Arteletra

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A Nude Woman in Uruguay

Armonía Somers’s *La mujer desnuda* was first published in 1950 in the journal *Clima*, but it was not made popularly available until 1966 when it was republished by Arca. In an interview with Campodónico, Somers explains that the National Library purchased almost all of the copies of the first edition of *La mujer desnuda*, and the director of the Library had sent them around the world: “Es decir que *La mujer desnuda*, realmente, no se difundió en Montevideo, la revista [Clima] fue para ciertas élites y la separata fue adquirida por la Biblioteca. De tal manera, la novela siguió siendo un mito, porque se hablaba de ella pero muy pocos la conocían” (“Diálogo” 255). Though Somers was outright rejected as a serious writer for having written a supposedly pornographic novel, only a few people actually read it when it first appeared, and it went almost completely unnoticed internationally. In this chapter, I analyze how Somers’s nude woman attempts to restore her own potentiality for dissent and disagreement while going unnoticed in the context of Uruguay.

*La mujer desnuda* opens with a grotesque, fantastical scene. On her thirtieth birthday, Rebeca Linke flees from her family home in the city to a cabin she bought in the woods. There she takes off her only article of clothing—an overcoat that allowed her to travel unnoticed by train—reaches for a dagger, and cuts off her own head: “La cabeza rodó pesadamente como un fruto. Rebeca Linke vio caer aquello sin alegría ni pena” (18). At first, it might be argued that Linke has become hysterical and overreacted to an early mid-life crisis, only to be relieved in an affectless state, her death. However, the first sentence of the novel establishes the banality of this day: “El día en que Rebeca Linke cumplió los treinta años, comenzó con lo que ella había imaginado siempre, a pesar de una secreta ilusión en contra: la nada” (15). The day
seemed to be of little importance, one in which nothing ordinary nor extraordinary would occur. The narrator further describes the day as “apenas como un aburrido bostezo de verano igual a tantos” (15). This stands in direct opposition to the decapitation scene that follows this opening frame, but what is certain is that her thirtieth birthday, on an otherwise meaningless day, becomes the symbolic catalyst for her to open a line of flight. As Deleuze and Guattari sustain, “We can be thrown into a becoming by anything at all, by the most unexpected, most insignificant of things” (292). Such a seemingly minor, everyday event is all it takes to send Linke down this errant path.

The fourth paragraph registers a second beginning for the novel. Linke steps out of the spotlight and almost disappears from sight: “Todo empezó así, entonces: que ella fuese retrocediendo inconscientemente en un escenario vulgar y desapareciendo de la vista” (Mujer 15). There is an uncertainty in these actions, and the narrator hesitates to tell them as fact. Moreover, the narrator frequently slips in and out of Linke’s consciousness, at times narrating her thoughts as if they were shared by the narrator, at times commenting on the events of the story as if from an omniscient perspective. As Marjorie Agosín explains, the entire novel is written “como una serie de monólogos circulares donde la realidad exterior y la interior emergen entrelazadas” (586). In this second beginning in which the distinction between inside and outside, self and other, is lost, Linke begins to create an opening in her life by going unnoticed of her own volition.

Similar to Konsideransky’s cave-tower, Linke’s cabin establishes certain resemblances with Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave.” Once she arrives at the little house, she removes her overcoat and falls into a sort of trance under the moonlight that filters through the blinds, “el rayado blanco y negro” (Mujer 17). The light of the moon creates the effect of prison bars that simultaneously cover and expose her nude body, symbolically imprisoning her in this cabin. As with Filloy’s cave-tower, this narrative is not a simple reconstruction of the Platonic text. The prisoner in Plato’s allegory is unchained by some unnamed source, whereas Linke breaks her own symbolic chains. She remembers that she has a small dagger, “una obra de arte,” tucked inside a book that will be apt “para decapitar a una mujer prisionera” (18). This small work of art will become the means by which she attempts to produce a clean break
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with the past and free herself, but she does not plan to return to her cabin as in the Platonic text, nor does she desire to hide from the world. Here Linke produces an opening in an already occupied space—a national political context characterized by patriarchal restrictions on women’s bodies and by the state of exception—and from that opening, she will step out into the world as a nude woman, a bare life, who has recovered her potentiality to engage in dissent and disagreement.

