

RUPTURE 3

In/Visible

On October 22, 2015, I joined members of Yakye Axa and Sawhoyamaxa at the opening of the exhibition *El Grito Enxet* (the Enxet Cry) at the Centro Cultural Paraguayo Americano (CCPA; Paraguayan-American Cultural Center) in Asunción. Upon arriving, I immediately noticed that almost all the members of Sawhoyamaxa and Yakye Axa who came to the event were waiting outside the gallery, talking quietly with one another. There was a small table with artisan wares that women from the communities brought to sell, but there was not much business. Inside the gallery were perhaps ten to fifteen *asuncenos*—non-Indigenous residents of Asunción—who appeared to be upper-middle class, based on their nice clothing, behavior, and exclusive use of Spanish. *Asuncenos* milled about looking at the portraits, reading descriptions that accompanied them, and made comments condemning the living conditions and human rights violations the artwork exposed.

The exhibition featured paintings by the local artist Diego Schäfer and was part of a multiyear advocacy campaign organized by Tierraviva and Amnesty International on behalf of the Yakye Axa and Sawhoyamaxa communities. The campaign was called “Hacer visible lo invisible,” Make the Invisible Visible. To make the invisible visible in this context is to cast light on the human rights violations and environmental harms that the Yakye Axa and Sawhoyamaxa communities are experiencing due to the state’s failure to restitute land and implement judgments handed down by the IACHR. An underlying narrative animated the campaign and exhibition: state neglect effectively renders Indigenous rights and well-being invisible. Schäfer makes the invisible visible by painting black-and-white portraits that depict daily life. He uses another layer of paint that is only visible when exposed to ultraviolet light to reveal what was otherwise hidden in plain sight: human rights abuse caused by the negligence of the Paraguayan state. *Doña Florencia* is the title of one of the paintings.



FIGURE 6. *Doña Florencia*, digitally enhanced painting by the artist Diego C. Schäfer from the 2014 exposition *Hacer visible lo invisible*. Florencia's portrait appears with the missing identity document transposed over her face, visible only when ultraviolet light is applied to the painting.

The painting highlights the fact that prior to the IACHR judgments, few people from Yakyé Axa and Sawhoyamaxa had identity documents. Under normal lighting the viewer only sees Doña Florencia's face. But the ultraviolet light reveals her face on a ghostly, albeit elusive, state-issued identity document. State officials required that community members make a trip of several days to Asunción to get an ID, impossible for most because of the expense. Lack of state-issued identity documents, including birth and death certificates, negated the Enxet full rights as citizens by denying them the ability to vote and access some state services. It is a de facto form of juridical erasure that expunges Enxet life from the settler state, existing perhaps only as a number on a census but not recognized or identified in any state registry. The IACHR found that the state neglected to effectively issue

ID documents to members of Yakye Axa and Sawhoyamaxa, which was, in part, a denial of their right to due process and fundamental rights as Paraguayan citizens. Moreover, during adjudication of each case before the IACHR, community members could not prove to the court exactly how many people died while awaiting due process of their land claims because many of them had not been issued birth or death certificates. Despite ample testimony, those lives could not be counted, nor could the state be held accountable for their deaths. Thus settler colonialism in the Bajo Chaco erases Enxet in life and death. The Paraguayan state recognized both communities as legal entities, even though many community members did not officially exist on any state registry. Documents with thumbprints in place of a state-issued ID number are lasting witness to the lack of official documentation.

Doña Florencia was one of thirteen portraits. Another painting depicted a young child playing with a bucket that under ultraviolet light turns out to have been previously used for toxic chemicals. Mobile vendors often sell the buckets cheaply, and many people in the communities use them to gather and store water from the stock ponds. Another painting depicts an older woman weaving a basket from *caraguata'y* fibers. The fibers change to thread woven from plastic bags, evoking the fact that community members have little access to forest resources necessary for cultural practices. However, Tomás Galeano's portrait stood out. Tomás was one of the original leaders of Yakye Axa who helped initiate the community's land claim but had recently passed away. Tomás wore glasses. Under ultraviolet light, his glasses reflect an ethereal image of the lands that Yakye Axa claimed, the island of palms, lands he was never able to return to.

