"Erasing a Mural Does Not Erase Reality": Queer Visibility, Urban Policing, and the Double Life of a Mural in Ecuador

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ABSTRACT

Halted by the police, repeatedly defaced, and ultimately erased, the mural *El Amor No Tiene Género* (Love Has No Gender) lasted less than one week on the streets of Quito before it disappeared under a layer of whitewash in July 2019. The image – a trio of kissing couples – was painted by local street artist Apitatán to celebrate Ecuador's landmark approval of marriage equality. Its destruction inspired widespread media coverage, direct-action activism, and institutional support for the mural which culminated in its revival two months later. This article investigates what the double life of Apitatán's mural reveals about the politics of visibility in Quito at a critical moment of consolidating political rights for the country's LGBTQ community. Drawing on digital ethnography and storytelling methods, I weave together these two visibility disputes – about the mural and about queer love – to illustrate how public visibility is always contingent. To do so, my analysis explores the interplay between erasure and policing practices to enforce conditions of visibility within the urban environment.

KEY WORDS

Erasure; policing; murals; queer visibility; marriage equality; Quito

When Apitatán, an eminent street artist in Quito, halted his painting activities earlier in the week, the mural was nearly finished. It featured a series of portraits: three women and three men split into a trio of pairings and dispersed down the length of the wall. A heterosexual couple locked lips in the middle, flanked on either side by equally amorous LGBTQ twosomes. Each individual presented in a singular color. Progressing from red to purple, the characters coalesced into the visual effect of a rainbow. The full image delivered an ode to love in all forms and combinations. All that remained to complete were the details of decorative foliage that would flow behind the foregrounded figures. But before the artist could return to finalize these last marks, the mural disappeared.

On Friday 5 July 2019, two men – one in full-bodied navy coveralls and a brimmed hat obscuring his face; another dressed more casually in a t-shirt and jeans – arrived at the wall and painted over the entire surface in white (Apitatán, 2020; El Telégrafo, 2019c). Who exactly had arranged for the mural's removal remained unclear, although one local newspaper pinned responsibility on a company, Financoop, which owned a neighboring property and, purportedly, the site in question (El Telégrafo, 2019c, 2019d). The workmen finally left after stamping the wall's midsection with large red letters that announced *Se Vende* – For Sale – in allusion to the empty lot tucked away behind it.

This coverup, however, was not the first attempt at the mural's destruction. In the days prior, someone had vandalized two of the depicted couples (see Image 1). An anonymous assailant painted lines of X's, sprayed in blue, that cut down vertically between the adjoining faces of the women and men located on either end of the wall. It was as if this crossing out attempted to physically separate their points of contact, to push apart where their tongues entangled and their lips pressed against one another. The middle couple, by contrast, remained untouched. Shortly thereafter, the mural suffered a second attack. This time someone hurled white paint at the image, targeting the same two lovers as before. Hastily applied with the fling of a brush, matte white obscured the colorful portraits in splotches and splatters that bled together with leaking trails, dripping down to the ground. Whereby the earlier assault strove to thwart the characters' actions, the second comprised a more deliberate attempt to mask their identifying features, to eliminate their very existence on the wall. Again, throughout it all, the hetero couple at the center emerged unscathed. Doubled up, the defacements' sustained and targeted aim across the panel of portraits rendered their homophobic message unambiguous.

This article investigates the accumulative erasure of Apitatán's mural *El Amor No Tiene Género* (Love Has No Gender)[1] and the aftermath of this destructive impulse. I follow the mural's storyline from early attempts to disrupt and dismantle the artistic production through to its resurrection on the streets of Quito several months later. My analysis retraces how acts of vandalism and vitriolic rhetoric became bound within the application of whitewash, just as it draws out multiple embodied efforts to recuperate the mural's presence in the cityscape. By taking this protracted view of events, I envision erasure as implicating more than the physical removal of the image. Such an approach instead positions this aesthetic altercation as entangled in much deeper contentions over a politics of visibility within the public sphere.

Originally painted to celebrate Ecuador's landmark 2019 ruling on marriage equality, the double life of Apitatán's mural illuminates conditions of queer visibility in Quito's public spaces at a critical moment of consolidating political rights for the country's LGBTQ community. As Emil Edenborg asserts, "questions of visibility are central in discussions of global queer politics" (2019: 1). A visibility framework offers a prism for analyzing queer liberation and advocacy as well as queer oppression and the policing of heteronormative values (Edenborg, 2019: 2). Unpicking the homophobic underpinnings of this image destruction, I explore how the erasure of Apitatán's mural, and its later revival, grants insight to ongoing struggles over the visibility of LGBTQ citizens in Ecuador. My analysis pays attention to the presence of certain bodies and identities at different moments in this story, in an effort to grasp contingencies delimiting their visualization in public space. By weaving together these two visibility disputes – about the mural and about queer love – this article demonstrates how the destruction of public art often entwines with other processes of exclusion and omission in the urban sphere, and how controversies engulfing these works likewise reveal the mechanics of suppression against perceived infractions to the (hetero)normative landscape. In recounting the tale of *Love Has No Gender*, I highlight the potential for a close reading of erasure to enhance our vision of the webs of politics and power embedded within the structures and aesthetics of the cityscape.