The Uruguayan Exception

Uruguay was known as the Switzerland of South America in the first half of the twentieth century, ever since the Partido Colorado’s candidate, José Batlle y Ordóñez, became President. The country’s strong, two-party democratic institutions were celebrated in contrast to its surrounding neighbors, Argentina and Brazil, who had engaged each other in war in the nineteenth century for control of the Banda Oriental, as Uruguay was known in Spanish, or the Cisplanta, as it was known in Portuguese. By the end of World War II, Uruguay was praised internationally for its economic growth and stability, which were dependent upon the regulations made by the Welfare State.\(^1\) Despite the differences with the Cuban Revolution and with Argentina’s frequent alternations between democracy and dictatorship, Uruguay’s so-called model democracy also made frequent recourse to the state of exception—known in the 1830 Constitution as \textit{medidas prontas de seguridad} in case of external attack or internal commotion—since the beginning of the twentieth century (Iglesias 132).\(^2\) Between 1946, the year in which Batllismo consolidated its power under Luis Batlle Berres, and 1973, the year in which the Armed Forces began the dictatorship known euphemistically as “el Consejo de Seguridad Nacional,” the \textit{medidas prontas de seguridad} were increasingly invoked as a political strategy oriented toward maintaining the sociopolitical order dominated by the two ruling parties, the Partido Colorado and the Partido Nacional. This two-party state felt the need to reaffirm its centrality and superiority over “cualquier colectivo social—tanto patronal como asalariado—que pretendiera erigirse en representante de intereses sociales específicos por fuera de instancias controladas por ellos” (148). The Uruguayan state invoked these exceptional measures
in order to guarantee the transition between the two parties to the exclusion of any others.

With the growing tensions of the Cold War, the “threat” invoked in order to justify recourse to this Uruguayan variant of the state of exception became, first, Communism and, later, the armed urban guerrillas known as the Tupamaros. Abril Trigo argues that in Uruguay the Cuban Revolution “destapó los demonios y los echó a andar por las calles de nuestra gris Montevideo” (186). As he contends, the possibility of a political revolution exposed many tensions that had been hidden behind the apparently peaceful, two-party democracy, and it is in this context that the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional-Tupamaros (MLNT) attempted to alter the status quo by making frequent reference to Uruguay’s nineteenth-century civil wars. The MLNT, Trigo writes, “le lleva a recordar [a los detentadores del statu quo] que la guerra civil fue el recurso habitual del pueblo uruguayo en la primera mitad de su vida independiente. Que los mismos partidos tradicionales, hoy vocingleramente pacifistas, fueron los protagonistas de aquellas ‘patriadas’ en las cuales nacieron” (205). The Tupamaros, in this sense, evoked a strange mixture of national history with a revolutionary present as they visibly and violently rebelled against the traditional parties, but they would not succeed. For Trigo, the Tupamaros attempted “salvar los restos del naufragio,” those of the sinking Uruguayan state, rather than provoke a more profound revolution (206).

By July of 1970, the violence had escalated, and on April 15, 1972, the recently elected Juan María Bordaberry declared a state of internal war—a state of exception—and suspended the Constitution. As Thomas C. Wright explains, approximately six hundred Tupamaros were captured and one hundred killed by July 15, 1972, but the counterinsurgency measures were not dropped, leading to labor unrest, political protests, and allegations of military involvement in death squads and brutal treatment of prisoners. In reaction to this popular unrest, and not just to the existence of urban guerrilla cells, “Bordaberry acceded to the gradual militarization of his government until the culminating coup of June 1973, when he closed congress and municipal governments and began to rule by decree with a military-civilian cabinet” (101). Under this more generalized state of exception, which by 1973 was no longer shrouded in democratic robes, the
Tupamaros were quickly eliminated by the militarized state that remained in power until 1985.

