"Introduction: Obscenity, Art, and Performance"

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Note: This article includes images of a sensitive nature

In this second special issue on the cultural politics of obscenity in Latin America, we place our focus on performative configurations of subjecthood and power positions, especially as they relate to explicit public and semi-public displays of the human body. Performance studies scholar Michelle Castañeda argues that courtrooms are "little theaters" where the law puts on a show; while the theatrical presentation of the law's cruel contradictions becomes "strange" in the sense of "parodic, nonsensical, and absurd " (2023, 1-2)[1] This special issue brings to light how notions of the obscene intersect with legal frameworks, performative politics, public protest, and cultural productions including artwork, photography, and literature. The performance of intimate subjectivities for the state, the market, or particular audiences produces archives that mediate embodied experiences in their most sexual and unspeakable facets.

For instance, in Argentina, following the 1976 coup by a military junta led by General Jorge Rafael Videla, while the military and reactionary sectors used the state apparatus to terrorize perceived opponents and silence critical voices, courts-martial were routinely held to maintain soldiers' discipline in every matter that pertained to the performance of their duties, including "dishonest acts", a term that encompassed any "activity that leads to sexual pleasure, including preparatory acts of approaching, between individuals of the same sex".[2] The officers investigating these cases requested that soldiers provide exhaustive accounts of carnal acts between males. Their cross-examinations of defendants sought to elicit evidence of

[1] Michelle Castañeda, *Disappearing Rooms: The Hidden Theaters of Immigration Law* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2023), 1–2.
[2] See, for instance, sentence number 1/1976 of the Supreme Court of the Armed Forces, issued on 13 April 1976, book of collected sentences from 1976, vol. 1, Departamento Archivo Intermedio (DAI), Archivo General de la Nación, Buenos Aires, Argentina,

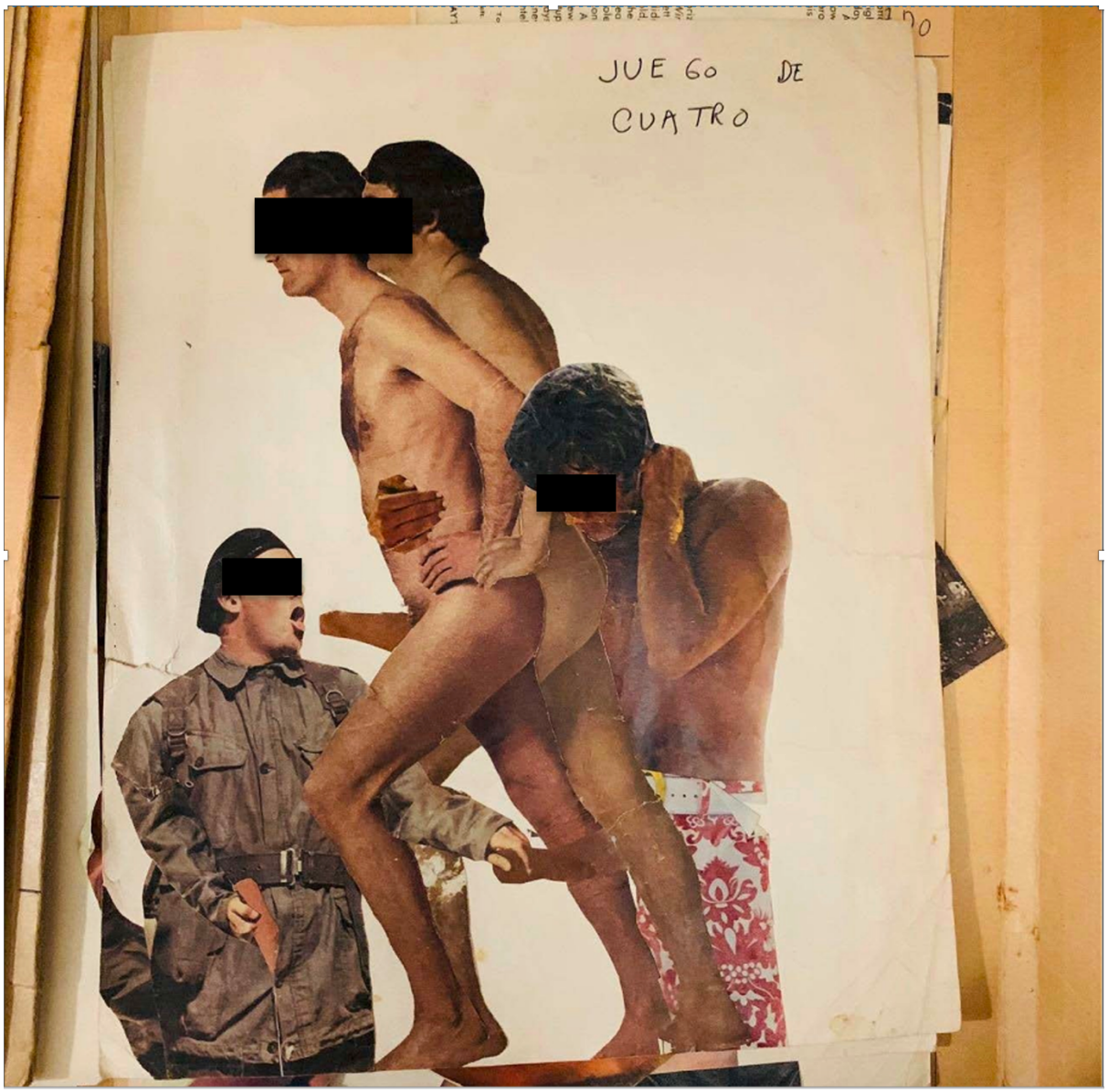
ejaculation and traced both the trail and final recipient of the arrested individuals' semen, producing an obscene archive based on the performance of gendered personae, from the masculine yet naïve "active" soldier to the hypersexual and feminine *marica*.