Discussions of erasure and urban art typically filter through a framework of graffiti abatement or zero tolerance policies adopted by a multitude of cities around the world (see Arnold, 2019; Shobe and Banis, 2014; Stewart and Kortright, 2015). In these circumstances, the removal process becomes a routine component of urban maintenance used to produce and enforce a "semiotic ordering of public spaces" by eliminating elements deemed intrusive or disruptive (Karlander, 2018: 3). These governance strategies exert control by conforming the city to an aesthetics of authority (Ferrell, 1996). In Latin America, by extension, mass eradication of graffiti and street art routinely occurs under beautification or cleaning programs intent on sanitizing the urban environment (see Larruscahim and

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[1] All translations from Spanish to English are my own, including many direct quotes cited in this article.

Schweizer, 2017; Morrison, 2017, 2020). Contrasting policies aimed at an entire category of markings, however, the erasure of Apitatán's mural points to a highly targeted revision.

To attend to this distinction, I embrace an expanded vision of erasure in the public sphere. Erasure is never innocuous; it transforms the public's relationship to the obliterated content (Fibiger, 2015). Such deletions reshape physical and ideological cartographies of the city, where a logic of erasure – like the cleansing of pathologized populations or the denial of historical residency rights – often underpins ideas of urban development (Morrison, 2020; Ozaki, 2021; Vacanti Brondo, 2018). Missing elements further reveal their loss in the construction of urban narratives about identity and memory which strip away the existence of entire communities, histories, geographies, and knowledges. Erasure forms "part of the infrastructure of forgetting, sanctioned ignorance that masks and perpetuates constitutive power relations" (Hawkesworth, 2010: 285). This expulsive performance, too, can constitute an act of violence (Ginn and Ascensão, 2018). Honing in on these forceful undertones, this article contributes to theorizing erasure by drawing out its interplay with practices of policing to regulate and enforce conditions of visibility within the urban environment.

Materializing the Story

Before immersing in the narrative at hand, I should comment on the making of this article. It is worth highlighting from the outset that this case study fits into a longstanding research agenda. My understanding of this material builds on knowledge cultivated over 15 years of ethnographic engagement, fieldwork, and successive research projects on urban art and, more recently, its erasure in multiple Latin American cities (see Morrison, 2017, 2020). While my research design in this instance reflects mobility constraints imposed by the global Covid-19 pandemic, these are digital methods that I have refined over many years as an integral part of my broader ethnographic research on this topic. This familiarity, in both material and method, primes my analysis of the Quito erasure.

I embrace a multiplatform and multimodal approach to digital research methods as I turn an ethnographic eye to online media and public discourses about the mural in question. Moving away from the distant vantage points of big data visualizations, engagement metrics, or metanarratives, I instead hone in on the minutiae of this material. I query keywords, key actors, and hashtags and follow hyperlink trails to dredge up digital content, later reassembled like bits of a mosaic. It is a process I frame as digital excavation. This approach aligns with strategies to map online public debates by gathering "the many objects – visuals included – that are used in debates about controversial issues on digital platforms" (Rabello et al, 2021: 4). To be effective, my methods acknowledge "the importance of researching across multiple social media platforms to tell a rich story about social phenomena" (Pearce et al, 2020: 163). Such a multimodal cross-platform analysis is implemented, in practical terms, by adapting modes of data collection to account for "the affordances and structures of the platforms themselves" in order to capture the array of texts, still and moving images, and audio content featured on these sites (Pearce et al, 2020: 164, 168). The data collected extends beyond user-generated material, too. For instance, hyperlinks – now a ubiquitous feature of contemporary digital publishing – not only connect content across platforms but also can lead to original documents, such as policy briefs, that I would otherwise seek out through more traditional archival methods.

My writing, therefore, draws on a rich corpus of multimedia documents: tweets, photos, and footage released on Twitter; Instagram posts; videos uploaded to YouTube; Facebook event announcements and live-feeds; digital radio programs; newspaper and government websites; official press releases; activist blogs; even TED Talks. Throughout the excavation process, I remain mindful of the serious ethical considerations and practical decisions faced by online researchers to navigate the nexus of politics, visibility, and power within digital domains (Morrow et al, 2015: 537, 539). Accordingly, I refrain from referencing posts or comments that originate from the general public. I take care to build

my story around sources from recognizably public entities and established public figures. Amongst these, a primary account of events in Quito emerges through the products of local journalism. Ecuadorian newspapers *El Telégrafo* and *El Comercio* each regularly reported on unfolding developments between the breaking of this scandal in July 2019 and the inauguration of a replacement mural in September that year. Mainstream publishing complemented commentaries by alternative news outlets, blogs, and social media accounts involved in local LGBTQ activism. Collectively, these journalistic sources build up a picture of the social actors involved, just as they instruct on a public framing of this conflict. Statements released by government agencies – typically to condemn the mural defacement or to announce its relaunch – similarly impart the strategic positioning of institutions within the Ecuadorian political establishment.