**Linke’s Flight and Decapitation**

*La mujer desnuda* predates the dictatorship by over two decades, but the democratic state’s recourse to the state of exception stretches over this entire period. On the one hand, it is possible to read Linke’s cabin as an attempt to go unnoticed within this generalized state of exception. On the other, Linke’s ability as an unmarried woman to legally abandon her home on her thirtieth birthday provides a more concrete reference to a specific legal context within the Uruguayan state. As María Rosa Olivera-Williams argues, Linke’s dependency refers to the Uruguayan Civil Code in operation in 1950 that constructed an eternal dependency for all women, considering a woman to be “‘incapacitada’ para abandonar la casa de sus padres si no se había casado—sujeto que no había alcanzado la mayoría de edad—hasta los treinta años” (32). This patriarchal partitioning of all female bodies made possible by this particular Civil Code within the generalized state of exception becomes a more specific point of contention for Linke. Toward the end of the novel she explains what she was thinking as she chose to run away:

> Que yo diera en mirar a los demás en la forma cómo serían otros treinta después, con las voces cascándose, el pellejo colgado que ellos se estiran a veces con los dedos para crearse un segundo de ilusión, el sexo con los verbos ya sin conjugar, y el miedo de morir desprevenidos al acostarse cada noche. (*Mujer* 95)

After seeing these aging guests and imagining living the next thirty years just to end up like all of them, she decides to take advantage of the legal freedom she has finally been granted in this patriarchal society. At the first moment it becomes legally possible to do so, she flees to the cabin.

Briefly, Linke experiences her flight and decapitation as a clean break with the past: “Empezó desde ese instante a acaecer el nuevo estado” (19). Nevertheless, Linke does not stage a protest, found a guerrilla army, or fight to overturn the laws that created eternal dependency for all women; up to this point, she does not
contest the biopolitical organization of the Uruguayan state in any meaningful way. She waits until she has been legally permitted to leave, flees in the night, sits alone in her cabin, and cuts off her own head. When read in the context of national politics in this era, it becomes difficult to establish an allegorical reading of La mujer desnuda that would lead to any relevant political or social change. Suspecting the inefficacy of her actions, the narrator asks a rhetorical question: “¿Era posible que el mundo deslizante se hubiese solucionado así, de un golpe seco?” (19). The unwritten answer would be in the negative. Her flight and decapitation will not produce a clean break with the past. There can be no escape, because there is no outside; there can be only the possibility of opening an errant path within the cultural and political maps of the era.

Linke’s decapitated body decides, by unexplained means, it is time to return to the world. She eventually stands up, picks up her severed head, places it on a pedestal, and takes “algunos pasos atrás buscando el efecto en la penumbra” (21). Somehow, her body without eyes or ears is capable of observing her decapitated head as if it were a sculpture on display in a poorly lit museum. Then, she becomes scared: “Vio de pronto con terror que la hemorragia persistía, y que el rostro empalidecido mortalmente clamaba por su sangre” (21). The non-existent eyes from her body see her dying head, and her non-existent ears hear the demands it makes of her. She decides that now is the time to restore her head to her body: “Se hacía, pues, impostergable volver a lo anterior, tornar a echarse el pensamiento encima, construir de nuevo el universo real con las estrellas siempre arriba y el suelo por lo bajo, según esquemas primitivos” (21). What was experienced at first as a radical break becomes unsustainable; she must reconstruct the spatial configuration of the stars above and the earth below, of a world that functions according to a Cartesian notion of physical space and a Newtonian physics of predictable interactions between objects in that space. After experiencing a fantastical form of audio-visual observation that does not pass through the ears or the eyes, she labels those classic paradigms as primitive, because they are based solely on empirical observations of the visible, audible world. She then picks up her head and puts it on “como un casco de combate” (21). The wounds quickly heal themselves, restoring her ability
to see and hear through her eyes and ears. Now geared up, she prepares to set back out into the world, completely nude.