The act of making visible is a denunciation of the Paraguayan state. Making visible challenges official narratives that claim the state is working to ensure Indigenous rights and implement the IACHR judgments. Schäfer's artwork creates a discursive space where community members and their allies can advance their political goals through claiming and shaming. The strategy involves publicly mobilizing memories of violence to shame states for human rights abuses and thus claim rights from those states. "Making the Invisible Visible" is a clear example of that strategy.

Despite its widespread use and appeal across social movements, I suggest that the very acts of shaming and "making visible" can have contradictory effects. The strategy can re-victimize subjects of human rights abuses by requiring them to recite their pain publicly. Shaming the state to claim rights often requires that victims of human rights abuses relive memories of those abuses publicly as a necessary political strategy—both a cathartic and a traumatizing experience. The CCPA reception and the *El Grito* exhibition illustrate the multiple effects of making visible in subtle but clear ways.

A reception followed the inaugural events. Waiters in formal attire brought glasses of wine or soda to attendees. The thirty or so people milled about and mingled. None of the people from Yakye Axa or Sawhoyamaxa drank wine, but



FIGURE 7. *Don Tomás, leader of Yakye Axa*, digitally enhanced painting by the artist Diego C. Schäfer from the 2014 exposition *Hacer visible lo invisible*.

they did drink soda. Asuncenos drank wine and shortly thereafter began talking about the fact that Paraguayan politicians were “sin vergüenza” (shameless) for their behavior toward Indigenous Paraguayans. As the night progressed and people drank more wine, the conversation seemed to shift to other quotidian things pertinent to life in the capital city: potholes, new shopping malls, and plans for post-reception gatherings. There was a clear social differentiation between the asuncenos and the Enxet in attendance, with little interaction between the two groups. Many people from Yakye Axa and Sawhoyamaxa left shortly after the opening ceremony to sit outside with their wares and talk with one another.

At one point, I was looking at the portrait of Tomás Galeano and his large glasses. Anivel, one of the Yakye Axa leaders, walked up and asked if I knew who Tomás was. I told him I had never met him but that I knew of Tomás. Looking at the picture,

Anivel told me Tomás had encouraged him to become a leader of the community, though he was quite young at the time. Until Tomás's suggestion, Anivel had been an *estacionero*, driving cattle on nearby ranches.¹ "I learned much from Tomás," Anivel said. We stood looking at the painting in silence for several minutes. Then he said, "It is good that they did this [made the exhibition]. But it is hard to look at these and think of the suffering. When I see these pictures [*fotos*] they make me think, make me remember a lot of painful things. Tomás fought for years but was never able to see the end of the fight."² After that, Anivel left the gallery.

Anivel's comments about the images on display at the exhibition highlight one of the many processes of re-victimization that making visible entails. Making visible is an arguably necessary political strategy but can objectify mundane forms of violence. The images, while starkly beautiful denunciations, are disassociated from the context they were abstracted from. Inviting community members from Yakye Axa and Sawhoyamaxa to the reception was intended to further humanize and render visible the issues the portraits depict, Schäfer told me. Yet, based on what I observed that night, I was not sure that was the effect.

The organizations coordinating the "Hacer visible" campaign contend that the only way to confront injustice is to expose it. The campaign's goals are "to denounce the historical discrimination faced by Indigenous peoples in Paraguay, educate in Human Rights and encourage participation in the defense of the Human Rights of Indigenous Peoples in Paraguay."³ The campaign has raised the profile of the Yakye Axa and Sawhoyamaxa cases both within Paraguay and internationally, even garnering support from the renowned Puerto Rican reggaeton band Calle 13. However, in making the invisible visible in the way that was done that evening, it was clear that new erasures were produced. Some of the people depicted in the portraits, including Doña Florencia, were in attendance, yet mostly silent: present as living images and stories rather than people who live the images framed on the gallery walls. Indeed, most members of Yakye Axa and Sawhoyamaxa only briefly looked at the paintings, and there was a clear racial divide inseparable from the objectifications the campaign sought to overturn. Still, it is clear that making the invisible visible has increased pressure on the Paraguayan state to act. Without such pressure, state officials could very well do nothing but let community members languish on the margin of the highway. Making visible is one strategy to disrupt the official state narratives of care for Indigenous citizens and its facile commitments to implement the IACHR judgments. Through optics of care, officials intend to control the image of how the state handles Indigenous affairs but does so in a way that obscures what is hidden in plain sight: legal abandonment and the environmental racism that results.