Public reporting on this story not only delivers information in writing; visual components prove equally revealing. Defying persistent trends within social research to privilege textual analysis, "images play an increasingly important role across all prominent social media platforms" where visual data uniquely "captures their storytelling capacities, affective rhythms, and publics" (Pearce et al, 2020: 164, 165). My research process highlights how images are integral to producing narratives fostered in online spaces (Pearce et al, 2020: 165). Photographs illustrating digital publications – typically positioned as secondary to an article's written content – offer valuable visual evidence of the site under dispute and the substitute locale. They capture erasure actions in progress, bodies gathered in protest, and the highly publicized production of a new mural. Video footage, both edited and live-streamed, details spatial and social dynamics as they played out during pivotal events, elements hard to relay in writing alone. Filming further comprises a powerful illustrative tool for activist media or for acts of witnessing. These short clips amass into an audiovisual record to track, for instance, interactions with the authorities and the police as they shift across time and space. A key contributor to these multimedia sources is the artist at the center of this conflict. Not only did Apitatán actively speak to media outlets in the wake of his mural's disappearance and in the leadup to its revival, he also produced a substantial subset of visual documents that circulated independently on his social media accounts.

Once assembled, these materials allow me to reconstruct a timeline of events and to untangle competing narratives. They also enable me to observe subtle dimensions of visibility and exclusion within the urban landscape. I achieve this by moving fluidly between two modes of content analysis: triangulation and layered readings. A process of triangulation across textual, visual, and audio files functions as a verification mechanism. I search out corroborating sources derived from diverse authors and media formats to bulk out my vision of key events. I cross-reference facts and arguments reported by written accounts with the optical depth captured in images and the spontaneity of diegetic sound. Triangulation further aids in crafting a more nuanced story by aggregating details dispersed across disparate sources. These are compiled in ways that draw out the "different communicative work" conveyed by each media type as objects produced for distinct purposes and audiences (Pearce et al, 2020: 166). Layered readings enhance this analytical approach. I review sources to filter out multiple spheres of data that extend beyond the primary focus of their content. Engaged in this dynamic manner, still and moving images facilitate a way to sense actions and atmosphere on the ground, and to glean insights from performative dimensions of these encounters, even while researching from afar. These digital records – revealing the physicality of movements, the spatiality of bodies – bridge virtual and material worlds, rousing reflexivity on how "data are generated at this interface" (Morrow et al, 2015: 534). In particular, I closely read the subtleties of scenery and background figures caught incidentally in visual formats. Such unintended peripheral content divulges subtexts and submerged narratives that greatly expand the interpretive possibilities of these materials.

This article weaves together visual fragments and textual threads, excavated from the digital public sphere, to divulge the larger picture they compose when viewed in unison. I do so through a conscious use of narrative writing to bring this tale to life. Each scene is fashioned from information and

observations gathered through the combined methods of digital excavation, triangulation, and layered readings. Original sources for these insights – emanating, for example, from part of a video or an article's lead photograph – are cited throughout the text. My embrace of storytelling to compose this analysis represents, in many ways, an experiment in how to extend the craft of writing ethnography (Ghodsee, 2016; McGranahan, 2020) when fieldwork and field sites shift online. Telling stories revels in the ability of "rich narrative details [to] inform interpretive analysis" (Ghodsee, 2016: 32). As a method that deliberately "opens up space to engage with personal, lived, embodied experiences," storytelling offers a way to investigate and to articulate the effects of larger social systems and political processes "at the level of individual lives and bodies" (Daigle, 2016: 26). Or, in this case, a mural.

Policing the Wall

The mural's defacement – its imagery literally de-faced – and subsequent demise followed on from an unexpected interference of a different sort that occurred on the original day of painting. That prior Monday, on the first of the month, Apitatán and a small group of friends made their way over to *calle* Fernando Ayarza in the Bellavista neighborhood and set to work around midday. Over several hours they advanced the mural, sculpting and detailing the six central figures, when suddenly they were stopped by the police. At four o'clock in the afternoon, multiple officers from the Policía Nacional del Ecuador, the national police force, descended on the wall to halt the mural's production.

