Arteletra

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Chapter Two

On Going Unnoticed

The anonymous narrator of Calvert Casey’s “Notas de un simulador” (1969) states the need to research abandoned, fragmentary, and almost unheard words, phrases, and texts:

Debidamente investigadas, una frase, una palabra oídas al pasar, una carta abandonada sobre una mesa o caída de un bolsillo, fragmentos de la conversación escuchada en el breve trayecto de un tranvía, un cruce en las líneas telefónicas, pueden darnos espléndidas claves, tantos son los que sufren desatendidos. (51–52)

These bits of language slip in and out of perception as they get left behind or lost; they circulate briefly in public and private conversations but are of little importance to the passers-by who barely hear them. The happenstance interlocutors of these disconnected, fleeting, and untimely ideas and conversations pay little attention to them. As potential witnesses, perhaps they have arrived too early or too late to the conversation of which they are not a part, or perhaps they only notice their seemingly quotidian, unremarkable aspects and ignore them. For any number of reasons such remarks are left unattended, and anything they might communicate goes unnoticed.

For my purposes, it is necessary to avoid jumping to the well-worn argument that what is needed is simply to make these texts heard and visible, to restore them to some knowable, transparent, or transcendental realm. Rather, these fragmented texts belong to the everyday, to the quotidian practices and discourses overlooked by totalizing institutions while also evading, and possibly deactivating, their disciplinary organization. Everyday practices, as de Certeau argues, have “a certain strangeness that does not surface,
or whose surface is only its upper limit, outlining itself against the visible” (93). Locating and analyzing these practices is not so simple, because what goes unnoticed is not always a complete and coherent text, discourse, or subject waiting in the shadows for a spotlight to pass by, illuminate it, and render it intelligible within governing institutions and social practices. Those who go unnoticed often desire or need to evade the tools of surveillance; in fact, their well-being and survival may depend upon it.

Amid the Swirling Lights and Shadows

Casey’s narrator embodies the characteristics of these abandoned voices as he stumbles across the swirling lights and shadows of the city at night. Narrated in the first person, he recounts his surreptitious excursions. He provides palliative care to the dying, whether they be homeless or abandoned in a hospital, and he observes them in their last moments, taking great care to remember and narrate their passage from life into death. To avoid public suspicion, he tries to go unnoticed as he approaches these other abandoned characters he finds in the shadows. In section XVI, the narrator returns to his apartment, unsure how to react to the hostility of a man and woman who see him in a plaza taking care of a dying, young black man. They suspect this outsider of committing unseemly acts. Toward the end of the story, the narrator will be imprisoned for murder, because he was the unknown stranger last seen with this man and other dying people just before their death. His guilt or innocence cannot be confirmed in this first-person text, but the narrator has written this story from his jail cell as an attempt to set the record straight.

Going unnoticed, according to the narrator’s version of the story, is not a matter of seeking isolation, but rather of stealth and camouflage, of hiding and writing in plain sight so that he may engage with these abandoned, sick, and dying people. Before his arrest, he explains how the music from the street fair outside his building seeps into his apartment, distracting him. Instead of joining the crowd, he climbs to the roof terrace where the noise from the fair did not reach: “Me sentí rodeado de silencio, calmado por la brisa apacible que venía del lado de la bahía” (“Notas” 80). The narrator, while hopping from one roof terrace to another and walking through the darkened outdoor
corridors of neighboring homes, moves cautiously across and between lit spaces. In a sense, he attempts to step out of focus. He writes of this play of light and shadow not as a classic chiaroscuro with sharp divisions, but as a swirling of various colors, shades, and intensities through which he passes: “una luz sucia”; “la oscuridad era casi completa”; “una luz amarillenta me tiñó las manos”; “un fulgor remoto”; “un brillo pálido” (80). In these spaces, the lights are faded and distant. They cannot fully illuminate his body. They only offer quick glimpses as the lights flash across him.