These judicial transcripts reflected as closely as possible the erotically charged interactions between soldiers, including the original vocabulary that they used, and probably would have been considered too pornographic to be printed in any other context at the time. As soldiers gave their depositions, prosecutors explicitly coaxed them about the level of detail that they expected. In a trial in 1977, for instance, when the soldier began to describe how a corporal touched his testicles, the prosecutor interrupted him: "Please, I want every little detail about this part."[3] This same prosecutor could not hide his frustration when another of the interrogated defendants repeatedly failed to provide him with a satisfactory description of his sexual encounter with a corporal:

> Prosecutor (P): What did you do while he touched you?
> Defendant (D): I tried to push him and then I came.
> P: Did he only touch you with his hand?
> D: Yes, just with his hand and he put his face beside my dick when I came.
> P: Did he put something on you, his mouth for instance?
> D: Yes, the mouth?
> P: Come on, you are the one who has to tell me every little detail. Tell me again.
> D: He sits down on the bed, holds me with his left hand, and with the right one he "jerks me off" and I come.
> P: And where did [it] go? [In the Spanish original this question may have referred to a person.]
> D: He went to the bathroom.
> P: No, no, what you came.
> D: I think he swallowed it, in his mouth.[4]

[3] Depositions on 21 April 1977, file 335451, folder 6113, box 60, DAI.

[4] Depositions on 21 April 1977, file 335451.



"Juego de cuatro". Image included in the Peter's papers collection. Courtesy Archivos Desviados, based in New York City and Buenos Aires. This image and others were originally discussed in Javier Fernández Galeano and Jorge Luis Peralta, "Los papeles de Peter. Un archivo inédito de escritura y pornografía maricas", *Moléculas Malucas*, May 2022. https://www.moleculasmalucas.com/post/los-papeles-de-peter