Apitatán took out his phone to film the scene unfurling before him. Standing, it would appear, at the edge of the pavement, he pans the camera from left to right in a single sweep.[2] Its frame rotates from an initial shot of the mural-in-progress, past a cluster of uniformed officers, past a police vehicle and motorcycle pulled up to the sidewalk, past another cop and a woman who converse just beyond the parked car – hazard lights still flashing and protruding into the road – and over to a view of oncoming traffic that drives steadily by. Neighboring apartment buildings, some completed and others under construction, fill in the background. In total, the clip runs for a mere 13 seconds. But it is enough time for Apitatán to deliver a tactical message. Heard speaking from behind the camera, his voice alerts prospective viewers of the artists' location and their predicament that "the police don't want to let us finish the artwork" (in El Comercio, 2019a). The brief narration ends with a plea for assistance, asking if anyone with relevant contacts could send help their way. In combination, the image and audio point to a dual civic intent for making this recording: to accrue public witnesses and to summon support as, once uploaded to social media, the video's content quickly amplified over the Twittersphere. Apitatán's words just as his tone hint at the unusualness of the situation he now faced, the unusualness of such a heavy-handed response to the production of a mural. This was not a routine encounter.

After investing four hours and his own funds in painting the wall, the police intervention forced Apitatán to abandon the project midway through. At least six uniformed officers stood guard at the mural once the artist and crew cleared away. The president of the Bellavista neighborhood association confirmed these numbers when giving statements to local media about that afternoon's events: some nine police officers had arrived in a patrol car, two more by motorcycle, while a further vehicle from the Metropolitan Control Agency carted agents charged with regulating the use of Quito's public space (in El Telégrafo, 2019c). This throng of officials converged along the side of the road, all sent in response to the presence of a single street artist and five or so other individuals assisting with the visual production. A photograph, shot from across the street, shows how officers aligned their bodies with the parked police truck to form a barrier obstructing a clear view of the unfinished mural (see Image 2). They manned the wall with backs to the image, surveying the street, on the look out to

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[2] *El Comercio* (2019a) newspaper disseminated a copy of this video on their Twitter account.

intercept any breach attempted by sly individuals gaming to reignite the artistic process. At the time, Apitatán argued how little sense it made not to let him finish the artwork given that the majority of its content already graced the wall: "The message is already there, I just wanted to finish it, but they won't let me add the final touches" of highlights, shadows, and other details applied to round out the composition (in El Telégrafo, 2019a). An hour or two more and he could have completed the mural in full. Yet the police had refrained from detaining the artist only on condition that painting activities cease.

Apitatán spoke in more detail about his experience of police intimidation in a radio interview broadcast a few days after this incident and the subsequent episodes of vandalism. During the 11-minute segment with Andrés 'El Mono' López for his headlined show on Radio Visión Ecuador, the artist recounted how the attending officers threatened him with arrest, a hefty fine, and seizure of all his paints if he dared return to imprint the surface with even one more line (Apitatán, 2019a). Hearing about the law enforcement's alleged comportment, the radio host pressed further, only to learn from Apitatán that the entire wall had been painted over in white, *blanqueada*, that very morning. With López clearly shocked upon learning of the erasure escalation live on-air, the conversation quickly pivoted from the contentions of vandalism to a more serious suppressive claim. "So, the artwork no longer exists," continued Apitatán, "In a way it put an end to that whole controversy, but [this removal] is a very strong act of censorship" (2019a: 8:50). An intent to censor, in fact, cuts across the mural's visual evolution from crossing out to coverup. These origins trace back to a pair of discursive frameworks used to validate interference in the public painting process in the first place.

Framing the Painting

Back at the wall during that initial altercation, the police justified their presence and their shutdown of the mural production by informing Apitatán that he did not have the correct permissions in place to proceed with his artwork. As specified in media reports, the artist supposedly lacked authorization from the Municipality of Quito, the local branch of government, deemed mandatory for such a project (El Telégrafo, 2019d; Fundamedios, 2019). Never mind that Apitatán sought out approval from the Bellavista neighborhood association. Never mind that he obtained permission from the president of said association to paint at that site. Never mind that the association president accompanied the painting process, later becoming a vocal advocate in denouncing the police incursion, the acts of vandalism, and the ultimate erasure of the mural. Somehow these other forms of validation proved insufficient, incorrect, noncompliant.

The police rationale extols the protocols of the legislated city, where the urban experience becomes "encapsulated and produced through the regulation of space" (Young, 2014: 41). Such legal architecture governs civic conduct through a grid of strategic plans, social policies, and ordinances enforced by local laws (Young, 2014: 41, 43). Under this framework, the streetscape becomes defined by a condition of ownership, where titled possession of property extends to the licensing of permitted ways to act "within spaces owned by others" (Young, 2014: 43). Efforts to remove the mural, therefore, exert a form of spatial capital. Imagining the wider implications of this concept, geographer Ryan Centner explains how "the power to take place is the ability not only to win negotiations over the control of space, but also […] to determine when access is questionable or not. Spatial capital thus enables more than entry to a site; it empowers the making of definitions about its usage and reformulation" (2008: 198). Aesthetic modifications to the wall conform to a position of power and spatial domination that links intimately to other modes of capital accumulation, be it economic, cultural, or social (Centner, 2008: 197-198). A similar neoliberal logic radiates from the final words inscribed over the whitewashed surface to announce its purchasable status. This (literal) overwriting draws attention back onto the wall's commercial, rather than aesthetic, value. The reformed visual content adjusts the public view of the wall as perceived through a lens of speculative capitalism.