Her decapitation will not produce a definitive rupture with the state of exception or the paternalistic world in which she lives. From the cabin where she finally goes unnoticed under the paternalistic gaze of her family and of the Civil Code, Linke acquires the potential to engage in dissent, a potentiality that previously had been obstructed. In “On Potentiality,” Agamben studies Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* and *De anima* to consider the relationship between *dynamis* and *energeia*, potentiality and actuality. In Agamben’s reading of Aristotle, *energeia* or actuality corresponds to the light, whereas *dynamis* or potentiality corresponds to darkness. However, Agamben argues, when one sees, one actualizes one’s potential for sight, that is, for the perception of light: “when we do not see (that is, when our vision is potential), we nevertheless distinguish darkness from light; *we see darkness*” (180–81; italics in original). In this perception of darkness when light is absent, there is still the potential for sight even though one is not actually seeing. Linke comes to see the darkness of her situation, the nothingness, “la nada,” that takes over the day of her birthday and convinces her to flee (*Mujer* 15). Furthermore, Agamben claims that potentiality is more than the ability to do one thing or another: “The greatness—and also the abyss—of human potentiality is that it is first of all potential not to act, *potential for darkness*” (“On Potentiality” 181; italics in original). Potentiality is both the potential to act and the potential to not act; it is the ability to do something and the ability to refuse to do something, at the same time. As such, the space of potentiality is a threshold in which decisions can still be made. If this space were to foreclose the possibility of choosing evil over good or vice versa, then there would be no possible choice, no actual state of potentiality. Potentiality, then, is this opening of a threshold in a space already occupied by innumerable normative demands, both political and moral; in this threshold, decisions can be made, for better or for worse, to agree or to disagree with those demands. Going unnoticed opens such a threshold in which dissent becomes possible for those seemingly unimportant people, those bare lives whose ideas and voices remain unattended and who have no chance or no desire to participate in a state that has ignored and abandoned them. The
politics of going unnoticed restores potentiality by opening a space in which anyone can register their dissent, can assume their right to do, to not do, and to resist or refuse to do an action.

Perhaps for the first time in her life, Linke acquires potentiality at the moment she decides to cut off her own head, and she takes advantage of this when she leaves the cabin and returns to the world. Of course, her unnoticed actions are never offered as a moral imperative to be followed by others; there is no discernible end goal explained in the text, no *a priori* manifesto to be fulfilled upon her successful decapitation. In the description of the act itself, Linke symbolically divests herself of her clothes as she attempts to sever all ties to her past by cutting off her own head. Though she struggles to achieve this act, she is both physically capable of this gruesome gesture and of refusing to do it; she puts up no resistance even when the dagger seems to acquire its own agency:

La mano que quiere alcanzarla [la daga] no puede. Derriba el vaso con agua de la mesa y queda allí como una flor congelada. Es entonces cuando la daga va a demostrar que ella sí sabe hacerlo, y se desplaza atraída por las puntas de unos dedos. Claro que hacia una mano que está adherida a un brazo, que pertenece a su vez a un cuerpo con cabeza, con cuello. Una cabeza, algo tan importante sobre eso tan vulnerable que es un cuello … El filo penetró sin esfuerzo, a pesar del brazo muerto, de la mano sin dedos. Tropezó con innumerables cosas que se llamarían quizás arterias, venas, cartílagos, huesos articulados, sangre viscosa y caliente, con todo menos el dolor que entonces ya no existía. (*Mujer* 18)

The dagger is said to demonstrate that “ella” does know how to cut off Linke’s head. The narrator achieves a grammatical ambiguity with regard to the antecedent of this pronoun, one of many stylistic traits by which Somers creates enigmas throughout her work. In this instance, “ella” can both mean “she” in reference to Linke and “it” in reference to the dagger, a grammatically feminine noun, impeding any attempt to decipher exactly who or what is being referenced. With the double reading, the dagger shows Linke how to cut off her own head and that it is capable of cutting off her head for her. Somers’s grammatical ambiguity impedes the distinction between the woman and the dagger, between subject and object, between a living person and an inanimate thing. All
the while, the narrative alternates between Linke’s somewhat disembodied point of view and a third-person description of the events by the narrator or, perhaps, by the now animate dagger. In my analysis, these three perspectives are practically and purposefully indistinguishable; one phrase may be read in multiple ways like an errant palindrome that blurs distinctions between forms of life at the everyday level. This dagger-woman or woman-dagger acquires a potentiality of her own for the first time as she attempts to nullify the partitions that have structured her entire life.

