

*This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in the Journal of Latin American*

*Cultural Studies on 29 March 2016, available online:*

*<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13569325.2016.1148017>*

Acting across Violence:

H.I.J.O.S., Practices of Trans-Action, and Biopoetics in Post-Dictatorship Argentina

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**Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Tibi Galis, Deborah Kapchan, Ann Pellegrini, Diana Taylor, and *todos mis amigos argentinos* for their suggestions and support in the development of this work.

## Acting across Violence:

### H.I.J.O.S., Practices of Trans-Action, and Biopoetics in Post-Dictatorship Argentina

From 1976 to 1983, the people of Argentina lived under one of the most repressive and violent military dictatorships of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Over a seven-year period, the right-wing military junta that seized power in March 1976 carried out its *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* (Process of National Reorganization), colloquially known as *El Proceso* (The Process), which sought to eliminate everyone deemed to be a subversive, leftist element across the country. This effort led to the torture, death, and disappearance of some 30,000 Argentinean citizens who were kidnapped by the military police and taken to clandestine detention centers spread all across the country. When the families of victims went to the state to find out what happened to their relatives, they would discover that all evidence of their family members' lives had been completely erased; the government acted as if these *desaparecidos* (disappeared persons) had never existed to begin with.

Just like in most totalitarian regimes, during Argentina's last military dictatorship, known by many outside of the country as 'The Dirty War,'<sup>1</sup> the population lived within a tightly-controlled environment managed largely by fear. As Diana Taylor writes of the Argentinean dictatorship, 'A new sense of communal identity was simultaneously forged and undone around a shared terror' (1997: 98). The junta created this terror through the way they performed their violence. One could be deemed a subversive merely because one owned a copy of a certain book or wore one's hair too long. Anyone had the ability to report suspected subversion to the authorities, even without real evidence to substantiate such claims; this fact led to a pervasive environment of distrust due to what Hannah Arendt has called 'the ubiquity of the informer,' an overwhelming sense of suspicion and anxiety that is present in most repressive regimes (1970: 55). Furthermore, the junta would often kidnap people in broad daylight for everyone to see. They purposefully made the violence visible so that the act of kidnapping an individual would serve to terrorize an entire population. Observers

would be forced to watch, yet pretend not to see due to their inability to do anything to stop the violence and their fear of being disappeared themselves. This process of self-blinding, which Taylor has called ‘percepticide,’ is what helped ‘to atomize the victimized population and to preclude the possibility of solidarity and mobilization’ (Taylor 1997: 123-25). If, as Arendt argues, power can only emerge when a group of people act in concert and without the use of physical force (1970: 44), the junta’s central objective was to prevent such concerted action by creating a population of completely atomized citizens, too fearful of each other to mount any form of communal resistance.

While the junta was largely successful in initiating and sustaining an affective environment of terror, it did not succeed completely in keeping citizens from organizing and mobilizing against it, exemplified most clearly in the famed human rights group the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* (Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo). After the regime finally fell in 1983 and the country returned to democracy under the presidency of Raul Alfonsín, the Madres continued their work, demanding that the state answer for its past crimes through means of memory, truth, and justice. The newly-established democratic government was unstable, however, and felt that the only way to keep the fragile peace with the military was to promote a national policy of reconciliation—a policy that ultimately meant complete impunity for the perpetrators of this Argentinean genocide. By 1986, the passage of several laws—*La Ley de Obediencia Debida* (The Law of Due Obedience), which made it illegal to prosecute a military officer for following orders, and *La Ley de Punto Final* (The Law of Full Stop), which set a date beyond which no legal cases could be brought against the military—made the prosecution of perpetrators a virtual impossibility. The Madres, along with many other groups, continued their work, calling for justice—not only in the form of punishment of perpetrators, but also social and economic justice for the whole of Argentina. When the state continued with its national policy of forgetting and an expansion of the neoliberal economic regime under the presidency of Carlos

Menem, however, a new organization emerged in the spring of 1995 with a related mission to the Madres, but with an entirely novel means of achieving it.

*H.I.J.O.S.*, an acronym for ‘*Hijos y hijas por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio*,’ or ‘Sons and daughters for Identity and Justice against Forgetting and Silence,’ was formed in the city of Córdoba during Easter week of 1995 by a group of about 70 young adults whose parents were disappeared during the dictatorship. Within a few months the organization expanded to some 350 members in 14 sites throughout Argentina (Calandra 2004: 51). As the organization quickly grew, it started to take on multiple projects, each of which responded to their three-prong cry for truth, memory, and justice.

*H.I.J.O.S.* approached their mammoth task by sub-organizing into numerous committees, each of which responded to a specific mission of the organization (Calandra 2004). For instance, the *Comisión Identidad*, or Identity Committee, worked to uncover the truth of those who were disappeared and the causes for which they fought, while the *Comisión Arte y Política*, or Art and Politics Committee, worked to find alternative, artistic ways for spreading the message of the group. But perhaps the most visible and well-known committee of *H.I.J.O.S.* was the *Comisión Escrache*, which ultimately codified a completely novel mode of political protest, activism, and representation that would contribute greatly to a sea change in the way both the people and the government of Argentina related to its past. In the remainder of this article, I will expand on current literature on the *escraches* of *H.I.J.O.S.* (Kaiser 2002; Taylor 2002; Benegas 2011; Sosa 2013, 2014) to demonstrate three specific things that the *escraches*—as an example of a broader subset of group, embodied practices—have done and can do when it comes to the collective processing of past violence: they can disorient and reorient existing structures, including bodies, spaces, and power relations; they can create intersections of multiple temporalities, which work towards performing a

specific vision of the future; and they can constitute new collectivities around the phenomenon of shared affect.

