MANDATE OF INVISIBILITY

Reflections on an Ongoing Investigation About Gender Expressions in the Bolivian Chaco

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Abstract

This article addresses ethical and methodological challenges I encountered while conducting fieldwork in the town of Camiri, between May 2023 and December 2024, as part of a research project on gender diversity in the Bolivian Chaco. Through the analysis of interviews with non-heterosexual people and my field notes, emerged the concept of mandate of invisibility, which refers to what is allow or not to be seen, in relation to gender expression and sexual identity. I reflect on how this mandate affects my work as a researcher and the impact my presence has in relation to the tensions between visibility and invisibility.

Keywords: *queer anthropology, sex-gender diversity, Bolivian Chaco, ethnography, mandate of invisibility*

In memory of Ramona

Introducing Camiri's Diversity

Camiri is a small town in the Bolivian Chaco that flourished during the mid-20th-century "oil boom" (Gustafson 2020). Located within Guaraní territory and surrounded by Guaraní communities, the town today faces the decline and crisis of natural gas extraction. Alongside cattle ranching, these extractive economies have been central to the colonization of the region, shaping enduring class, racial, and gender hierarchies. In the local context, land and cattle are largely concentrated in the hands of white settlers—referred to in Guaraní as *karai*. Differences between karai and Guaraní are marked by economic inequality and unequal access to basic resources. While the urban fabric of the region is characterized by considerable ethnic and racial diversity, Camiri and nearby towns are primarily identified as *karai* spaces.

In addition to the presence of karai and Guaraní, Aymara and Quechua from the western highlands have long migrated to the eastern lowlands, including the Chaco, in search of work and better opportunities. Locally, these indigenous migrants are pejoratively referred to as *collas*.[1] One of the protagonists of this article, Antonella, earnestly tells me: "I am colla,

[1] The term colla dates back to the Inca Empire, when Colla-suyu referred to the region we now know as the highlands of Bolivia. Today, the term colla refers to indigenous people of that territory but is used mainly in a pejorative manner in the Bolivian lowlands.

DOI 10.36950/sjsca.2026.33.11911

I admit it, before it bothered me to be called that way, but now I accept it." Antonella is a trans, migrant, Aymara descendent woman, who settled in Camiri after moving with her family through several cities and towns across the country. She is one of several non-heterosexual people I came to know during my fieldwork.

When I first arrived in rural Guaraní communities looking for non-heterosexual people, my questions about the existence of same-sex couples often provoked giggles among locals. "That hasn't arrived here yet," remarked a Guaraní woman leader as we traveled together from the town of Macharetí to the community of Carandayticito, suggesting that such practices were perceived as belonging to the karai world, external to their own. Testimonies of this kind eventually led me to Camiri.

In Camiri, I conducted interviews with several non-heterosexual individuals. The main protagonists of this article—Ana, José, Mauricio, Ramona, Catherine, Leo, Tino, and Aurelio[2]—each share different elements of in/visibility, and are either karais, mestizos, collas or Guaraní. However, such categories can be problematic when it comes to self-identification versus etic categorizations. As Canessa points out, because indigenous identity denotes historically marginalized and oppressed people, in Bolivia few actually want to be referred to as such, even if they recognize that status. "It is—a few radical politicians notwithstanding—largely a designation offered by others and is rarely embraced by people not actively involved in indigenous politics" (Canessa 2012, 6).

Most of the persons I met in Camiri reject the categorization of "indigenous." As an example of how confusing these categorizations can be, José, a bisexual man, told me he never thought of himself as Guaraní, even though everybody I interviewed refer to him as such. Ana, who is a lesbian, remembers her Guaraní grandmother pealing corn in the backyard and talking in her native language. Now, as a young woman who was born and raised in Camiri, she acquiesced to being identified as karai, despite her Guaraní ancestry. However, she has attempted to settle in a nearby Guaraní community, but people there do not recognize her as one of their own. The fact that she "looks like a man" has also been motive of rejection, and some have openly expressed fear of their daughters getting near her. Similarly, those whose families have migrated from the highlands recognize their parents as Aymara or Quechua, but find it difficult to recognize themselves as such, as they are estranged from their parent's communities of origin.

"Whiteness" in Camiri, and Bolivia in general, is often related to a privileged class condition. I am a white, Uruguayan woman who migrated to Bolivia fourteen years ago. As a result, people in the Chaco expected me to be of wealthy origin, and some were puzzled and disappointed when I explained I actually come from a working-class context.