After she decides to restore her head to her body, she chooses to leave the solitude of her cabin, which served only as a temporary threshold, and sets out into the world completely nude. She hesitates for just a moment while reaching for the door: “Hasta que la mano, retardándose algo más de lo común sobre las cosas, consiguió abrir la puerta luego de un crispamiento largo sobre el pomo” (21). Following this sentence is a large blank space, offering a visual opening within the narrative itself as she returns to the world. On the other side of the white space, Linke immediately struggles to orient herself: “Rebeca Linke sufrió un repentino vértigo. Quiso dominarlo aferrándose a algo. No había nada próximo” (22). The definitiveness of that last phrase, uncharacteristically short and concise within Somers’s ambling syntax and endless sentences, shatters the fantasy of freedom. She experiences the open as pure, vertiginous abandonment. Nevertheless, she decides to persist: “Nunca había andado descalza sino en la alfombra o en la arena. Pero decidió soportar sin protestas los espinos” (22). She traverses the prairie, observes her body and the lines in her hand under the moonlight; for the briefest moment, nothing is there to support her, but there is also nothing that seems to stand in her way as she continues unnoticed along her errant path.

The politics of going unnoticed will not be an easy task, nor will it be without risks to those who step out of their disciplined space as in the case of Linke. Stepping into the open prairie is also stepping out of her unnoticed threshold; at the edge of the prairie she notices something else: “La vigilaban miles de ojos ocultos, la trituraban miles de dientes” (23). Not only does the prairie not provide any support, but also it is occupied by others who immediately notice, keep watch over, and threaten this nude woman who has stepped out of the place designated for her. The danger is evident: “le pareció, de pronto, que el bosque la había
identified, que la estaba espiando [y] lo cierto fue que la envolvió de repente en un silencio brutal, esa mudez de conspiración en muchedumbre” (23). This threat foreshadows the violence of the second half of the novel, but for the moment, she walks into the forest and wanders around until she comes into contact with other people.

**First Encounter: Nataniel’s Chains**

Of the many encounters that take place in this novel between Linke and the townspeople, three are of interest for my analysis; they range from barely making contact, to provoking an angry mob with her nude body, and in the final encounter, to establishing a fleeting moment of dialogue with one other person who attempts to understand her dissent. First, Linke stumbles into a shack in the forest, where she disturbs a sleeping man, Nataniel, who is in bed with his wife. In a dream state, he starts to speak to her, unable to figure out exactly who she is. She tells him to touch her: “Ven, toca, estoy desnuda. Tomé mi libertad y salí. He dejado los códigos atrás, las zarzas me arañaron por eso” (27). At the moment he almost awakens, he forces himself upon his sleeping wife. Seeing this, Linke fears that this new phase of her life will come to an end: “Volvería a ocurrir lo de siempre, los bienes compartidos con miedo, el mundo del engaño y del robo, otra vez las inmundas ropas cubriéndola” (28). She runs out of the shack, knocking things over, and leaves Nataniel behind. In this first encounter, she barely peaks her head out of her unnoticed threshold, quick to run away before he realizes what has happened, since she does not know what he might do to her. Later, she mocks him because of “los cerrojos en que viviría aun sin creerse prisionero” (33). Though she finds another person still chained in the darkness, as in the Platonic allegory, she does not actually free him; rather, fearful that he will drag her back inside and shackle her to the wall, she prefers to run back into the forest at night.

**Second Encounter: The People’s Terror**

The second encounter takes place with the townspeople as a whole, and it will prove her fears of losing her newly acquired potentiality to be well-founded. In *The Open*, Agamben defines
the anthropological machine as the mechanism by which, in both ancient and modern times, the notion of man has been produced “through the opposition man/animal, human/inhuman” that presupposes the existence of man: “the machine necessarily functions by means of an exclusion (which is also always already a capturing) and an inclusion (which is also always already an exclusion)” (37). The space of exception at the center of this articulation is “perfectly empty,” and what results when a human being is placed in that empty center is “a life that is separated and excluded from itself—only a bare life” (38; italics in original). In my analysis, from the moment Linke becomes the woman-dagger or dagger-woman, “ella” not only recovers her potentiality but importantly occupies and exposes the emptiness and contingency of the division that marks the boundary between man and animal, human and inhuman.