As military authorities forced those subjects under investigation to recreate and perform scenes of queer sexual intimacy, obscenity unexpectedly speaks to us through archival records that otherwise were instrumental in state violence. There are also

unexpected connections between institutional and personal archives. The image above is part of an album of homoerotic collages that were found in a secondhand bookstore in Buenos Aires by Juan Queiroz, who plays a leading role in Archivos Desviados (Deviant Archives), a grassroots archival project that centers marica cultures and politics in Latin America. The creator of the collage was Peter D., an unknown English-speaking person who lived in Argentina for most of his life and began to craft his personal collection of queer erotica in the 1950s. The images in Peter's collection are assemblages of male organs, clothing items, and faces cut from mainstream newspapers and magazines. He incorporated the faces of well-known Argentine actors, singers, and sportsmen into recreations of sexual acts and postures including oral sex and anal penetration between multiple participants, while he cut print paper with a color resembling human skin into phallic shapes, as if he were a potter molding clay. Although in some images military paraphernalia, guns, and cartridges are used to denote domination, in *Juego de cuatro* (foursome) Peter put a phallus in front of a soldier who had fully opened his mouth, probably to give an order, repositioning military belligerence to signify maricas' sexual receptiveness. The relationship between Peter and the fantasies he materialized on paper embodies a complex positionality vis-à-vis masculinity, which for *maricas* could be both an object of desire and the root cause of the daily violence they suffered. Along with the phallus, Peter crafts a male gaze that penetrates him and commands erotic submission, becoming a signifier of the masculinity that *maricas* themselves created. In all these ways, the image *Juego de cuatro* encapsulates the mutually productive relations between desire and power; performance and materiality; and archives of institutional violence (like the interrogations of arrested marica soldiers) and the imaginaries that inform and circulate in personal and grassroots repositories.

Indeed, the obscene often hides within the archives in ways that complicate how we might think new histories of pornography, censorship, and the obscene. If one types the word "pornografía" or "pornográfico" into the digital finding aids of several Latin American national archives , the result is often underwhelming. When, however, we look under the category of "ultraje a la moral pública o las buenas

costumbres" ("grave affronts to public morality of good customs") we uncover cases that delineate and mark the obscene through records on censorship, pornography, and even crude verbal epithets directed at everyday individuals.

Notions of the obscene itself are often binary and tautological, assigning ideas of filth and dirtiness to bodies, their practices and secretions. See, for example, the 1737 definition of *obsceno* (obscene) printed in the Real Academia Española's *Diccionario de Autoridades*, which reads: "Impúro, súcio, torpe y feo" (Impure, dirty, sordid, and ugly). Yet, as Jean Baudrillard writes in *The Ecstasy of Communication*, "[o]bscenity is not confined to sexuality, because today there is a pornography of information and communication, a pornography of circuits and networks, of functions and objects in their legibility availability, regulation, forced signification, capacity to perform, connection, polyvalence, their free expression. It is no longer the obscenity of the hidden, the repressed, the obscure, but that of the visible, all-too-visible, the more visible than visible; it is the obscenity of that which no longer contains a secret and is entirely soluble in information and communication (1998, 22)"[5] Here, we follow such insights, thinking about how obscenity becomes performatively layered with the construction of knowledge and information, always in dialogue with the question of audience.

This second special issue takes on some central threads of the previous *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* issue (Vol. 32, No. 4) on obscenity, including a situational perspective that considers the role of reception and audience in defining the boundaries between proprietary and public offense. Throughout the various articles in this issue, the reader will notice that cultural repertoires and archives can be re-signified and have a different political effect than initially intended based on performers' strategies and the complicity or antagonism of the audience. The contributors' interventions show how visibility functions as a social field where power is exercised and in which the abjection of certain subjectivities is disputed. In this line, theater scholar Isaias Fanlo argues that the obscene "reflects the tension between what deserves

[5] Jean Baudrillard, *Ecstasy of Communication* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1998), 22.

to be visible and what ought to remain away from a decent gaze" (2019, 209).[6] The performance of repulsion towards obscenity functionas as a mechanism fundamental in constructing a position of power, that of a subject who assumes the transparency of his own normative status. In reclaiming "obscenity" and "abjection", Fanlo traces a connection between these terms, *marica* experiences, and other subjectivities excluded from sanitized public spaces (Fanlo 2019, 210, 216);[7] this convers with the attention paid in this special issue to *travesti* activism, inverts' narratives, and other localized and global iterations of queerness. In tracing the obscene as a point of tension with hegemonic representational regimes, this issue pays attention to the multiplicity of power structures and social dynamics that shape the meaning of performative and artistic repertoires. Here we draw from performance studies scholar Juana María Rodríguez's analysis of a set of "racially gendered pornographic images" taken to be obscene when "the overt display of the collusion between state and economic power that it showcases is deemed too indecent for public consumption" (2014, 158).[8] Rodriguez's work invites us to approach obscenity keeping in mind that racial violence, economic inequality, and state surveillance are intersecting vectors in the marking of abjection.