Though categorizations of race and ethnicity may be ambiguous, the exposure to gender and sexual orientation-based violence differs for those affected by migration, low income, and racism. An intersectional perspective allows understanding how violence does not affect all non-heterosexual people in the same way, but rather intersects with other structural inequalities such as class, ethnicity, geographical location, or religion (Crenshaw 1991). Being a non-heterosexual person of indigenous origin, an internal migrant, or other form of

[2] Mauricio, Ana, Leo, and José are pseudonymous.

otherness, without access to protection networks or economic capital, implies greater exposure to multiple forms of violence.

As to the main topic of this article, visibility in relation to gender expression is also conditioned by these differences. The fact that the first non-heterosexual people who were introduced to me—or came forward—where mostly white or mestizos men and women, who have stable jobs or small businesses, is revealing of such inequality. Most visible, public spaces in Camiri, like the square and its surrounding restaurants are not only reserved for heterosexual expressions of affection and gender performativity, but also mainly for an economically privileged population.

When I first arrived in Camiri, I was surprised by the amount of non-heterosexual people I met, in contrast to what I had observed before in Guaraní communities and smaller towns. In other words, I was confronted with my own preconceptions about how conservative the region actually is. Nonetheless, what seemingly was a peaceful coexistence of heterosexual and non-heterosexual individuals soon revealed underlying violence, both physical and structural.

Between Physical and Structural Violence: Invisibility and other Forms of Violence

Antonella, as a trans woman, walks through the streets of Camiri with both self-confidence and discretion. She knows she is being watched, as she remarks one night while pointing out that people in the main square are staring at us. This awareness surfaced repeatedly in my interviews: to remain in Camiri, to live without facing retaliation, one cannot be "scandalous," as both Leo—a young gay man—and Antonella explained to me that evening in the square. Even the town's most established and socially accepted gay couple avoid displaying affection in public.

Explaining why they remain discreet about their sexuality, some contrasted the example of Ramona, a transgender woman who was brutally attacked in Villamontes, a nearby town, ten years ago. While recovering at her home in Camiri and unable to move, Ramona took her own life. She had often been seen in the company of a close friend, also a transgender woman; together they expressed themselves openly, dressed provocatively, and mocked the conservative scrutiny imposed on them. Since Ramona's death, however, her friend has rarely appeared in public, avoids speaking about her, and no longer walks the streets of Camiri with the same carefree defiance.

Antonella herself experienced multiple forms of violence throughout her migrant trajectory. While living in the city of Santa Cruz, at the age of ten and unable to conceal her departure from hegemonic masculinity, she was stabbed together with her first love—a sixteen-year-old teenager—while they were selling candy on the street. She woke up in the hospital only to learn that her partner had been murdered. Experiences of gender-based violence within her family were also recurrent.

Later, in Camiri, a violent dispute with a teenage boyfriend over his involvement with a cisgender woman ended with him physically assaulting her and calling her out on her parents: "Your son is a faggot; he wants to be a woman." Troubled by the suspicion that she

had been rejected precisely because she was "not yet a woman," the eighteen-year-old Antonella decided to leave Camiri for Santa Cruz, returning only after completing her transition process.

Mauricio, son of a Quechua migrant woman from Potosí and a local man, tells me he tried to break through invisibility, participating in a few activist initiatives an NGO put forward ten years ago in Camiri. His mother encountered a photograph of him in one of these events, beat him repeatedly, and demanded he leave the house. He understands his mom, he said. She was only fourteen years old when she arrived alone in Camiri and gave birth to him with barely sixteen. She feared rejection from Camiri's society, which she had already suffered for being colla. In order to stay in the house, he was forced to hide his sexual orientation.

Other accounts mention bullying in school. Juan, for example, recalls that one of his fellow classmates was locked in a wardrobe by other kids due to his "effeminate" tone of voice. This was determining in Juan's vigilance of his own way of talking.

José, who did not recognize himself as Guaraní, told me that there are gay Guaraní men, but that they are obliged to get married, have children, and silence their sexuality in order to stay in the communities. Similarly, gay men I interviewed agree on the fact that there are many "false straight men" in town, who search for their company now and then.

Reviewing my field notes I find the following statement: "Antonella is the only trans girl in Camiri, probably in the region." Moreover, for the first version of the abstract that I submit for this special issue to my colleagues of the "Queer and Indigenous (Dis)Encounters" project, I find myself stating that "Antonella is the only trans girl in the region." These assertions were prior to knowing the stories of Ramona and her friend, and of meeting Catherine, a Guaraní transwoman who lives in a nearby community.