Arguments of property rights and proper permissions ring hollow, though, when bringing the actual condition of the site into focus. Despite whisperings of an owner living nearby, for all intents and purposes the property was abandoned. An aerial shot of the venue confirmed its fallow status. Published alongside a story about the mural's demise (El Telégrafo, 2019c), the photograph reveals how the wall sealed off a plot of land, undeveloped and overgrown with vegetation. The space just sat there, concealed from public view while awaiting transformation into a high-rise apartment building like those of its rather middle class, residential surroundings. Looking at this empty lot, its outer aesthetic hardly seems worthy of municipal permissions or the concern of law enforcement when the entire site received so little attention. Its shabby state jars with the officers' conviction to impede the making of an artwork that would have, surely, improved the structure's external presentation.

Indeed, the wall itself looked just as unkempt as its hidden interior (see Apitatán, 2020; El Comercio, 2019a; El Telégrafo, 2019a, 2019d). Weeds burst through cracks along its base and invaded, unhindered, the narrow pavement that separated the partition from the road and the traffic to its front. Two massive grey gates broke up the wall into three segments; prior to Apitatán's intervention, both surfaces, metallic and plastered, routinely donned the audacious coverage of graffiti throw-ups and tagging. Placed in contrast to the mural's swift removal, an unspoken tolerance towards these marks of 'vandalism' proves counterintuitive. It runs against the popular grain of thought about urban aesthetic hierarchies that typically sees muralism as a welcome deterrent against other less desirable inscriptions on the cityscape. Whitewashing the mural, Apitatán argued in accordance, "is absurd because that wall, in that place, is not going to remain blank, it always fills up with graffiti" (in El Telégrafo, 2019c). His assertion resonates with earlier disparities between the police interference in the artistic process and the authorities' notable absence from attending to the multiple midweek attacks which blatantly defaced the wall. Why, the question lingers, did the painting of a mural merit such an intense reaction to prevent its public appearance?

Interrogating this query, Apitatán flags up an uncomfortable truth: "What bothers [them] is the subject of its content not the fact of painting in an abandoned space" (2019a: 4:18). Even as the exact mandate for the mural's final removal remained elusive, prejudice towards the image bubbled up from the beginning. Indeed, it extends all the way back to the original police call out to the wall. Law enforcement had been alerted to Apitatán's painting activities after receiving a complaint from nearby residents (El Telégrafo, 2019a, 2019d). While officers may have professed to the artist a concern about his authorized status, the language of the instigating grievance suggests a different take on the supposed offence. As Apitatán recounts of these initial events, "apparently some neighbors didn't agree" with the mural's appearance on the street and, "through a group chat, they called the police and told them to go stop us painting because we were painting *mariconadas*" (in Fundamedios, 2019). Painting *mariconadas*, the neighbors objected, *gay images*: the English approximation fails to capture the vitriol and intolerance oozing from the Spanish original. The force of that final descriptive term shifts the complaint away from apprehension about an unsuitable activity or spatiality or legality of the painting process and refocuses on the substance of the mural. Casted as intolerable content from the onset, the successive layering of discriminatory rhetoric and actions solidify into an indictment that this portrait of queer love did not belong.

Advancement of Rights

The timing of the mural's destruction lends further gravity to insinuations of unbelonging. Apitatán had painted his mural on the heels of a fresh wave of visibility for the LGBTQ community within the Ecuadorian public sphere. The annual *Marcha del Orgullo LGBTI*[3] (Pride March) had taken place on the

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[3] LGBTI – the 'I' standing for Intersex – is the term typically used in Latin American contexts (Bueno-Hansen 2018: 127); I retain this spelling where it appears in original sources.

previous Saturday. And just three weeks earlier, on 12 June 2019, the country's Constitutional Court passed a landmark ruling to legalize marriage between couples of the same sex. *Matrimonio igualitario* (marriage equality) marked the culmination of a long political struggle to attain rights for LGBTQ individuals which had been building momentum since the late 1990s.