*Escrache* is the unique form of public activism developed by H.I.J.O.S. to respond specifically to the lack of formal justice and punishment for former perpetrators of torture, detainment, and genocide during the military dictatorship of the '70s and '80s. The word *escrache* comes from the slang verb *escrachar*, when means to uncover or to bring something to light. The goal of the *escraches* of H.I.J.O.S. was to do just that: to make the public aware of the unpunished perpetrators who were living amongst them and, in lieu of the formal punishment that the state was unwilling to execute, to levy a different type of justice that they called a *condena social*, or a social sentence.

The *escrache* itself was a loud, theatrical, and spectacular event. Hundreds, sometimes thousands of people would gather at a central meeting place, from which they marched through the neighborhood streets, playing music, singing songs, and chanting political statements, until they reached the home of an unpunished perpetrator. At the home, the music and chanting continued. They often performed whimsical or ironic acts; for instance, at the 2002 *escrache* of Luis Donocik, participants dangled pizza boxes on fishing poles over the barricades guarding the house while chanting to the perpetrator, 'You would kill your mother for a pizza.' During many of the *escraches*, H.I.J.O.S. was joined by the theater group *Etcetera...*, which would perform satirical, morbidly comic dumb shows of the crimes committed by the perpetrator being protested. Finally, some leaders of H.I.J.O.S. would deliver a speech, articulating the crimes of the perpetrator and announcing his social sentence. Meanwhile, participants marked the house with brightly-colored paint that let everyone know that a murderer lived in that place. By the end of the *escrache*, the house would be spattered with red splotches from the paint-filled eggs that had been thrown at the façade, and the street or sidewalk in front of the house would be covered with a statement like, 'AQUÍ SE ESCONDE GENOCIDA SUELTO,' or 'Here hides a free *genocidaire*.' After all of this, the

participants marched away from the perpetrator's home, leaving the neighborhood to act upon this new knowledge they had received.

While the *escrache* has its place in the broader context of global social movements (Tilly 2006; Tilly and Wood 2009) and the more specific context of Latin American political protest (O'Donnell 1999; Eckstein 2001; Hershberg and Rosen 2006; Lessa and Druliolle 2011), it is also unique in a number of ways, especially in how it fits into the narrative of violence, memory, truth, and justice as it relates to Argentina. Current studies of genocide and state-sponsored terror understand these violent phenomena not as events—the mass killing of individuals—but as long-term social processes that begin with much smaller steps, and that progress step-by-step towards mass killing (Stanton 1996, 2008). The earlier stages that occur before the perpetration of any actual physical violence contribute to the creation of an affective environment that allows for the level of social opposition towards an othered group that is needed to try to eliminate that group altogether. Just as the steps leading up to mass killing are numerous and gradual, I argue that one cannot think of the endpoint of genocidal violence and state terror as being synonymous with the endpoint of physical violence or killing. The affective violence and social oppositional forces that allow for the physical violence in the first place remain present in a society long after the physical violence has ended. For instance, the sort of rabid anti-Semitism that allowed for the murder of roughly 6 million European Jews in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century did not simply vanish after the end of World War II; while the murder of Jews may have ceased, this social, affective violence is present to this day in some sectors of European society. This enduring nature of the social and affective violence can be seen in every case of genocide and mass atrocity. To understand this conception of genocidal violence as an enduring force that includes but also exceeds the physical, I think with the term *resonant violence* (Whigham 2014, 2015), which denotes the affective quality of large-scale violence that can begin before any physical violence breaks out and that continues to perform—to resonate—across

populations long after the physical violence has ended. This resonant violence, if not acknowledged and addressed, can continue to emerge through instances of physical, social, and economic violence, including the re-emergence of killing and mass atrocity.

A significant literature exists regarding trauma in relation to survivors of genocide and how that trauma is processed through modes of discourse, like victim testimony (Felman and Laub 1992; Caruth 1995, 1996; Stier 2003), and documentation, like written works and the visual arts (LaCapra 1998; Hirsch 1997, 2012). The *escrache* represents a mode of responding to resonant violence that is primarily characterized not by the verbal or the archival, but by the positioning of the human body in public space with other human bodies. As such, the *escrache* is an example of what I call a co-embodied practice (Whigham 2014, 2015), the term I use to describe any embodied act performed by a group of people acting in concert and in public space. There are many different types of co-embodied practices, and they are certainly not all positive. For instance, mass killing or genocide itself can be seen as a co-embodied practice—a group of people or a state acting with their bodies and in concert towards a shared goal of eliminating a group of individuals. But while some co-embodied practices are destructive, they can also be extremely productive in nature. The *escrache* is an example of such a practice.

Certain acts of co-embodied practice have spontaneously emerged across numerous cultural contexts with a history of state violence, manifesting in a number of ways, but each contributing to a shared goal of processing or transforming this violence into new forms of agency and power. The *escrache* represents a specific subset of these co-embodied practices that I call *co-embodied practices of trans-action*. This denomination is a broad category that I am using to provide a lens through which to view certain practices that share certain characteristics. I use the neologism *trans-action* to emphasize two aspects of these practices. First, through the ways that they move across, beyond, and through literal and figurative space, these practices exemplify all the directionality and intentionality implied

