodies touch. In this suspension, something appears—one might say, a world” (71–72). By being perceived, through exposure, those who go unnoticed open the potential for these impossible-to-fulfill dialogues to take place among all sorts of people and, by extension, the potential for sustained dissent and disagreement that can allow for the temporary creation of a common world to come.

In my analysis, this exposure takes place along the path opened by the errant palindrome. Against the current of a chronologically structured text, the flight of the errant palindrome passes back and forth over that which was going unnoticed. This flight opens the conditions of possibility for saying with unattended fragments that which always remains irreducible to what is said and always exceeds any attempt at totalization or essentialization. The exposure of these previously unnoticed people does not take place under the harsh, all-pervading lights of the public sphere, but instead flashes unexpectedly from among the swirling lights and shadows of the Sixties. The narrator and the woman expose something of themselves in their dialogues before deciding to end their brief, errant encounters and go their separate ways. At the woman’s insistence, they turn their faces away from one another, thus closing the lines of communication temporarily opened between them. This arduous, infinite task of engaging in dialogue cannot be sustained by only two people indefinitely. Every self and every other will have to decide whether or not to carry out this process by which the open transforms into a world that only exists within the space and time, the instant, of these dialogues. Whereas Somers remains at the everyday level where these dialogues take place, Filloy offers a glimpse of what this community might look like on a larger scale.