We see as much in several of the articles collected here, starting with Olga Rodriguez-Ulloa's "Chola Sex Party: Anal and Concha Art", which analyzes how Peruvian artist Wynnie Mynerva's performances and artwork radically reframe the politics of racialized gazing both inside and outside of Peru. Rodriguez-Ulloa carefully traces the performance that Mynerva enacted with her mother in 2020, "¿Qué limpian las que limpian?" and her abstractly explicit paintings including "Historia de venganza 1" and others. Here, the author focuses on historical (and colonial) racializing desires as some of the core driving forces of sexual practices and fantasies in Peru, especially as they intersect with notions of female domestic labour, sexual labour, and the visual and performative. Throughout, Rodriguez-

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[6] Isaias Fanlo, "Ética de lo obsceno," in *De vidas y virus: VIH / sida en las culturas hispánicas*, ed. Rafael Manuel Mérida Jiménez (Icaria: Barcelona, 2019), 209.
[7] Fanlo, "Ética de lo obsceno," 210; 216.
[8] Juana María Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 158.

Ulloa demonstrates how Mynerva critically engages with the idea and historical violences inflicted on the category of the racialised *chola* in Peru. Wynnie Mynerva's rapidly growing corpus of visual, artistic, and performative interventions, in many ways, seeks to undo the body itself, partly by strategically connecting fantasies of violence (directed toward cisgender men who enact rape and other forms of sexual violence on women and other marginalized subjects) with partly abstracted corporeal and sexual pleasures. Though outside of the scope of Rodriguez-Ulloa's article here, in a late 2023 two-part installation, "The Original Riot," staged at New York City's New Museum, Mynerva undoes *her own body*, exhibiting one of her own surgically removed lower ribs, which comprises *The First Cut* (2023), alongside a split 70-foot mural that depicts the female figure of Eve and Lilith, central to Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. In the words of the New Museum's online description, Mynerva's 2023 installation proposes and embodies those "bodies on the edge of abstraction that refuse to be categorized, consumed, or controlled; and their radical performances and body modifications posit sexual transgression as a path to social transformation."[9]

Mir Yarfitz, in his article "La Bella Otero's Overdetermined Anality: Tales of Sexual Inversion in Early Twentieth-Century Buenos Aires", looks at other aspects of the performative, by reading the archival traces of La Bella Otero's life and self-narratives in ways that reveal her agency and the historical constructions of femininity along the vectors of class, subcultural norms, and the complex meanings of anal sex. Yarfitz's work shifts the interpretative framework from gay to trans history and places sex at the core of gender identities and performance. Obscenity is paradoxically most present in the scientific journals that addressed La Bella Otero's story, while there was a harsher censoring of popular journalism and theater plays like José Gonzáles Castillo's *Los invertidos*. This double standard shaped the decisions and strategies of "inverts" to leave a written testimony of their self-representation,

[9] https://www.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/view/wynnie-mynerva-the-original-riot. For more on this exhibit, see https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-meet-painter-wynnie-mynerva-surgically-removed-rib-current-new-museum.

instrumentalizing medical examinations to perform their personae for their own chosen audience of future readers.