through the Latin prefix *trans-*. Practices of *trans-action* do not place primary focus on the occupation of a certain, contained space; rather, they are more concerned with migration or with the crossing of large spaces, say a city or even a country. They also cross less literal spaces, like generations or time—a point to which I will return later. Second, as embodied practices that manifest the full political potentiality of their participants, these practices exemplify the performance of *action*, in the way Hannah Arendt conceptualized the term in *The Human Condition* (1958). As opposed to *labor*—which Arendt sees as the biological activity of the body to maintain life—and *work*—which she sees as the activity of humankind towards the creation of material objects—Arendt describes *action* as all the activity that happens through the interaction of human beings, which highlights their plurality and which constitutes them as political, social beings. According to Arendt (1970), it is from the action of a group of beings working *in concert* that all true power emerges. The *escraches* of H.I.J.O.S., with their transitory focus on multiple sites within neighborhoods and cities, the communal engagement involved in their preparation, and H.I.J.O.S.’s own theoretical conceptualization of their specific form of activism, offer a prime example of practices of *trans-action*.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the prefix *trans-* refers to any number of directionalities. It comes ‘with the sense “across, through, over, to or on the other side of, beyond, outside of, from one place, person thing, or state to another.”’ Co-embodied practices of *trans-action*, then, are group actions that represent any or all of these directionalities. The *trans-* nature of the *escrache* is made manifest in a vast number of ways. First, the *escrache* is an example of a practice in *transit*. It crosses space because it is delocalized. As one *bija* has said, “Our [space] is...the entire country! Indeed, ours is not a fixed space...the space of the *escraches* is a mobile space, a space that is created every time that one wants to go make the *escraches*”<sup>2</sup> (Qtd. in Calandra 2004: 150). Unlike, for instance, the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, who are so associated with the occupation



of a single space that it appears in the name of the group, H.I.J.O.S. garnered a sense of power through its mobility. While each individual *escrache* was fixated on a specific site—namely, the house or apartment of a former perpetrator—this speaker argues that “the space of the *escraches* is a mobile space.” Despite the fact that every *escrache* focused on one dwelling, the *escrache* as a phenomenon was always moving and never settling down. Indeed, it generated part of its power from this restlessness, as former perpetrators who had not yet faced the social condemnation of an *escrache* never knew when their day might come.

More concretely, however, it is a practice in transit because participants of the *escrache* literally traveled through the streets of their city to perform this political action and to reach the house of the *escrachado*, the perpetrator against whom the *escrache* was being directed. These acts of crossing the city worked towards reshaping and realigning the bodies of individuals, as well as the body politic. In *Queer Phenomenology*, British-Australian scholar Sara Ahmed pulls from the language and theories of phenomenology to theorize how social norms are constructed and perpetuated and how collectivities are formed around these norms. Ahmed understands the body as an entity that is orientated in specific ways—both *within* spaces and *towards* certain objects. In most cases, the body being directed is the collective social body, and this body ‘gets directed in some ways more than others’ (Ahmed 2006: 15). Ahmed understands social normativity as the result of multiple bodies following the same path, all the time reproducing the lines of that path, more firmly demarcating that path as the ‘right’ one, the one of least resistance (ibid.: 17). Not all bodies choose to stay ‘in line,’ however, and when the body deviates from the normative path, it helps to produce alternative lines of possibility and new potential modes of being (ibid.: 20).

H.I.J.O.S. emerged from a political environment that had normalized the ‘lines’ of forgetting and silence; as citizens were oriented towards the future in a way that did not allow them to look back at the crimes of the past, the politics of impunity and reconciliation were coming to be taken

for granted or naturalized. Through their performances of the *escrache*, H.I.J.O.S. veered off of these lines endorsed by the state, and asked others to follow them. Susana Kaiser (2002) supports this assertion in her own research on the *escrache* when she writes, “*Escraches* have disrupted the process of ‘normalization’ of living with major criminals by telling people: ‘Torturers and assassins surround you. How are you going to react to this horror?’” (511). Diego Benegas (2011) puts it another way by drawing on Pierre Bourdieu to argue that the *escraches* are an “identitarian intervention” that work to alter a social *habitus* or disposition to the past (21). Ahmed writes, ‘Deviation leaves its own marks on the ground, which can even help generate alternative lines, which cross the ground in unexpected ways’ (ibid.: 20). For H.I.J.O.S., these lines led straight to the door of the free perpetrators, where the activist group continued the work of forging a new path for Argentinean society.

Ahmed writes that orientation is ‘about making the strange familiar’ (ibid.: 11). H.I.J.O.S. saw that the people of post-dictatorship Argentina had been orientated in specific ways to make the strangeness of having kidnappers, torturers, and murderers living amongst them, unpunished, seem normal or acceptable. The *escraches*, then, served as a disorienting tool that brought to the foreground what the government wished to keep in the background (ibid.: 31)—namely, the presence of these criminals living largely in anonymity next door to the population they had terrorized only 15 years prior. The participants in the *escraches* initiated this disorientation and the disruption of social norms by literally taking control of the streets—the streets that had been so tightly controlled by the state under military rule—and moving through them, playing music, singing songs, chanting. Their goal was to let all of the neighbors know of their own presence and the presence of these perpetrators. Consequently, the *escraches* bestowed on the citizens a new sense of agency, alerting them that they did not have to accept the state’s policy of reconciliation and impunity for these criminals. Ahmed writes, ‘Migration could be described as a process of

disorientation and reorientation: as bodies ‘move away’ as well as ‘arrive,’ as they reinhabit spaces’ (ibid.: 9). The migration of H.I.J.O.S. through the city not only disoriented, then, but also reoriented people towards what was being lost or denied. ‘Sons and Daughters *for* Identity and Justice *against* Forgetting and Silence’: the name of the group has within it both the negative—what they are disorienting from—and the positive—what they are reorienting towards. Unlike some political protests, then, the *escraches* were quite clear about their goals, not only offering a shared rejection of the status quo, but also offering new directions towards which ‘we’ should collectively head.

