PART THREE

The Aesthetics of Writing in Plain Sight

Y yo pienso, no puedo dejar de pensar, en cuántas cosas tuvimos a la vista pero nunca vimos realmente. Porque no sabíamos en qué dirección y ángulo mirar. Porque nunca miramos dentro de ciertas sombras.

Jorge Enrique Lage, “Epílogo” (44–45)

To go unnoticed is not to be invisible. The protagonists who go unnoticed do so in plain sight of all those around them. For some, going unnoticed is simply the unfortunate result of being perceived as unimportant, whereas for others it provides an opportunity to carry out prohibited or discouraged tasks. In the following chapters, I analyze the narrative forms used by Calvert Casey, Juan Filloy, and Armonía Somers to represent their unnoticed protagonists without revealing every aspect of their lives under the harsh lights of the public sphere. Though not an aesthetic movement in the traditional use of the term, the texts under consideration here coalesce around a practice that I call “writing in plain sight.” Writing in plain sight is a tactic that allows one to attend to what has always been apparent on the surface of hegemonic politics, to all those things, as Jorge Enrique Lage writes, that “tuvimos a la vista pero nunca vimos realmente” (44).

By writing in plain sight, these authors pry open and transform the visible but unnoticed narratives that underwrite hegemonic politics. This process takes place through Filloy’s intervention into the gaucho genre, Somers’s appropriation of family romance and cookbooks, and Casey’s exploration of Havana’s sewers and nightlife. Despite the differences in content, their works overlap at key points. Casey and Filloy write primarily within national traditions. Filloy and Somers are quite explicit in their rewritings
of nineteenth-century texts. Somers and Casey share an intimate exploration of the human body, its illnesses, and its waste. By looking at the visible but unnoticed surface of discourse, each author divests politicized traditions of their burdensome symbolic weight and reconfigures essentialist myths that only serve the interests of the ruling elite.

My own work here as critic should not be mistaken as engaging the type of method envisioned, for example, by Fredric Jameson in *The Political Unconscious*. For Jameson, the task of the critic is not only to historicize but also to reveal an underlying and repressed ideology at work in a text through the tension generated between what is present and what is absent. He defines this method as one in which “the ‘false’ and the ideological can be unmasked and made visible” (53). My intention is not to challenge this method *tout court*, but rather to insist that other critical tools are necessary, because on the one hand, as Beasley-Murray reminds, “it is not as though the workings of power are hidden” (205). They often lie in plain sight, albeit ignored, on the surface. On the other, as Verónica Garibotto argues in her analysis of the reappearance of nineteenth-century texts and tropes in contemporary literature, “La reemergencia del pasado lejano excede la voluntad alegórica” (5). These rewritings engage an allegorical mode of writing, but they are always in excess of that mode of allegory in which the past is only a veil for the present.

Attending to those who go unnoticed and to what they write and rewrite in plain sight is not a heroic activity. It is not an attempt to scour the depths of something like the Sator Square or to solve the enigma of Linke’s nude body and ultimately reveal their true, underlying, or repressed meaning. In this sense, my method more closely relates to the various practices Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus unite under the banner of surface reading: “we take surface to mean what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding […] A surface is what insists on being looked at rather than what we must train ourselves to see through” (9; italics in original). My readings begin by seeking that threshold of perception from which I can analyze and reconfigure what is written in plain sight on the surface of these texts in historical and political contexts. As a result, I establish dialogues between texts and subjects that traditionally have been kept apart by disciplinary, national, or generic bounds.
This chapter unfolds as a series of movements toward the open. Each section begins with a palindrome that I have chosen from Filloy’s *Karcino*. The errant paths of these three palindromes connect Filloy to Somers and Casey by charting the movements from direct toward subtler rewritings of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century aesthetic and political traditions. Along the way, the gauchos will be stripped of their heroic attire, the body politic will be exposed to infectious disease, and the people will revel in the filthy and the impure. Overall, the narratives that found essentialist myths to subdue and control individuals for the political interests of a ruling elite will be rewritten by looking at the habitual workings of power that exist in plain sight.