A year on from decriminalizing homosexuality in 1997, Ecuador ratified a new constitution that further expanded civil liberties by prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation (Lind and Keating, 2013: 521-522). Such openings on paper, however, clashed with a sustained conservatism on the ground to produce a deeply "ambivalent form of state inclusion for queer politics" (Lind and Keating, 2013: 516). Pascha Bueno-Hansen reminds us that a formal recognition of LGBTQ equality under Ecuadorian law "has not translated into everyday lived experience, as police continue to mistreat, discriminate against, detain and torture LGBTI individuals," and gender and sexual minorities still face prejudice within the broader cultural sphere (2018: 130). This incongruity emerges acutely within the realm of statecraft. Turning a critical eye to how homosexuality, same-sex marriage, and transgender rights have been addressed within Ecuador's two recent constitutional reforms in 1998 and 2008, Amy Lind and Cricket Keating observe the "seemingly contradictory interplay" between an uptake of homoprotectionist discourses and legislation – such as those affirming individual protections based on sexual orientation and gender identity – and a persistence of homophobic policies (2013: 516). A primary example of this latter tendency manifests in the treatment of marriage specifically, in contrast to otherwise bold ideas promoted by the 2008 Constitution. This document expanded upon its precursor's antidiscrimination clause to provide protection on the basis of gender identity in "a move that includes transgender rights in the polity for the first time," and it enshrined in law a more expansive definition of the *familia diversa* (diverse family) which affirms multiple configurations of family life extending beyond blood kinship (Lind and Keating, 2013: 522-523). Despite these moments of inclusive language, the new constitution also made concessions to conservative political and religious demands levied in the lead up to its ratification by introducing a clause – inexistent in the 1998 version – that defined the institution of marriage exclusively as an act between a man and a woman (Lind and Keating, 2013: 523-525).

In the intervening years, multiple individuals launched legal challenges to upend this reductive interpretation of marriage. In December 2010, trans and judicial activists organized a wedding between a cisgender man and a transgender man, whose legal documents retained an orientation as female, to generate a legal paradox which "forced the state to address head-on the uneasy coalescence between homophobia and homoprotectionism embedded in the Constitution" (Lind and Keating, 2013: 526). Then in August 2013, Pamela Troya and Gabriela Correa arrived at the Civil Registry to request a marriage license. Refused on grounds of the constitutional wording, they appealed to the courts, albeit unsuccessfully (Castro, 2019). Five years later, in May 2018, another gay couple Efraín Soria and Javier Benalcázar attempted to register their marriage in Quito. They, too, were refused and they, too, challenged this decision, where their case made its way up to Ecuador's Constitutional Court (Castro, 2019). Different to before, the verdict now hinged on how national law would be interpreted in light of a declaration emitted by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (2017) which stipulated that member states should guarantee certain rights for LGBTQ citizens. After reviewing this case, alongside that of Rubén Salazar and Carlos Verdesoto, the Constitutional Court concluded – voting five in favor, four against – that the Ecuadorian constitution must be read in conjunction with the mandate from the Inter-American Court. This ruling, announced the following year in June, formally established marriage equality in Ecuador which became the fifth country in Latin America to legalize same-sex marriage.

Apitatán's mural took direct inspiration in this momentous legal milestone for minority rights. The three couples, all passionate and public in their affection, delivered "a message of equality and of how people can identify with the alternatives that exist in the same feeling: love" (Apitatán in El Telégrafo,

2019a). The spirit of his design and the essence of the law converge within Apitatán's chosen title for the mural: *El Amor No Tiene Género*. Simply stated, love has no gender.

Encoding the Erasure

Set within this broader terrain of queer politics and visibility in Quito, the elimination of Apitatán's mural does more than withdraw its content from public view. The intention is farther reaching. Whitewashing offers a simple and effective measure to realign the streetscape in accordance with an intended set of values, aesthetic and otherwise. As the final stage of the mural's incremental disarticulation, removal rids the wall of its outer image. This action redacts, purges, an unwanted presence or unspeakable idea from the larger urban picture on display. It envelops the wall, as Ana Cristina Basantes so evocatively writes, "in a white coating, as if the neighborhood were a bleached tomb: the rottenness, inside" (2019). Stuffed down, rendered out of sight. In this moment, the act of erasure embodies an effort to suppress.

A similar suppressive drive pervades that first loaded complaint about the mural's appearance. Insight to this tacit function arises from observations about the deployment of anti-LGBTQ rhetoric within contemporary statecraft. While readily disregarded as indicating supposedly static religious values or allegedly traditional attitudes about sexuality, these prejudicial framings in the political arena often double as a mechanism to maintain or defend control over the masculinist state (Currier, 2010; Lind and Keating, 2013: 518). Everyday activations of homophobic language likewise can advance unspoken agendas. Back in Bellavista, the neighbors' elected vocabulary – so casual yet deliberate in its violence – did more than simply call on the police to go and check out the painting activities; it delivered a call *to police*. Encoded within this discursive device lies a message about a need to patrol the spatial and aesthetic norms of the city itself. From the complaint's implicit homophobia to the targeted deletions on the image, from the policing of the wall to the mural's ultimate destruction, these discrete actions assert a vision of heteronormativity as much as they suppress queerness within the public sphere. Queer erasures flatten; they reduce the textured realities of urban life into an impression of uniformity, a singular surface narrative undisturbed and uncontested as it disperses across the cityscape.