An *escrache* was never a spontaneous event; it was deeply planned and meticulously organized. Preparation began with the ‘*busqueda de información*,’ or ‘search for information,’ during which H.I.J.O.S. would search archives and interview journalists and other knowledgeable parties to find where the perpetrators lived and to confirm the crimes they committed (Ana Tello, Personal Interview, 8 August 2013; Sofia Caravelos, Personal Interview, 26 July 2013). Roughly one to one-and-a-half months before the public event, members of H.I.J.O.S. would go into the neighborhood of the chosen perpetrator, usually marking their entrance with a mural or some graffiti to make everyone aware that an *escrache* was coming. Committee members crossed the neighborhood by going door-to-door, explaining to the neighbors who the perpetrator was, where he lived, and what he had done. They posted stickers and signs throughout the neighborhood that listed the perpetrator’s name, address, and telephone number (Colectivo Situaciones 2002: ‘Documento de la Comisión de *escrache* de H.I.J.O.S., Noviembre de 2001’). They warned passersby how close they were to the perpetrator’s home by posting fake traffic signs throughout the neighborhood that featured statements like: ‘Attention! Murderer at 500 meters!’ (Calandra 2004: 149). In all of these ways, participants crossed the neighborhood as they cultivated potential participants in the climactic event of the *escrache*.

Aside from the literal crossing of the city to distribute information or to make the actual denunciation of the perpetrator, *escraches* crossed in many other ways. They were practices of *trasection*—a word that denotes not only the crossing of space, but the dividing of space, as well. Through their extensive preparatory work, H.I.J.O.S. was actually dividing the neighborhood in a number of ways, and these acts of division can all be seen in the documentary film, *H.I.J.O.S.: Mesa de Escrache*, which documents the entire process of planning and performing the *escrache* against Luis Donocik in 2002. First, H.I.J.O.S. was dividing those who supported their work from those who did not. The film shows young, twenty-something members of H.I.J.O.S. approaching numerous people in the neighborhood, most of whom are middle-aged or elderly. When they hear that they are living next to this free perpetrator, the responses of these passersby range from complete support of the group, as listeners commit to attending the *escrache*, to complete debasement, as they tell the young activists that their work is either useless—as these people will never be punished—or the stuff of childish stupidity.

One former participant in the *escraches* with whom I spoke, Federico Zuckerfeld, describes this process of dividing the neighborhood as an essential component of the *escrache*. In one conversation he said, “The *escrache* has the quality, the interesting quality, of perturbing, disturbing the society....Because you are with it or against it” (Personal Interview, 14 August 2013). For Zuckerfeld, the *escrache* purposefully created a binary in the neighborhood, forcing people to decide how they would align themselves. This binary actually mirrored the binary logic of the former military dictatorship. In *Poder y desaparición*, Pilar Calveiro, an Argentinean scholar who is also a survivor of several concentration camps during the dictatorship, writes, “Totalitarian logics are binary logics that conceive of the world as *two large opposing camps*: theirs and the others’ (2008, 88, original emphasis). Just as the violence of the dictatorship was characterized by the sort of “us-them thinking” (Waller 2007) that allowed for a simplification of the world, which in turn allowed for the

clear identification of ‘the enemy,’ H.I.J.O.S. worked to separate those who supported the *escrache*—and consequently those who supported justice for past crimes—from those who did not. There is a difference here, however, which shows how the binary logic that H.I.J.O.S. used differed from that of the perpetrators. Calveiro writes, “The reduction of reality to two grand sphere hopes finally for the elimination of differences and the *imposition of a unique and total reality* represented by a strong nucleus of power, the State’ (2008, 88, original emphasis). Whereas the binary logic of the perpetrators worked to support the centralized power of an authoritarian state, H.I.J.O.S. worked to empower the people themselves, thus creating a new source of power that might influence the state to act differently.

To understand the type of power that was generated by the *escrache*—and, it should be said, by any number of other forms of political protest or collective action—it is useful to note that Spanish, like most other Latinate languages, has two different words for power: *poder* and *potencia*. The distinction between these two words has been well-articulated and highlighted by *Colectivo Situaciones*, the ‘militant research’ group who worked closely with H.I.J.O.S. throughout the period in which they made the *escraches*. According to them, *poder* refers more to fixed forms of power, like the power of the state, while *potencia* refers more to an individual’s or group’s capacity or potential (Whitener 2009). Nate Holdren and Sebastian Touza put it another way in the introduction to their translation of *Colectivo Situaciones’* work when they write:

Generally speaking, we could say that *poder* defines power as ‘power over’ (the sense it has, for instance, when it refers to state or sovereign power) and *potencia* defines ‘power to,’ the type of capacity expressed in the statement ‘I can.’ To continue with the generalization, it is possible to say that *poder* refers to static forms of power, while *potencia* refers to its dynamic forms. *Potencia* always exists in the ‘here and now’ of its exercise; it coincides with the act in which it is effected. This is because *potencia* is inseparable from our capacity—indeed, our bodies’ capacity—to be affected. This capacity cannot be detached from the moment, place, and concrete social relations in which *potencia* manifests itself. (Holdren and Touza 2005, 597).

While the power of the state that was keeping the perpetrators from justice and promoting an environment of impunity and forgetting is a clear example of *poder*, the power of H.I.J.O.S. and the

escrache represents *potencia* perfectly. The escrache is a manifestation of the capacity of individuals to rally together against the more static forms of power in order to move them. Whereas *poder* manifests itself through structures and institutions, *potencia* emerges from the body itself. As Holdren and Touza put it, it is ‘inseparable from our capacity...to be affected,’ thus highlighting how the *potencia* of the escrache is not only an embodied power, but also an affective power that is transmitted across bodies in the ‘here and now’ of their action. So if *poder* is a monumental power that reigns over or surrounds us, *potencia* is the power that transects *poder*, crossing through it, dividing it, and consequently altering the way it functions.