Engaging in the politics of going unnoticed is to attempt to deactivate or render inoperative these pervasive, divisive machines without first securing a visible position within the governing institutions and everyday practices that power them. Though the divisions they create allow a body to partake in the political process, they also form the trap of biopolitics; they divide humans into competing, disciplined categories that facilitate the total surveillance and control of those very bodies who at the same time are expected to accept these divisions as perfectly natural and carry out the roles assigned to them. The threshold in which one goes unnoticed pries open the space between the dichotomies created by the biopolitical machine, rendering some of the partitions it creates inoperative, in order to restore the potential for dissent and disagreement to that person. In The Use of Bodies, Agamben warns that those who inhabit “the central emptiness” separating man and animal, or between any of the other biopolitical dichotomies, must know that to do so is “to risk ourselves in this emptiness” (92). Linke is such a bare life, a nude woman, who has occupied this empty space between man and animal, human and inhuman, man and woman, and risked her own life in order to deactivate this dividing machine, albeit temporarily.

At the first sight of dawn, the narrator explains that Linke had not planned anything beyond her decapitation: “Su desnudez, su libre determinación, habían comenzado con la noche y sin mañana previsible” (Mujer 34). Now her nude body and her
newfound potentiality are about to be fully revealed under the morning light to the world around her. Along her errant path, she comes to the outskirts of a small town that she describes as a “zona de peligro”: “Esa área sin relieve y la luz creciente la estaban convirtiendo [a Linke] en un blanco perfecto” (37). She runs into two men, twins, who are shocked at their discovery: “¡una mujer desnuda en medio del campo!” (38). They run back to the sleepy town and interrupt everyone’s daily routine:

Fue en aquella sucesión vulgar de circunstancias, donde nunca ocurriera nada fuera de ordeñar las vacas y transportar los tarros al tren lechero, sembrar, casarse y tener hijos que harían después las mismas cosas, incluso ir el domingo a la iglesia, morir, continuar pasándose el apellido, donde prendió la noticia de los gemelos. (42)

This life ordered only by habit, by the tacit and unreflective acceptance of the biopolitical organization of these people’s lives, is described with utmost disdain. Linke’s disruptive actions, the recovery of her potential, is immediately rejected by everyone in this town. As Núria Calafell Sala explains, their rejection results from the fact “que ni saben leer el mensaje de Rebeca Linke ni pueden llegar a comprenderlo” (“Sabotaje” n.p.). Linke’s nude body presents itself as an enigma that cannot and will not be deciphered by these people. Faced with this problem, the twins decry what they do not understand as an “escandaloso Moralismo,” and they form an “ejército bárbaro” to hunt her down, justified only because it acquired “el matiz popular” (Mujer 43). Nataniel will be one of the few who refuses to join the angry mob despite his lack of comprehension. In the light of day, this nude woman will be subjected to the violence of a popular will that intends only to maintain the status quo despite the poor quality of life it requires of all of them. As a bare life, Linke has been banned and abandoned by the law; therefore, she may be sacrificed for walking down this errant path and stepping out of the place assigned to her.

Before they become an angry mob, the townspeople turn to their local priest for guidance. He offers his paternalistic recommendation: “vuelve a tus hijos, tu campo, tus quehaceres humildes” (58). Soon after, he explains to one woman that “la
vida en escala pequeña [...] me han dicho algunas mujeres aquí mismo, es suficiente para conquistar la paz que se ha extraviado” (59). The priest’s primary goal is to prevent Linke’s dissent from spreading to those around her, because this would awaken them from the slumber of their small lives and could incite a larger revolt. The priest’s actions may be understood as representative of the institutional desire to achieve the total management of bare life, which is one way of defining totalitarianism, whether it take place within a democracy, a dictatorship, or a revolutionary state. According to Agamben, twentieth-century totalitarianism—more than carrying out the last great tasks of nineteenth-century nation-states, “nationalism and imperialism”—has taken on the task of managing bare life itself in the generalized state of exception when all other historical duties appear to have been lost: “Do we not see around and among us men and peoples who no longer have any essence or identity [...] and who grope everywhere, and at the cost of gross falsifications, for an inheritance and a task, an inheritance as task?” (Open 76; italics in original). When faced with the loss of an inheritance, an essence, an identity, a history, a purpose in life, individuals and peoples can be enticed by the promise of authoritarian, totalizing control; even as such control further divides them from one another and restricts their potentiality, these defined roles and places purport to restore meaningful, historical tasks to the people. This is what Somers’s priest offers the angry townspeople too late.