However, once Ramona's death is mentioned in an interview, I realized that this is not the first time I heard about her. During my encounter with Leo and Antonella in the square, Leo had already mentioned her: "she's discreet," he said, pointing respectfully towards Antonella, "not like *that other one*. She was quite scandalous," At that moment, I was not prompt enough to inquire further about who *that other one* was. Instead, I inquired about what to be "scandalous" meant. He explained that there is no major trouble if you are gay in Camiri, as long as you do not behave too "effeminate."

In the conversation with Leo and Antonella there is a concealment of Ramona's full story, although it is partially used as an example. Though her death is not openly talked about, it does not lose its disciplinary quality. When Ramona's murder is addressed in some of the interviews, the main complaint is not about violence itself, so much as about the inadequate conduct that provoked it. In Camiri, non-heterosexual persons themselves may point out the behavior considered appropriate in terms of gender expression.

Antonella does not openly defy the rules of behavior considered adequate to any other woman: she dresses discreetly and avoids drawing attention on herself. This notion was reinforced when she explained to me that when she dates men, it is she who insists on not appearing in public with them. She has also invested large amounts of money on what she recalls as a very painful (though very much desired) transition, which makes it hard to distinguish her form cis-women in town.

As a researcher I have translated this mandate of invisibility into my field notes. I allowed, a priori, my analysis to circumscribe to what I was allowed to see by denying the existence of others who could fit into the "trans" category. Underlying this mandate, is the binarism of "feminine" and "masculine." Not only demonstrations of affection are repressed in public spaces, but also gay men are prompted to avoid "effeminate" gender expression, and lesbian woman are celebrated when they assume a hegemonic femininity. What happens in the intimacy of a room is not a problem, as long as it is not associated with a public gender expression contrary to heteronormativity and binarity.

In the case of trans women, invisibility is a bigger challenge. Unlike Antonella, Ramona had not gone through surgery, her friend either, but they were both visibly "effeminate." Their gender otherness was explicit, which, as many stated, could be related to the fatal punishment Ramona received.

Catherine wears short hair and chooses to dress as local men normally do. Only on special occasions, she puts on makeup and a long blond wig or colorful 1920s flapper style headbands, skirts or dresses. She carries out domestic and care work in the house of an oil engineer, in a nearby community, under the wife's command and without pay. "They take care of me," she said, "I have clothes and a good bed, the lady is my friend. Sometimes I want to escape for a few days, but my friend won't let me, she begs me to stay. The children are very fond of me too." To earn some cash, every day she puts out a bucket of *somó*, a cold drink made of previously boiled corn, in the entrance of the house, which she sells for two pesos bolivianos a glass. She spends most of her time in the domestic, private sphere and rarely visits Camiri. However, she is an important part of Camiri's annual town celebration. The fact that she becomes visible only during the annual parade illustrates how trans visibility is often confined to spectacular and stereotyped forms of representation that obscure everyday lives and struggles (Valentine 2007; Namaste 2000; Ochoa 2014).

Gender is not an essential identity, but rather a repetitive practice regulated by social norms that define what is intelligible, gaining legitimacy through the public repetition of stylized acts (Butler 1990). Those whose way of being in the world deviates from binary norms are monitored, punished, and/or excluded. Surveillance of gender performativity in Camiri is exercised in everyday spaces: schools, families, churches, streets, and squares. This control, as Foucault warns, produces disciplined subjectivities (Foucault 1979).

Berlant and Warner explore this idea in their notion of "heteronormative public space," where the visibility of dissident affections is not only delegitimized but directly excluded (Berlant and Warner 1998). They assert that "heteronormative intimacy is naturalized to the point of becoming invisible, while queer intimacy always becomes public and scandalous." This generates a regime of monitored affection where any dissident affection—a kiss, a hug, a caress—becomes grounds for censure.