The notion of power exemplified through *potencia* is similar to what Arendt articulates through her concept of action. According to her, action represents the pinnacle of human activity because it can only emerge through togetherness. It is, at once, interdependent and intersubjective. Arendt writes, ‘Action, as distinguished from fabrication, is never possible in isolation; to be isolated is to be deprived of the capacity to act’ (1958, 188). Indeed, what a dictatorship seeks to do through its power to atomize and its efforts to silence collective vertical voice is exactly to deprive people of their capacity to act, for what emerges through the togetherness of action is pure potential (note the connection with *potencia*). The consequences of action are unpredictable and limitless. As Arendt writes, ‘[A]ction, though it may proceed from nowhere, so to speak, acts into a medium where every reaction becomes a chain reaction and where every process is the cause of new processes’ (1958, 190). The power of action is that it brings something new into the world—a concept that Arendt calls *natality*. Natality is not always positive, and action does not always lead to good things. What authoritarian regimes hate about action, however, is its inherent unpredictability and uncontrollability, for what is borne through collective action can, indeed, be revolutionary in the way a society functions and the way power is oriented within societies.

Through exercising the *potencia* of making the *escrache*, H.I.J.O.S. acted. And while they did divide communities against each other, their ultimate goal was not to create this sort of division. On the contrary, they would have much preferred that the entire neighborhood *transcend* their differences in order to join their collective effort and thus increase their capacity to create change. H.I.J.O.S. did, however, hope to create a different sort of division: the division of the perpetrator from the rest of the community. Julieta, a 28-year-old member of H.I.J.O.S. whose father, aunt, and uncle were all disappeared, explains this form of division very eloquently in the film. She states:

Given the absence of a legal sentence, there must exist a social sentence. What we pursue is to build this social sentence with the neighborhood and the neighbors. Obviously, we are for prison. We want to see them in jail. We want the law of Final Stop to be declared invalid. We also believe in justice, but we believe the *escrache* itself is an act of justice made in that moment. It is also to create, little by little, a conscience in the people. What we pursue is that [the perpetrator's] own house becomes his jail, that his own neighborhood and neighbors sentence him in the daily things, in his daily life of going out to buy or get the newspaper. The social sentence makes the baker decide not to sell him bread any longer, the taxi driver not to take him. We want him and his past to stop being a mystery to the neighborhood. (H.I.J.O.S.: *Mesa de Escrache*, 2002)<sup>3</sup>

The most recognized slogan of H.I.J.O.S. is “*Si no hay justicia, hay escrache*”—“If there is no justice, there is *escrache*.” Julieta demonstrates here how the *escrache* was more than an act of protest; it was actually performing the act of judgment that the state was refusing to perform. The *escrache* represented the issuing of a social sentence that must then be carried out by the people of the neighborhood. As such, the performance of the *escrache* was only the beginning of a much larger process in which H.I.J.O.S. did not take part. This process of condemnation was left to those most directly affected by the presence of this perpetrator. H.I.J.O.S. was really drawing a line in the sand that divided this criminal from the rest of the community. It was then up to the community to decide whether they would remain on their own side of the line by carrying out the social sentence issued by the *escrache* or cross that line by continuing to ignore the unpunished crimes of their neighbor.

The preceding examples of the *transitory* acts of the *escrache* have stressed the more literal trans- qualities of the action, but there are also more metaphorical acts of trans-action that are just as essential to this practice. For one, the *escrache* was an act of *transtemporality*. As a radical street performance that recalled the past in the present in order to alter the future, the *escrache* worked to manipulate and refigure the population of Argentina's relationship with time. For H.I.J.O.S., this project seemed deeply connected with a resistance to the linear temporality of neoliberal capitalism. The military dictatorship of 1976-83 was very much borne of a Cold War mentality, and the 'subversive elements' that were disappeared by the right-wing regime were those who were deemed to be socialist or leftist. When the military regime was replaced by a democratic one in 1983, the physical terror of disappearance ended, but the systemic violence and inequality of the neoliberal economic policies of the dictatorship remained almost completely intact—another aspect of resonant violence. H.I.J.O.S., through the *escrache*, always worked to reinforce in the minds of participants and observers the connection between the past dictatorship and the economic policies of the day that were still very much in existence. In the speech given at one particular *escrache*, H.I.J.O.S. said:

Impunity lives in each one of these people, repressors, torturers, kidnappers, *genocidaires*, ideological authors of the mass extermination of thousands of popular activists that fought against the privileged and against inequality, that same inequality that today is the supreme law of the Argentinean Republic. (Colectivo Situaciones 2002: "Discurso de H.I.J.O.S. en el *escrache* a Weber")

In this speech, those disappeared by the dictatorship are presented as fighters for social equality, and the inequality against which they fought is presented as still present through the laws that both include and extend beyond impunity for past perpetrators.

According to Colectivo Situaciones, the *escraches* offer a conception of time different than that offered by capitalism. As they write:

For [capitalism], the past is already gone, only existing as a passive memory, like *Nunca Más*.<sup>4</sup> We experience the future as a far-off and imprecise promise that does not depend on us. For this reason our present is weak, sad: we are alone, and waiting for a miracle. In the *escrache*, on the contrary, the



past acts with force, the disappeared live as an actual project; it is a past that declares: it is the past of the present. On the other hand, the future has already arrived, because it is none other than the one that we are building, which depends on us: it is the future of the present. In this way the *escrache* establishes a decisive present, full of potential. The *escrache* is a practice that can neither wait nor resign itself. It springs forth today and is for now. (Colectivo Situaciones 2002: ‘Hipotesis para la discusión’)

The post-dictatorship democratic regime invested deeply in maintaining the economic model of neoliberal capitalism, and therefore devoted itself to a temporality that placed the past as a distant thing to be forgotten and moved beyond. Likewise, capitalist conceptions of the future place it forever ahead of us, never to be reached. The only thing capital can do is produce more capital. It is not interested in a utopian world of humanist values like equality or sustainability; unimpeded growth and progression is its only goal. For the Argentinean people, then, this model of time does not allow for a meaningful reckoning with past violence, nor does it offer a vision of an achievable future with more justice, equality, and prosperity for all. It is a greatly expanded temporality where the past and future are both incredibly distant, while the present is a non-descript ‘no man’s land’ in between the two.