Also mixing with these shadows and lights are sounds and silences that simultaneously flow through these spaces. The tranquil silence with which the scene begins is temporary, and the narrator moves in and out of earshot of other sounds: “el inesperado silencio” when the fair music suddenly stops; “el lejano clamor de la ciudad”; “Del pozo subían voces”; “Alguien tosió con una tos dura, una voz cantó; oí risas, más voces” (80). At this stage, he does not engage other people in dialogue; instead, silence interrupts the night, and within it echo bits of unintelligible sounds from distant people. The narrator who goes unnoticed clumsily navigates a complex, shifting field of lights and shadows and of voices, noises, and silences. He jumps over low walls that separate connected roof terraces, but he never passes from one clearly defined space of darkness, invisibility, or silence into another clearly defined space of light, visibility, and voice. Such sharply demarcated zones of perception are not to be found in this narrative and, in general, do not appear in Casey's fragmented writings. It is within such threshold spaces that he and others go unnoticed.

In all of the texts under consideration in this book, the underlying connection is the narration of a desire, attempt, or inadvertent experience of going unnoticed. This phrase, “going unnoticed,” requires some pause in order to unravel the various forms it may take. By no means does going unnoticed require concealment or stasis. One may just as easily go unnoticed sitting alone in the middle of the woods or a desert as walking anonymously through a crowded, urban setting. Neither an origin nor a destination, it is a temporary state wherein one is not perceived or paid much attention by others, and this state can and will come to an end. Insofar as the “going” of the phrase “going unnoticed” necessitates some sort of spatiotemporal movement or duration, it names a process, a becoming, and a lapse of time during which a subject
is not noticed and accrues potential energy. Even when this state comes to an end at a given point in time and space, the fact that one went unnoticed remains nonetheless significant, because the potential energy previously stored can be released upon emerging from this state.

Going unnoticed involves moving in such a manner as to be unobserved or overlooked by potential spectators who could perceive the unnoticed body or discourse if they were located in a different threshold. Going unnoticed occurs in the threshold between perception and imperception. By going unnoticed, one moves through what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as “zones of indiscernibility” in which only certain movements will be perceived while others will remain unobserved (280). The perception of movement is always dependent upon the viewer’s position in relation to the movement or rest of others: “Movements, becomings, in other words, pure relations of speed and slowness, pure affects, are below and above the threshold of perception” (281). Movement is only perceptible from a specific threshold, from a position relative to that which is moving. Put in simpler terms, consider the following: while sitting on a moving train, the other passengers do not appear to be moving in relation to me, yet to someone standing on the station platform or watching the train from outside, all of the passengers including myself inside the train appear to be moving in relation to that viewer. As such, to perceive the movement of a body one must be situated in an adequate threshold of perception.

The connection between movement and perception is also, for Deleuze and Guattari, a matter of becoming. Avoiding metaphysical postulations about being, they define “becoming” as that which concerns the immanent relations of alliances that are set in non-linear motion within rhizomes:

Becoming is a rhizome, not a classificatory or genealogical tree. Becoming is certainly not imitating, or identifying with something; neither is it regressing-progressing; neither is it corresponding, establishing corresponding relations; neither is it producing, producing a filiation or producing through filiation. Becoming is a verb with a consistency all its own; it does not reduce to, or lead back to, “appearing,” “being,” “equaling,” or “producing.” (239)
On Going Unnoticed

In my analysis, the process of going unnoticed is not a taxonomy; it refuses all rigid classification for establishing family ties, whether biological or fictional, as in the case of the lettered intellectuals of the Sixties in Latin America. Instead, going unnoticed is a process of becoming, of deactivating, and of opening up of those exclusive categories that operate through the logic of surveillance within the generalized state of exception to order and control bodies under the guise of bringing visibility and clarity to all.

Furthermore, going unnoticed cannot be reduced to imitation. Those engaging in this practice do not have an end goal of becoming like or becoming identical to something else, since at that point they would cease becoming and solidify into being or dissolve into a visible identity group that, although it may make some demands, can and will be co-opted by the state and the market. In contrast, going unnoticed necessitates the continuation of this movement that evades the stasis of identification. Once one stops moving, the thresholds of perception change immediately; one stops going unnoticed and can be perceived as similar or identical to something else, whether it be a friend or an enemy.

