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PART FOUR

The Ethics of Being Perceived

The fact that must constitute the point of departure for any discourse on ethics is that there is no essence, no historical or spiritual vocation, no biological destiny that humans must enact or realize.

Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*

Between the seemingly individualistic process of going unnoticed and the gestures toward new forms of community analyzed throughout the previous chapters an untraversable gap appears to have opened. Going unnoticed is only ever a temporary state when someone turns away from totalizing institutions, slips out of their gaze, and opens lines of flight along which one’s perception of the political and aesthetic organization of the world are irreversibly reoriented. These practices do not produce new heroic individuals who rise above the crowd to see and govern with total clarity, nor do they uncover an essential foundation for the political community. The politics of going unnoticed has no *a priori* goals; rather, it effects a disordering or a disruption on smaller scales. If those who went unnoticed had decided to remain in the shadows or to hide instead of write in plain sight, then the politics of going unnoticed would slip into solipsism, self-preservation at any cost, or a renewed bid for hegemony—in other words, into Filloy’s *yomismo*. Yet, Calvert Casey, Juan Filloy, and Armonía Somers imagine characters who establish dialogues with others from their seemingly unimportant positions. In this final part, I analyze the new dialogues that become possible as a result of these disruptions. By going unnoticed and writing in plain sight, different people and groups allow themselves to be perceived from within new thresholds that have been pried open between the high walls
and rhetorical devices used to divide and isolate them from one another in the service of hegemonic politics and inequality. These practices are what I call “the ethics of being perceived.”

I have a particular definition of the word “ethics” in mind that distinguishes it from “morals.” These terms are frequently used as synonyms, and their connotations vary drastically from one context and author to another. Today, morality and moral values are associated with religious, national, or other forms of identity-based appeals for appropriate behavior, whereas ethics relates to the business world as it establishes a variety of codes of conduct for its employees. For my purposes, this common-sense distinction names more or less equivalent practices by which one group tells its members and others how they ought to behave. In philosophy, rulebooks for behavior are studied and developed under the umbrella term, “normative ethics,” which encompasses three main subfields: 1) virtue ethics, which emphasizes virtue or moral character as the foundation for good actions; 2) consequentialism, which analyzes the outcomes of actions; and 3) deontology, which determines duties and obligations. Despite their specific perspectives, each of these three branches of normative ethics is concerned with establishing the boundaries by which virtuous or moral actions are defined. This outline, although hasty, can serve as a guiding map for a variety of ethical theories that do not interest me at present; as a shorthand, I prefer to label all such theories and rulebooks that map the distinction between good and evil, virtue and vice, proper and improper, under the term “morals.”

An ethics of the politics of going unnoticed plays out in the threshold spaces pried open between normative binaries wherein such distinctions lose their clarity and, therefore, their expediency for a hegemonic politics that seeks to divide human beings from one another in the service of economic and social inequality. This does not mean that any action can now be considered acceptable within any community. Rather, this ethics takes place within a constellation of texts that historicize the particularity of seemingly universal moral categories. In The Genealogy of Morals, Friedrich Nietzsche critiques moral values by calling into question their “intrinsic worth” and claim to universality through genealogical and etymological analyses (155). Nietzsche concludes that “the origin of the opposites good and bad is to be found in the pathos
of nobility and distance, representing the dominant temper of a higher, ruling class in relation to a lower, dependent one” (160). He contends that the concept of “the good” was not something attributed to oneself from above or outside but rather an internally applied term by which a ruling class legitimized its claim to power. While he ultimately reduces the question of moral values to class distinctions, Nietzsche’s analysis lays the groundwork for interpreting “the good” and “the bad” not as universal categories, as thinkers from Plato to Kant have argued, but rather as historically contingent values that structure a society through the belief that one’s own community is good, while those who are said to be in opposition to, different from, or simply residing outside this group’s imagined limits are bad or evil. Building from his analysis, today the essentialized morality that claims to know what is good (e.g., “us,” the proper) and what is bad (e.g., “them,” the improper) can be interpreted from within a broader context that contests exclusions based on gender, sexuality, race, and any other mode of ideological identity, as they intersect with and reinforce class distinctions.

Once the supposedly universal categories of, for example, good and evil are determined to be historically contingent, it becomes possible to refuse to participate in a politics that simply marks the other, whoever they, you, or I may be, as immoral in order to justify power relations. In “What is Enlightenment?” Foucault expands on Nietzsche’s analysis and proposes a way of thinking that does not center on deciding whether one is “for” or “against” the Enlightenment: “one must refuse everything that might present itself in the form of a simplistic and authoritarian alternative” (313). What interests me is this refusal of the false dilemma. Instead of adopting an attitude of rejection—of casting aside what is labelled “inhuman” or “filth”—he proposes adopting a “limit-attitude” that can move beyond the “outside-inside alternative” or beyond any other simplistic and authoritarian binary, whether they be political, ethical, or both (315). This refusal to name, divide, and cast aside as if from a universally true, but actually solipsistic, moral standpoint serves as a necessary starting point for the ethics of being perceived.

“Politics” in the present study has not served as a synonym for “will to power” or for “hegemony.” I have defined politics as a gesture that produces an opening for dissent and disagreement.
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.