The *escrache*, however, actually worked to collapse this expanded temporality...to reverse it completely. In the *escrache*, both the past and the future were performed in the present moment. The past was obviously present as the participants went to the houses of past perpetrators, chanting for justice, calling for recognition and retribution for their past acts. But, as Colectivo Situaciones puts it, the past was also present because the activism of H.I.J.O.S. was working to keep the political project of the disappeared thousands alive. So the past was positioned as both a negative temporal space—a space in which this horrible violence occurred—but also a positive space—a space in which thousands fought for social good and equality. Likewise, H.I.J.O.S. made the future present because the *escrache* did not only call for some formal, state justice *in the future*, but actually performed its own alternative form of justice in the moment of the *escrache*. The *escrache* did not only call for a trial; it *was* the trial that had not happened, through which was issued the (social)

sentence that the state had failed to issue. Furthermore, within this collapsed and concentrated temporality where the past, present, and future all intersected, power was transferred from its traditional bearers—those within the halls of government—to the people at large, whose role it then was to carry out the social sentence that the *escrache* had issued. In fact, it became the job of the community to extend the affective environment created in the moment of the *escrache*; if they took up the challenge handed to them, then this charged present moment, which was full of the past and future, as well, would be sustained.

As such, the transtemporality of the *escrache* created what Arendt would call a *space of appearance*. According to Arendt, the space of appearance is the literal or figurative space where people come together towards a larger political purpose. It is a space of potential energy, and it only exists for as long as individuals put their speech or deeds towards the fulfillment of a shared goal. She writes, ‘The space of appearance comes into being whenever men are together in the manner of speech and action’ (1958, 199). The space of appearance, then, is a space of co-embodied practice, and it is also a space for the creation of new forms of Arendtian power. Arendt is quick to qualify that the space of appearance is fragile and temporary, however. It only remains in existence for as long as people come together towards a common purpose. I argue that, as the *escrache* exemplifies, the space of appearance is, by its very nature, a transtemporal space that, whether consciously or subconsciously, acknowledges the intersection of the past and future in the present moment. Within this space of appearance, a *transaction* occurs. It is not a monetary transaction, but another sort of exchange altogether, through which an inadequate past is exchanged or even converted into a more promising future. Or, more specifically, the inadequate past is exchanged for new forms of power, which are generated from the coming together of individuals within the space of appearance. The *escrache*, then, is both a trans-action and a transaction.

All of these modes of trans-action contribute to the overall performative nature of the *escrache*, which ultimately used these instances of migration and division to produce new sources of agency that refigured the way power functioned within the society. At the intersection of these multiple lines of crossing, of division, and of colliding temporalities, then, resided a concentrated and unique moment of power. Borrowing from Argentinean poet and philosopher Julián Axat, I see this moment of power as the birth of a new form of *biopoetics*. In the first volume of his *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault outlines his theory for a specific type of power of the modern era through which the individual and collective bodies of a population are controlled and maintained through governmental structures. This sort of power over life, which Foucault calls *biopower*, operates on two levels: first, through the disciplining of individual bodies to behave in certain ways—what he calls *anatomo-politics of the human body* or, elsewhere, *governmentality*—and second, through the management of entire populations (the body politic) in all manners of birth, death, and health—what he calls *biopolitics of the population* (Foucault 1978).

One thing that all authoritarian regimes enact in one way or another is a particularly aggressive mode of biopolitics that plays out upon the bodies of every citizen in one way or another. This biopolitical power is much more overt than that which exists in, say, a democratic society; it is hard to experience it as unnatural, as the perpetrating regime is usually quite forthright in its objectives. It does lead to a stranglehold of control, however, that places additional levels of discipline on individual and collective bodies. Bodies are orientated in specific directions, and the lines they must follow are drawn with an iron fist. During the Argentinean military dictatorship, the population underwent just such a heightened state of biopolitics and forced direction through the Process of National Reorganization. In such an intense state of domination, the possibility of deviating from the norm is dangerous, even life-threatening. Even so, groups like the Madres de Plaza de Mayo emerged from within this state of control, offering a collective voice that called out

for people to follow other lines. H.I.J.O.S. did not form under an outright state of domination like this. They did see, however, in the politics of reconciliation and impunity of post-dictatorship Argentina, another kind of biopolitical power asking people to walk the lines of forgetting, of silence, of ‘moving forward.’

In response to Foucault’s theorization of biopolitics—these disciplining forces that regulate and manage populations—Axat has developed a complementary theory, which he calls *desobediencia biopoética* (biopoetic disobedience), to describe some of the acts of resistance that emerge from within the extreme biopolitical control of dictatorial or genocidal regimes like that of Argentina from 1976-1983. Axat, who is the son of two disappeared parents and is himself a founding member of H.I.J.O.S., writes that the term biopoetic disobedience serves as an ‘escape from the zones of criminalization and death’ by recovering these spaces from authoritarian governments, paramilitary groups, or those who use terror and fear as their governing principles. In doing so, these acts ‘construct new spaces of sociality and citizenship,’ as well as ‘generate levels of conscience’ and ‘contaminate in an activist manner the social sectors that, before, confronted each other by separating themselves one from the other’ (Axat 2010a: 246). These acts of recovery, construction, generation, and contamination all occur through creative and poetic uses of the body that work largely on the level of the symbolic.