The impetus toward the total biopolitical management of a community is not strictly enforced from above. The townspeople in the novel form, borrowing a term from Beasley-Murray, what may be considered a multitude, but one that brings “death rather than life, setting off a chain reaction” that cannot be attributed to the state (257). As Somers’s narrator explains, they choose to punish Linke for exposing their lost inheritance and their total lack of potentiality under a regime that divides and controls them:

En cuanto a la mujer, aquel desnudo les había recordado con demasiada insistencia lo que ellos se cubrían. La criatura desvestida tras el desasosiego que arrojara en sus lechos, les acababa de traer el terror de sus almas en descubierto, el soñarse pesadile-camente con sus rencores al viento, con sus pequeñas miserias sin cortinado espeso. (Mujer 108)
Desiring to return to the habit of their routines, despite it not being a particularly easy or satisfying life, Linke’s nude body reveals everything this community had been ignoring, its miserable living conditions and the resentment and pain that accompanies such a life: “Cómo no condenar, entonces, aquella desnudez que obligaba a las suyas” (78). Linke has recovered her potentiality, and her nude body only forces them to recognize everything that they lack. In their desperate haste to cover everything once more, but also in their rage against their own misery, they turn into a destructive mob that sets fire to the priest’s home—who now regrets his appraisal of the nude woman—before hunting down Linke “con sus picas, sus horquillas, sus palas” (107). Not unlike what Trigo describes as the reaction caused by the Cuban Revolution in the Uruguayan imaginary, the townspeople’s violence is a reaction to having the lid taken off their demons. In order to return things to the way they were, this community decides to eliminate the nude woman in Uruguay who irreparably revealed what they had all been hiding and can serve as their scapegoat. With such a violent act, the mob seeks to close the opening created by Linke. They chase her, she flees toward the river, and the final image of the novel is that of her bruised, nude body floating face down through the river in the forest.

The state of exception forecloses the communal space to any actor who seeks to open it through dissent, and this closure is all too often reinforced by everyday actions. The threat, which is also the appeal, of this sort of totalitarianism has not waned after the return to democracy in the Southern Cone nor after the death of Fidel in Cuba; the Pink Tide has begun to subside in Latin America, and everywhere in the West today authoritarian politics is winning even at the supposedly democratic polls. The biopolitical machine is churning faster every day, and increasing numbers of people negatively affected by it have become its ardent supporters. This choice to defend these biopolitical divisions, this demand from below that everyone else give up their potentiality and accept the structures and laws that violently order their lives from above, has become the biggest obstacle to creating equality and justice within a radically democratic framework today.
Third Encounter: Juan’s Dissent

The remaining question, therefore, is what does the politics of going unnoticed achieve if Casey has to flee the authoritarian institutions that rise in Cuba, if Konsideransky’s cave-tower can only be read ironically, and if Linke dies in the end? Before Linke’s death, the narrator explains the following about her: “Odiaba desde siempre las moralejas, rechazaba las conclusiones finales y los mitos que las generan en un mundo que de pronto se abre en volcán, en aluvión de lodo, en silencio de sombra que anda en busca del cuerpo desintegrad” (Somers, *La mujer desnuda* 119). The politics of going unnoticed proposes a different reaction and a different type of decision-making. In reaction to a space that is suddenly thrust open, like the townspeople’s world when confronted by the nude woman, Linke rejects the narratives that attempt to justify the violent actions that would return the spewing ash and flowing mud to its former place or too quickly talk over the silence of that disembodied shadow. Linke knows the failure of this politics is not a historical necessity, nor are the biopolitical divisions naturalized by these townspeople. She accepts the risk of occupying that central emptiness in order that a radically other politics might become possible.

