

Prison

Between the hard earth, winter's humid cold that chills to the bone, and sounds of semis passing intermittently in the night, I had not slept well. When I heard Anivel open the door to his home and start gathering wood to start a fire, I rolled out of my sleeping bag, unzipped my tent, and joined him in the dawn light. A small, battery-powered radio played a treble-saturated Paraguayan polka song about the Chaco War. "How did you wake?" Anivel asked. "Iporã," good, I replied. He said the same when I repeated the question. As Anivel lit the fire, I prepared tereré. We sat near the flames, talked, and squinted through the algarrobo smoke that occasionally wafted our way on the morning breeze, stinging the eyes and conjuring tears. The heat of the small fire on our faces was a welcome break from the cold morning. Soon, Veronica, Anivel's wife, joined us. We woke up slowly as the sun broke through the forest on the other side of the fence that separates us from the community's traditional lands. As we were starting our second pitcher of tereré, a young man who I had not yet met, Belfio, joined us.

This visit to Yakye Axa was different from some of my previous ones. I was conducting research as part of a global study about the strategic litigation of Indigenous land rights, the findings of which would be presented at the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Affairs and inform an Open Society Justice Initiative special report published in 2017.¹ Belfio was excited to talk with me and wanted his perspective included. When he arrived, Veronica stepped away from the fire. Belfio took her place on the broken brick where she had been sitting. We drank tereré and talked with Anivel for a few minutes. Then I took out my recorder, and we began our conversation.²

Joel: Can you please introduce yourself for the recording?

Belfio: My, my name is Belfio Gómez Benitez. I am twenty-five years old. I grew up on the side of the road, and I have experience.

And we began.

Much suffering [*heta sufrimiento*]. Much [*heta*].



FIGURE 9. A semi hauling cattle kicks up dust as it speeds through Yakye Axa on Ruta 5. Photo by author, July 2016.

It is a well-known story. They know of it all over.
I have a lot of experience.
Like I said, I grew up on the side of the road, and there has been a lot of suffering.
And this.
In the middle of this suffering, I have knowledge.
We will one day achieve what we want.
As I understand in normal terms, the normal person, as I understand it, no one wants the past suffering.
Do you understand?
For that reason, I say that I have the experience from the middle of the suffering, the crisis, the persecution.
I say that to you because we live like we are isolated, like we are in prison, in the desert.
So I have the experience of how we have lived, and I want to teach that so that we do not live it again as we did in the past . . .

Joel: Why do you say that you have suffered?

Belfio: And that is why I say I have the experience.

I wake up, and I see our suffering.
Our crisis, of the community, that we have already passed from the little to the big, the young to the old.
On that side, I have experience.

The land they gave us is not the land we originally requested.

But I have experience and knowledge so we can achieve something . . .

Joel: How do you see your future on the land? What is your wish for that land and Yakye Axa?

Belfio: I have many thoughts based on my experience.

From age three or four, I remember growing up on the side of the road without land.

I have many wishes that I would like to do. In this time, if we had the land, I would, I have ideas. But they are not everyone's.

We all have ideas of how to live well.

But for that moment, there is a but [*hay un pero*].

There is a but.

For the moment that we have the land, many people ask what we will do? What will we go and do?

There is one but [*hay un pero*] that we want the state to remember.

There is the community development fund that we can use so that we don't live there as we have lived here.

The state looks at other [Indigenous] communities and has doubts. They get land and don't do anything. That is because they do not have a fund to help them develop. To help them advance. For that, there is much we can do.

There is much we can do if they give us our development fund after we move so that we can progress so that we don't live as we have.

We lost the original fight for the land.

Much time passed, and we fought.

But we lost that fight and took the other land.

Now the second fight is for our alternative land.

That I don't fully understand, but we have it.

But now we continue to suffer.

There has been much suffering since they bought the land.

Time has passed.

The people here heard they purchased the land for the community.

But.

Now today, much time has already passed. I don't even know how much, three or four years. The community has suffered a lot.

We, for example, me like a young person. I am a young man. I see my elders in the middle of these four years. Some, some elders wanted to put their feet on the ground of our land.

But, in those four years they have left us.

And that is the suffering.

That is the suffering.

So that our elders can step on the land, the land of the future of the community.

But that is the fight.

The fight of the community.

There is the entry.

Today there is the entry. That is to say the road, so that one day the community can go.

Go, and know, and live, and project their future.

I grew up on the side of the road, in the midst of the suffering.

Akakuaa rutacotare, en el medio del sufrimiento.