Axat first developed this theory to describe the poetic disobedience of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, whose use of symbols like the ‘pañuelo’—the white handkerchief covering the head of every Mother—and the Plaza de Mayo itself—which sits at the center of the seats of executive, financial, and religious power in Argentina—were powerful enough to bring worldwide attention to the human rights abuses of the dictatorship, ultimately contributing to its downfall. Axat writes:

What the dictatorship of 1976-83 could not foresee were those unprecedented acts [of the Mothers], the overwhelming force of the desperate mother facing the disappearance of a child....Nothing can stop a mother who denounces power. No pack of hounds, no herald can stand against the handkerchief of a Mother. Horses neigh backwards, bucking before the handkerchiefs. (Axat 2012)

In this quotation, Axat positions the embodied poetics of the Mothers against the biopolitical forces of the regime. The hounds, heralds, and horses of the military are all made powerless by a fragile headscarf, because that headscarf represents ‘the overwhelming force’ of a mother who has lost her child.

According to Axat, it is partly the absurdity of this confrontation—a group of middle-aged housewives against the Argentinean military—that is essential to the biopoetic act. The dictatorship was able to destroy all forms of resistance during its reign of terror—from activist groups to student movements to political parties. In the face of such obstruction, the only hope for successful resistance became the ‘demented obstinacy’—demented because of the craziness of thinking it might actually work—of the Mothers (Axat 2012). Biopoetic resistance, then, represents the coming together of poetry and human rights as a tactic for the disadvantaged or those without traditional access to power to liberate themselves from the extreme biopolitics of domination (Axat 2010a: 252).

While Axat focuses largely on the Madres as his example of biopoetics, I argue that the *escraches* of H.I.J.O.S. also represent an instance of biopoetic resistance for a number of reasons. First, by marching through the city streets, the *escrache* acted to reclaim space that was traditionally seen as under the control of the state in order to create ‘new spaces of sociality and citizenship’ that centered on the performing of an alternative Argentinean future. Second, the *escrache* placed a great emphasis on poetic symbolism. For instance, through the painting and marking of the house of the perpetrator, the participants began the transformation of the dwelling into a prison; they were marking the space in a way that could not be ignored, and thus putting pressure on the neighborhood to do its part in carrying out the social sentence of the *escrache*. H.I.J.O.S. also put up traffic signs that warned people of the criminal in their midst; in this way, H.I.J.O.S. ‘officialized’ their message by using one of the tools of the state to perform a function the state chose not to

perform. Third, the *escrache* was a self-consciously absurd performance, derived from the traditions of street theater, music, and carnival to carry out a very serious task. By drawing from the tropes of carnival, however, the *escraches* also evoked the historical significance of carnival in both the positive and negative sense. Historically, carnival is a time when the rule of law ceased to be enforced, just as H.I.J.O.S. saw the Argentinean government as failing to enforce the laws that would hold past perpetrators to task for their crimes. But carnival is also a time when the weak and the strong switch places within a society, so the *escrache* was an example of the disempowered masses taking control from those in power and redesigning the ‘law’ in a way that disempowered those who had been protected from prosecution and retribution.

During a conversation with him in La Plata, Argentina, in August 2013, Axat explicitly connected the *escrache* to the tradition of carnival, stating that the *escrache* was meant to be seen as “the carnivalization of the political.” He said that all of the elements of the *escrache*—the music, the chants, and the celebratory atmosphere—“must be seen as doing in the people’s terms exactly what the state does not want to do...In this way the *escrache* is a farce of justice. It is a parody of justice.” As such, the *escrache* truly represented a case of biopoetic resistance, as participants made poetic use of the body to redirect the traditional power relations of biopolitical control in order to perform the state that the people desired. At the same time, the *escrache* was a comical critique of the state; in this sense, it asked for change to occur, as well. The *escrache* could not be the end in itself; it acted as a calling out not only of the perpetrator, but of the state that allowed the perpetrator to remain free. In the wake of the *escrache*, then, it was not only the neighborhood that was called to perform the social sentencing of the perpetrator, but the state that was called to alter its policies in relation to the past. This, too, fits into traditional understandings of carnival. As Mikhail Bakhtin writes in his seminal analysis of the social phenomenon, “...[C]arnival celebrated a *temporary* liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all

hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions” (1984: 10, emphasis added). According to Bakhtin, the carnival is always a temporary phenomenon, meant as a hiatus in the performance of the ordinary power structure of a society. Likewise, the *escrache* could not be (nor was it meant to be) a permanent solution, but rather a road to a bigger structural change. Bakhtin continues, “Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal” (ibid.). Herein lies the true power of the *escrache*, as well. Like all carnival, it represented a moment of becoming. In the case of the *escrache*, this “becoming” had several layers: the “becoming” of a new popular front, the “becoming” of a neighborhood united against a perpetrator, and, perhaps most important, the “becoming” of a society into one that would actively address its own criminal past.

Of course, the activism of groups like Madres and H.I.J.O.S. is not uncontroversial. For instance, Argentinean sociologist Hugo Vezzetti (2002; 2007; 2009) has written critically about how the discourse of groups like the Madres and Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo have exemplified and led to a national co-optation of the past for the creation of new ‘political identities,’ in particular, a national identity that paints the entire country as a victim to the crimes of the dictatorship rather than a society that was in many ways complicit in those crimes. Likewise, Cecilia Sosa (2014) has argued that the familial nature of these major human rights group has helped form a “biological normativity that has become hegemonic” (2). According to Sosa, groups like Madres and H.I.J.O.S. contributed to an exclusive “politics of mourning” that actually ignored many of the non-normative and queer bonds of relationality that emerged out of the dictatorship’s aftermath. Still, despite the validity of such critiques, the biopoetic power of the *escrache* and its political effects remain undeniable.

H.I.J.O.S. continued to make *escraches* against former perpetrators into the early years of the 2000’s, keeping true to their word that if there were no justice, then the *escraches* would continue. The 2003 election of Nestor Kirchner as president, however, was a watershed moment for the population of Argentina and its relationship to the violent past of the dictatorship. Within

the first year of his presidency, Kirchner led the charge to nullify the Law of Due Obedience and the Law of Full Stop, thus removing the legal shroud that had been protecting the unprosecuted perpetrators of the dictatorship. In 2005 the Supreme Court of Argentina reopened the trials against the perpetrators, and since their reopening, over 1000 military officers have faced trial, including Rafael Videla, the first president of the military junta, who died in prison in 2013.