In their contribution, "108: Memory, Libido and Obscenity between Paraguay and Brazil", Clara Cuevas, Cleiton Zóia Münchow, and Erwing Szokol turn their attentions to the profound historical and (kuir/queer) cultural symbolism that the number 108 — "Ciento Ocho" — has accrued in Paraguay since the 1959 Police investigations into some "108 people of doubtful moral conduct", early in the 35-year Alfredo Stroessner dictatorship, which began in 1954. They show how in Asunción, Paraguay the number 108, since the late 1950s, became a pejorative symbol associated with homosexuality, and how LGBT activists have radically reclaimed the number, as have artists such as nonbinary Brazilian performance artist Sucia Inmunda DeLaBasura, who died tragically in 2020. While it was Article 318 of Paraguay's 1914 penal code that strategically linked "acts of brutal obscenity that offend good customs" to public scandal, punishable by 6-12 months in prison, those accused of homosexuality and other obscene acts were systematically penalized during the Stroessner regime, most noticeably in 1959 and again in 1982. In recent decades, the authors show, the number has become a rallying cry for LGBT activists in the country, as seen with the 2013 collective founding of the house "Mansión 108" as a space to share "kuir ideas" in Asunción and the staging of "LINE 108. Bus of L.G.T.B.I. Memory" to revisit the city's queer histories and sites of memory.

Ana Alvarez's article "'Walking around naked sets back our struggle': Travesti Activism, Repression, and Public Space in Buenos Aires (1994–1998)" historicizes *travesti* activism in Argentina against the backdrop of police surveillance, the centrality of sex work as a source of income, and the obscenity attributed to travesti corporality and public presence. A core intervention in Alvarez's article is her analysis of the police's internal guidelines (*edictos policiales*) as the frame for the microphysics of power built on the distinction between obscene and tolerable trans subjectivities. In the 1990s, police raids themselves became a spectacle of violence for the consumption of the urban middle class; in performing a "cleansing" role, the police claimed to be invested in imposing certain norms of civility in public spaces, while in reality there were also economic

interests and corruption involved in the decisions to target particular areas and subjects. Alvarez's ethnography stems from her participation in the activist networks that denounced and confronted police violence. Hence her ability to closely read the dialogues that took place between travesti activists and police officers, which situated the "obscene" exhibition of the body at the center of trans people's rights to have visibility and legal protections. Insofar as *travestis* embodied a scandalous sexualization of femininity that drew from contemporaneous celebrity culture, they had to face not only police violence, but also the daily exclusions enacted on behalf of white middle-class respectability.

Turning her attention to the Afro-Dominican nonbinary *transmarica* performance artist Johan Mijail, Elena Valdez puts forth the notion of the artist's own "proctopoetics of the obscene through *excess*" in her contribution, "Decolonial Excesses: Racial and Sexual Dissidence in Johan Mijail's *Amor vegetal*." Through this performance piece, circa 2015, the author argues that Mijail, by introducing flowers, branches, and leaves into their own anus, employs generative notions of "excess" or *exceso* as modes of decolonial and transfeminist critique. By positioning Mijail and their performances at the center of debates around trans*loca*lization — with the *loca* being reframed from a pejorative term to one that enables new corporeal and political constellations in the Dominican Republic, in Chile (where Mijail lived and performed) and throughout the Americas.

Robert Franco's "The Bisexual Erasure of Emiliano Zapata: Obscenity and Censorship in Postrevolutionary Mexico" situates the recent controversy around Fabián Cháirez's painting of Emiliano Zapato as a feminized figure and queer icon in multiple frameworks of different and overlapping scales: the neglect among scholars and the media of bisexuality as a politics of self-understanding and the critique of binaries; the histories of racialization of "obscene" subjects who refuse to conform to the binary between homo and heterosexuality; the art markets that measure and transform scandal into a piece's selling price; the complex representations of historical figures that rely as much on rumours as on official records; and the tensions between global queer languages and local regimes of (in)tolerance, among others. Franco intentionally avoids a Manichean

reading of the events, and instead traces the obscene as a disputed field of representations where economic and symbolic interests coalesce and history becomes alive. In Franco's readings, the afterlives of Zapata's sexuality thus end up problematizing identity categories, the construction of a LGBTB+ imaginary that implicitly reifies the whiteness of global political subjects, and the monetization of obscene art's offensive potential.

If we turn, once again, to the partly pornographic military collage, we gather a much better sense of how the obscene is always performed — and performative — at multiple stages and on multiple levels: imagination, production, circulation, revision, criminalization, consumption, and exhibition, among others. Our hope is that these two special issues on the politics of the obscene in Latin America have gone a long way in exploring these roles, thereby inviting others to engage in similar historical and cultural inquiries on the erotic, the pornographic, and the obscene.