Going unnoticed is moving perpetually with no a priori end or goal in sight, with no particular destination, transformation, transcendence, or telos. There are no guarantees about where these errant trajectories may lead, nor will those who traverse them be sheltered from violence, but those who go unnoticed do acquire the potential to disrupt and render inoperative the machines that continually partition humanity into opposing categories.

Moreover, there is no mask, no persona, and no pseudonym presented to a public as a purposefully distorted representation of one’s identity behind which one goes unnoticed. Whereas pseudonyms and masks create an epistemological barrier by blocking access to knowledge or veiling truths about one’s identity, the process of going unnoticed does not attempt to distort reality in favor of a falsehood, a lie, or a myth. What goes unnoticed is the act, the subject, or the event itself presented or represented as itself, even though no one pays attention to its taking place or to its existence.

Finally, those who go unnoticed are corporeal subjects, not ghosts or disembodied spirits who glide invisibly through spaces; they have bodies that interact with the swirling lights and shadows, the voices and silences, and the other human beings who surround
them. Going unnoticed is a material practice. Their physical bodies are visible in the sense that they are capable of being seen, and all of those who go unnoticed will be perceived eventually. Yet, they manage to create a temporary state during which little public light is shone on their bodies. When they pass by others, no one pays attention. When they speak out, everyone happens to ignore their voice. Still, they continue to move about and stumble into others with whom they can engage in dialogue along the way.

More than a description of the place of these intellectuals and their written works in the political debates and cultural markets of the Sixties—although it is inseparable from these positions—going unnoticed involves an intentional desire on the part of their fictional characters to stay out of the public spotlight. These often anonymous protagonists actively seek out shelters and refuges, or attempt to hide and write in plain sight and to pass for something unworthy of further attention, albeit without masquerading as something or somebody else. This active gesture of going unnoticed is what connects the texts here and will be the primary focus of my analysis on the politics, aesthetics, and ethics of going unnoticed as I bring these authors into a dialogue that engages with and simultaneously exceeds their regional, national, and temporal contexts.

Two Houses

To return to the example with which I began this section, the anonymous narrator in Casey’s “Notas de un simulador” stumbles across the lights and shadows, the sounds, noises, and silences of his city. As Florence Olivier explains, the entire narrative is structured around a spatial paradox between the “carácter abierto del espacio urbano” and “la abundancia de espacios cerrados” through which “la libre circulación y el confinamiento acaban por ser equivalentes” (214). Navigating this paradoxical space, opening thresholds between circulation and confinement, Casey’s narrator manages to go unnoticed. The untimeliness of his actions, his evasion of the popular street fair, is precisely what allows him to open an errant itinerary within the same space but from a different threshold of perception. At first, his untimely actions go unnoticed by his peers, and he becomes capable of perceiving
and engaging with others who have been abandoned in the nearby darkness where they struggle to communicate and survive.

While walking in the shadows near a neighbor's house, Casey's narrator stumbles across “una luz potente” coming from a bedroom ("Notas" 81). Under that light, an unexpected exchange takes place as the anonymous narrator notices a set of anonymous eyes noticing him. A sort of unequal symmetry takes place along the narrator's errant line of flight through the city:

Por el hueco abierto que remataba la ventana, unos ojos me miraban fíjamente. Me desplacé un poco para observar mejor el interior. La mirada me siguió hasta que desapareci de su campo de visión, para volver a desplazarme conmigo cuando volví a entrar en él. Las sábanas ocultaban unos pies. El resto de la casa, a oscuras, permanecía en silencio. Volví a mirar los ojos abiertos bajo los párpados inmóviles. (81)

In their happenstance encounter, the narrator pauses along his errant itinerary. His otherwise unnoticed body steps in and out of the tiny threshold from which this other set of eyes can see him. He tries out a few different angles to remain unnoticed while peering into this house, but those eyes continue to find him as well.