This is when the third important encounter takes place. Her politics does have a significant impact on one man in particular: Juan. Going unnoticed cannot restore the conditions of possibility for a radically democratic politics of dissent in the open if it were to only guarantee potentiality for the one who goes unnoticed; this would be to follow the model of Pasternak or to accept Konsideransky’s *yomismo* literally. As the townspeople seek the guidance of the priest and then eventually turn on Linke, she and Juan engage in a different sort of relationship. They have a long, meandering conversation in which he at first attempts to domesticate her, to end the suffering he assumes to be the result “de su soledad, de su abandono” (98). However, he listens to her reaction: “No, Juan, yo no sufro” (98). She explains that she does not desire to go back to her previous life, to be subjected once more to a man who makes decisions for her.

After their romantic encounter, Juan is attacked by the mob, and the entire town is about to catch fire as the flames spread. With the flickering firelight threatening them from one side and
the murderous townspeople from the other, in his dying moments Juan may not completely understand Linke’s intentions or actions; he never truly solves the enigma of her nude body. However, her presence has caused a sudden change for him, finally allowing her to be as she now is, as she has chosen to be. He says to her: “Tú, yo, nosotros … La voz había surgido de la nada. Quedaba suspendida en el aire con la misma ingravidez de una pluma, una hoja” (114). In a dialogue that foreshadows the ethical encounters I analyze in the final chapters, despite the untraversable distance between them, this “nosotros” that barely forms from their attempted dialogue hangs softly in the air. Juan insists that Linke run away and leave his dying body behind; he wants the last thing he sees to be the backs of her legs as she tries to escape the mob. Juan attempts to engage her on her own terms, and his only demand is for her “caminar, irse” (118). As she leaves, she reflects on her situation: “No habría futuro para el amor, pensó, apenas si un breve presente, tan precario como intenso” (118). Their encounter lasted no longer than the flash of a present that exposed her to him. By engaging her in dialogue, he also steps out of his habits and routines; in the end, he only insists that she continue along her errant path, that she not abandon this politics. Juan is the only person in this narrative that encourages her to keep walking along her errant path, to continue the politics of going unnoticed, and to produce future openings in other unexplored territories.

This is not a huge success given that both Linke and Juan die, but she did achieve a first, rough start for the arduous task of restoring her potentiality and opening a space for dissent and disagreement where it had been previously blocked. This politics, difficult as it is to carry out alone, becomes incredibly fraught with tensions and literal threats as those who go unnoticed step out of their threshold and become perceived by a broader community. What I have mapped in this chapter have only been the rough starts toward a politics that becomes possible by going unnoticed. The failures of those who go unnoticed to revolutionize an entire society, to ensure radically democratic institutions, should not erase the real impact that they leave in their wake. Linke’s nude body had a profound, transformative effect on at least one other person. It may only be a small change in a complex society governed by massive institutions, but it is a change that affects
another human being. She has created a slightly better situation for one person, even if this small, temporary intervention did not incite a structural revolution.

Of the political gestures I have analyzed to this point, Linke exemplifies the importance of stepping out from thresholds in which one’s actions go unnoticed. The politics of going unnoticed can be successful only insofar as it deactivates the divisive machines that erect partitions between individuals and throughout communities. Once a barrier has been rendered inoperative, those who go unnoticed will need to step out of their thresholds and be perceived by others. Casey’s exile and Linke’s death warn of the real dangers of engaging in a politics of dissent and disagreement. However, in the following chapters, I analyze the aesthetics and ethics of this politics that opens an errant path for engaging with other individuals and for constructing new forms of community between them. The aesthetics of writing in plain sight attempts to render inoperative narratives founded on essentialist fictions about the need to purify the body politic from the radical other, whereas the ethics of being perceived then engages that other in an open, unending dialogue that recasts the enemy as an adversary to be included in the political community. Deactivating these divisive machines may be an endless, arduous task, but the aesthetics and ethics that I derive from the politics of going unnoticed provide a series of tools for breaking open these partitions wherever they may be built.