The perceived transgressions of queer visibilities speak to longer histories of power, space, and visuality in Latin American cities. Writing from a neighboring Andean context and in response to the Museo Travesti del Perú project by performance artist Giuseppe Campuzano, Miguel López highlights how deviant imagery in public artworks can reinsert lost or erased (hi)stories back into the fabric of the city. He frames Campuzano's deliberate queering of religious iconography and urban histories as "a critical response to colonial processes in Latin America" with the power to "disable the strong component of heteronormative religious morality that organizes and controls behaviour in public space" (López, 2013: 13). Such "sexo-political" art actions intervene "in the codes that divide the social body into normal subjects and sick subjects, into proper sexualities and deviant sexualities" (López, 2013: 13). These encoded erasures are very much intentional: "That a long historical silence around dissident sexualities has existed until this day is not a mere oversight, for it has been a persistent site of production of subjectivities and behaviours that have been passed down as fact" (López, 2013: 16). This analysis contributes to a decolonial critique of entrenched patterns of moral condemnation against gender and sexual minorities in Latin America by "exposing the colonial ontological underpinnings of violence and erasure that endure to the present" (Bueno-Hansen, 2018: 141). Opening urban visuality to the experiences and expressions of other subjectivities, to queerness, challenges the hegemony of a devout conservativism and the foundational narratives that sustain masculinist and patriarchal values as societal norms.

The controversy of *Love Has No Gender*, in turn, throws into relief how the acceptable parameters of Quito's urban environment run along deeply restrictive, and heteronormative, lines. It further exposes how homophobia becomes codified into the visual sphere. In the wake of marriage equality, the erasure of Apitatán's mural emerges as an extension of a broader conservative backlash towards the formalization of progressive sexual politics and protection of gender rights under the law. Elsewhere the president of the Ecuadorian Episcopal Conference launched a vocal attack against the Court's ruling; the ultraconservative group *Con Mis Hijos No Te Metas* (Don't Mess With My Children) – an anti-LGBTQ movement active throughout the Andes region – staged protests in multiple cities across the country (Plan V, 2019; República del Banano, 2019). The name of this group, in particular, conjures how visibility entangles in the construction of homophobic ideologies. This phrase explicitly engages a framework of public exposure. It regurgitates a classic homophobic trope that sees homosexuality, not least same-sex displays of affection, as an affront to public morals; more than for a potential to offend, these images must be sequestered from sight to protect children from a threat of corruption (Morris and Sloop, 2006: 14, 17). Yet, such a prudish outlook does not imply an outright aversion to all sexual content in public. It aligns instead to a selective view of gendered bodies and permissible behaviors. Emil Edenborg highlights this conundrum: "That something is visible does not mean it is seen. Normative positions like heterosexuality, ever-present in the public sphere, are often unmarked and unrecognized, while the practices and rituals that produce them as hegemonic are disguised" (2019: 2). In other words, the aesthetics of heterosexuality become normalized to such an extent that "visible acts of affection between opposite-sex couples" take on an appearance as neutral, negligible, in the sociocultural landscape; their own political or sexual nature passes completely unseen (Edenborg, 2019: 2). It is a point clearly reinforced by the distribution of vandalism down the length of Apitatán's painting. After all, the mixed-gendered couple at its center could continue to kiss in public without any provocation of a scandal.

Redressed in white and reframed in economic terms, the former mural reverts to a muted presence on the street: tolerable, passable, unremarkable. "My paint strokes [*trazos*] no longer existed, and the white of the wall turned into silence," Apitatán writes, "exposing the intolerance of a segment of society who thought that by covering an image they could make reality disappear" (2019d). He debunks the logic of this misplaced belief with an incisive remark: "Erasing a mural does not erase reality" (Apitatán in Amaya, 2019). No matter the effort or intent to stamp out queer visibility within the city, queer lives and loves continue to exist and persist. Apitatán's statement points to the ultimate ineffectiveness of the suppressive impulse, the impossibility of image repression to fully extract its contents from urban life. Traces, specters, and other forms of being will always resurface to tinge and furrow the superficial smoothness of erasure.