In Camiri, the weight of the churches and conservative family networks—which shape the moral norms of the collective space—produce a forced invisibility that restricts dissident bodies to the private sphere. The impossibility of being visible in affection or bodily expression is a form of violence that acts on everyday aspects of life: how to walk, how to dress, how to look, how to love. In Wayar's, an Argentinean trans-travesty activist, words: "It's not just that they kill us, but that they make us live lives in which we can't even walk hand in hand with someone we love." (Wayar 2018)

Ethical and Methodological Challenges: Precipitating Visibility with my Presence

From the owner of the hotel to the lady who sells me empanadas, they want to know what business brings me there. Here arises the first ethical dilemma. It is unethical to lie to the locals about my research topic, but to say it openly precipitates the visibility of a subject that is deliberately hidden. Likewise, once my interest is revealed, the fact of showing myself in public with somebody raises doubts about their sexuality. My presence disturbs the mandate of invisibility.

What if the visibility that precipitates my presence in the field ends up in retaliation against the people who trust me their stories? The dilemma is significant because more than a dozen non-heterosexual people were interested in participating in this research. On the one hand, there is an adherence to the mandate of invisibility; on the other hand, there is also a desire for change.

For Ana it is difficult to hide her estrangement from hegemonic femininity. She rolls her eyes with annoyance remembering how celebrated she was at the last festival at work, for which she wore makeup, earrings, and a skirt. They may suspect she is a lesbian, but avoid asking, and she prefers not to confirm it. They value her silence.

Ana handed me a gift. A t-shirt that says "HUMAN" and has in each letter the color of one of the flags that represent different forms of sex-gender diversity. Its gray color has worn out and the fabric formed little balls due to repeated use. I can tell it was not kept locked in her closet; she probably wore it in the privacy of her house. Ana and the others exercise a difficult balance between observing the rules and looking for small loopholes for transgression, where to be oneself beyond heteronormativity.

The presence of researchers on these matters has an impact: it precipitates visibility, while enabling the desire to tell silenced stories. In the final stages of research, those who participated manifested that it made them consider the possibility of becoming visible. The transformation is not unilateral. This research made me question my own gender expression. Antonella's suffering over male rejection mirrors my past efforts to please the mal gaze. My attempts to go unnoticed as a pansexual woman in certain circumstances in Bolivia reveal themselves as small acts of violence, as well as my prior adherence to narratives of non-existence of other trans persons in Camiri. I have become aware that disciplinary fear lies within me as well.

Finally, I made some small adjustments in order to make this investigation as safe as possible. Most of the interviews were held in my hotel room or the house of those interviewed. Nonetheless, if it is a matter of preserving the mandate of invisibility, then why conduct this research? The stories I collected instilled in me both fear and certainty that we must name this violence, make it visible, research about it, and fight against it.

Linked to the boundaries between visibility and invisibility are the ways people inhabit public and private spaces. Though often confined to the private sphere, dissident gender expression surfaces in the liminal zones between both. Luis and Aurelio run a small restaurant at the front of their house—a threshold between home and street. Those who take a seat there know that they may see Luis dancing gracefully with his apron on while cooking, and that Aurelio and close friends will be there; therefore, it is a place where heteronormativity is somewhat

challenged. They are the most visible gay couple in town, although they rarely show affection in public. Luis also led some activist initiatives. Yet their visibility is tied to being karai, university graduates, and successful business owners, in contrast to the invisibility of others

Conclusions

Violence directed at people with dissident sexualities and genders operates not only through visible acts such as physical assaults but also through the imposition of fear as a tool of social control. This fear, which is daily and tacit, functions as a mechanism that reinforces surveillance over bodies and regulates who and how inhabit public spaces.

My presence in Camiri precipitated visibility in a way I could hardly control without being dishonest about my research. Tensions between a desire to tell one's story and to remain discreet in order to avoid retaliations arose in my encounters in Camiri. These leave open questions about how far one can get to know transgression to heteronormativity in the Bolivian Chaco, without accessing the intimate spheres of daily life and relations.

Reviewing my field notes, I recall the excitement with which Antonella described her teenage bedroom. It was her "cave." There she "had everything;" she would cross-dress, put on make-up and look blissfully at herself in the mirror. How many caves of pleasure are there in Camiri, out of sight? How far can this ongoing research truly reveal the transgressions to heteronormativity without accessing the invisible and the intimate? In spite of this limitation, liminality between private and public spheres of life is the privileged space where this ethnography can reveal forms of transgression.

Mandatory invisibility in Camiri is not only a form of violence towards gender and sexual diversity, but also a strategy to avoid exile. Rather than victims, non-heterosexual people in the Chaco are invisible heroes, who stubbornly remain in this context, gaining quotidian victories over heteronormativity in the liminality between public and private spheres, challenging the mandate of invisibility.

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