What interests me is to read the house in Casey's story, which he wrote from exile after having worked for Casa de las Américas, in comparison to the metaphorical house that names that institution and its eponymous cultural journal and to the optical regime those institutions supported. In Cuba in the Sixties, Casa de las Américas played an important role in institutionalizing revolutionary discourses, which required constant intellectual reflection and participation. In Fulguración del espacio, Quintero-Herencia analyzes this journal and claims: “El poder institucional revolucionario armará una suerte de régimen óptico que llevará a cabo toda una peculiar espacialización del orden de lo real en la isla” (18). This optical regime is one that institutes specific “relatos morales e históricos” to which all those who appear under the revolution's all-pervading and supposedly all-seeing light must subscribe (18). This is to say that the idea of a Latin American “family” and homogenous group of intellectuals living in the “House of the Americas” is an invasive, even militarized demand inscribed within the logic of surveillance that is placed on those subjects
who “siempre se sabrán tocados por esta luz y obligados a conti-
uñas definiciones y genuflexiones identitarias” (19). In retrospect,
Quintero-Herencia cautions that this inward gaze and search for
regional homogeneity should not be overemphasized. These highly
visible spaces, debates, and discourses are never as monumental
and homogenous as they purport to be; rather, the plurality of
such an event is often forcibly homogenized and institutionalized
under the harsh spotlight guided from a hegemonic point of view.

The house in Casey’s story illuminates this other anonymous
body with a harsh light; from this perfectly visible room, where
everything can be seen, a set of eyes follow and keep watch over
Casey’s narrator. However, the fully visible person watching the nar-
rator is barely mobile; in fact, the narrator’s description of the other
person’s body closely resembles that of the other inanimate objects
in the room. Under immobile lids, his eyes are practically dead,
and as a reader, I wonder whether this person is even alive. He is
not dead, but neither is he in a position to control other bodies
and issue moral demands from within this house. His own surveil-
lance power is severely curbed; he barely catches a few glimpses
of the narrator when he steps in front of the window for a few
seconds. As the only visible body in the only brightly lit room, the
supposedly empowering lights of this house serve a disciplinary
task—confining this anonymous man in his bed. The narrator
continues along his errant route, stumbles, and once more, with-
out consciously intending to return to this spot, finds himself
seeing those eyes from the house: “Cuando volví a asomarme al
patio, tropecé otra vez con la mirada inmóvil bajo la luz cegadora”
(“Notas” 82). The house’s all-pervasive light immobilizes the fully
visible subject, tucking him in a bed in order to keep vigil over his
actions. Paradoxically, he is included under the blinding lights of
the revolutionary house—of the Casa de las Américas—but there
he is abandoned, left completely alone, because the exact position
of his fully illuminated, immobile, and impotent body is now
known at all times.

Meanwhile, the narrator continues to go unnoticed, but he
never locates a true outside of this house. He accidentally returns
to it after walking along his errant path through the swirling
lights and shadows. However, it is his errant itinerary that allows
him to see this house and its lights from a different perspective
and to slip out of its disciplinary gaze, albeit temporarily. More
important than this degree of agency or mobility that he gains by going unnoticed, Casey’s narrator makes the first step toward the type of ethical exchange that I detail in the final chapter. Over the next day or so, the narrator intentionally returns and exchanges glances with this person whose eyes ultimately “parpardearon con un saludo de despedida” (84). The narrator takes great care to go unnoticed by anyone else while he observes this fully illuminated, yet abandoned, person’s last days in silent companionship. Though the narrator began by wandering around in the dark in order to escape the racket of the street fair and the hostility of his neighbors, he becomes capable of peering into the shadows and bearing witness to this lonely, dying person’s last moments. He goes unnoticed and unintentionally begins to notice those who have been abandoned by, though not excluded from, the revolutionary house. The narrator briefly steps out of his threshold of imperception in order to accompany this other person. Though Casey’s narrator and this dying man only exchange silent glances, others who go unnoticed will begin the even more difficult process of throwing these disciplinary institutions into complete disarray in order to deactivate their totalizing control.