Soon after the trials began, *escraches* against the former perpetrators began to peter out before stopping almost completely by the end of 2006. The *escrache* as a tool, however, began to spread, and the socio-political situations to which it was used to respond began to expand, as well. The process began with the installation of the *Mesa de Escrache Popular*, a group that took over the planning of the *escraches* between the years 2000-2001; their purpose was to make the *escrache* into a tool used by all people, not just the members of H.I.J.O.S. (Whitener 2009). Despite the change in management, the *escraches* of Mesa de Escrache Popular had the same goals as those of H.I.J.O.S.: to reveal the perpetrators living freely within a neighborhood and to construct a social sentence for that person by bringing the neighbors together against him. Beginning with Argentina's massive economic collapse in 2001, however, a process that has been called 'the generalization of the *escrache*' commenced (Colectivo Situaciones 2002). Neighborhood assemblies began to protest in front of businesses or banks, calling these protests '*escraches*.' The practice also spread to other countries, most notably Spain, where it is a common practice still being performed against politicians today. While H.I.J.O.S. and Mesa de Escrache Popular have not seemed excessively territorial over the use of the term to describe these other protests, there does seem to be a fear that the generalization of the term could also lead to a neutralization of its real power. According to one member of Mesa de Escrache Popular:

...[I]f the dictatorship came to impose certain types of values—those of social discipline—and if it succeeded in breaking social ties..., then what the *escrache* does is to recuperate those ties and to generate new values. For me it is fine that the word '*escrache*' is being used by all sides, but the principle risk is that the *escrache* is politicized. Because the *escrache* is not just another form of



politics: it is the height of social protagonism. (Colectivo Situaciones 2002: ‘Conversación con la Mesa de escrache’)

This statement highlights the performativity of the *escrache*; it defines the practice by what it accomplishes—namely, the reparation of the broken social bonds brought about by the forces of resonant violence. According to the speaker, the circulation of the term is much less problematic than the potential dilution of the practice’s power, as evidenced through its ability to bring people together. It is perhaps ironic that these groups are brought together through a practice that works to transect and divide, which demonstrates that, during the height of the *escraches* in the late-1990s and early-2000s, what was actually being transected through practices of trans-action like the *escrache* was not a space or a group of people, but the damaging, affective force of resonant violence itself.

The *escrache*, along with other co-embodied practices, recomposed the negatively-affective force of resonant violence, transforming it into new forms of affective power and agency. In her book *Ordinary Affects*, anthropologist Kathleen Stewart develops the term ‘ordinary affects’ to describe the sentiments and emotions of the everyday that circulate amongst us and have effects on our interactions with the world and with others. She writes:

Ordinary affects are the varied, surging capacities to affect and to be affected that give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies, and emergencies. [...] Ordinary affects are public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation, but they’re also the stuff that seemingly intimate lives are made of. (Stewart 2007: 1-2)

If Stewart’s project theorizes the inconspicuous, quotidian, and...well...ordinary affects that circulate almost completely unnoticed every day, and yet have an immense effect on the lives of those touched by them, resonant violence is a way of conceiving of the *extraordinary affects* that come to be woven into the social fabric of a society after a period of genocidal violence. Perhaps one of the reasons the affective force of resonant violence is so damaging, however, is in its ability to *seem* ordinary and inconspicuous. Like ordinary affects, resonant violence becomes exactly both the

‘public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation’ and ‘the stuff that seemingly intimate lives are made of.’ Yet when the detrimental power of the extraordinary is accepted as ordinary, it becomes all the more difficult to convert or recompose it into something more creative or productive.

And yet the *escrache*, too, is an example of extraordinary affect, in this case being gathered and mobilized towards revealing not only the unpunished perpetrator living freely within a neighborhood, but also the extraordinary power of resonant violence that has been made to seem so ordinary for too long. The affective power of the *escrache*, as stated above, was never supposed to end when the *escrache* itself is over, however. The momentum generated through the *escrache* had to carry over towards the performance of the social condemnation by the neighborhood. Moreover, the *escraches* worked to propagate their new forms of extraordinary affect, which began to circulate more and more with the performance of each new *escrache*. H.I.J.O.S., Mesa de *Escrache* Popular, and all the many other participants in the *escraches* openly sought to make the extraordinary affect of the *escrache* into something ordinary and quotidian—something that circulated openly and freely, affecting daily social interactions and the way people related to the past. And so while the *escraches* themselves have ended, at least in their original form, the affective environment created through the *escraches* is still performing today. The energy of the *escraches* and its mandate for justice has now been taken up by the state, which is still holding trials against former perpetrators. While the subsumption of the work of the *escrache*—or any social movement, for that matter—within the framework of the state most certainly leads to an entirely separate set of complications when it comes to thinking about the directionality of power within a society, it also very clearly represents the normalization of the affective environment of the *escrache*. At least one facet of the extraordinary affect of resonant violence has been made to seem extraordinary again; at the same

time, the extraordinary affect of the escraches and H.I.J.O.S. has become ordinary. As bodies transact, magnificent and poetic things can, and indeed have, occurred.

## **ENDNOTES:**

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<sup>1</sup> While this term for the military dictatorship is popular outside of Argentina, it has been largely rejected within the country, as it frames the crimes of the military regime as occurring within a context of war—a gross mischaracterization of what actually occurred.

<sup>2</sup> All translations are the author's own, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>4</sup> “Never Again,” which is both the title of the report of Argentina's truth commission and a commonly-used mantra across cultural contexts vowing a commitment to preventing future occurrences of genocide and mass atrocity.

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