Reclaiming the Site

Just such a push back emerged in a gathering of activists and allies who rallied around Apitatán's mural to ensure news of its disappearance did not pass by in silence. They challenged its destruction precisely by reclaiming space and visibility for queerness at the erasure site, drawing on the corporality and collectivity of live performance to counteract the wall's missing lovers. Launched with an announcement on Facebook, a *Besatón Por El Arte* (Kiss-in For Art) would take place on the following Saturday. Event organizers from the autonomous youth collective El Punto called on their followers to join in a "public kiss to defend art, love, and diversity" (2019). "Come with your partner, friends, acquaintances," they urged, "to make [our] kisses visible and to fight hatred on Fernando Ayarza street […] where they erased Apitatán's mural" (El Punto, 2019). Bullet points listed confirmed activities, performers, and speakers joining from across Quito's LGBTQ community. The digital flyer concluded with a message of unity and resolve in confronting the week's public display of homophobia: "They are afraid of us because we queens [*lxs Maricxs*] are not afraid" (El Punto, 2019).

On the afternoon of 13 July 2019, a crowd gathered at the spot where Apitatán once stood to paint. Women from the Konchas Batukada circled together and drummed at one end of the wall (Iker Revista, 2019). The rhythmic energy of their percussion pulsated through the subdued city street, amplifying with each beat the loudness and life of lesbian-feminist resistance. Drag performance artist Asmodea Cazadora delivered a message of inclusivity – "We are a part of [*somos parte de*]. We are a part of diversity" (Iker Revista, 2019) – and turned to kiss the wall to leave a lingering imprint of their unrestrained darkly-stained lips, before passing around the tube of lipstick for others in attendance to inscribe their own messages onto the sanitized surface. Trans activist Runa Sanabria read aloud a declaration denouncing the artistic censorship and calling for wider visibility of the manifold ways to self-identify and to love (El Diario, 2019; Iker Revista, 2019). The same sentiments echoed in collective chants that proclaimed "el arte es libre" (art is free) and "abajo la homofobia" (down with homophobia) (Iker Revista, 2019). These phrases, dually sung out and written onto the wall, illustrate how the mural defense consciously linked up the fights against censorship and against homophobia. They divulge how the *besatón* viewed artistic freedom and a right to love freely as interconnected struggles for social justice.

Then, staged against the backdrop of the whitewashed wall, the main event. Couples of all combinations of sexual orientation, several draped in rainbow flags, stood up front to bring Apitatán's three enamored portraits back to life. The pairs kissed in unison to invoke the spirit of the painting that used to exist. The crowd gathered in a semi-circle around them, many bodies deep, spilling out into the street (El Telégrafo, 2019b; Iker Revista, 2019). Onlookers cheered and clapped and held up their cameras and phones to document this beautiful communal act of affirmation.

Resolute in its publicness, this collective kiss, like that depicted by the mural, disrupts moral codes of intimacy that relegate queer love as a private matter. Their bodies in pleasure expose and rebel against "the disciplinary mechanisms that strive to erase these images" (Morris and Sloop, 2006: 19). The *besatón* draws on a long transnational history of the kiss-in as direct-action activism and peaceful protest organized to counteract a persecution of same-sex displays of affection. This manifestation embraces a vision of sexual citizenship as "a politics that is closely linked to […] the performativity of public actions and, hence, a politics in which bodies are central and cannot be ignored" (Sheller, 2012: 41). It exerts the power and politics of queer embodiment: the corporality of individuals converging on the ground; the sonority of resonant voices and drums filling the air; the visuality of polychromatic flags and genderfluid fashion. A boldly joyous rejection of bigotry, their visible presence in this place – even if fleeting – testifies to the futility of a mural erased.

Reviving the Image

Two months later, *Love Has No Gender* was resurrected on the streets of Quito. Once more, three couples each embraced in a kiss. Once more, the vivid portraits splayed into the spectrum of a rainbow. A light grey background, patterned with the darker outlines of tropical foliage on top, unified the wall and sharpened the characters into focus. At the far end, multicolored text printed out the mural's title to underscore the values depicted by its design. The artwork ran 20 meters in length and 2.5 in height, roughly identical to its prior incarnate (El Telégrafo, 2019e). These reiterated proportions – the artist's minimum requisite to paint the image again – purposely took back the same amount of space as had before been seized (El Telégrafo, 2019f). Apitatán's painting stood as an exact replica of the one destroyed. Yet the power of this sameness intensified through the symbolic clout of its newfound location.

For its second life, the mural found a home on *calle* Yaguachi, looking out from a wall located directly in front of the National Assembly. In the wake of marriage equality, this repositioning is no small gesture. To sit at the foot of this building, a locale of amplified geographic and emblematic visibility

within Quito's topography, conveys a powerful rejection of that July's homophobic acts. It places the mural's message of equality in direct dialogue with the site where laws are designed and decided for the entire country to live by.

It makes clear, too, the eagerness of institutions to support this public image. While grassroots activism may have made objections to the erasure visible, the mural's revitalization hinged upon institutional scaffolding. Back in July, newspapers already reported on meetings between the artist and city officials to secure suitable conditions to reproduce the painting (El Telégrafo, 2019d, 2019f). Ultimately, its renewal came to fruition with assistance from two government offices, the Secretariats of Social Inclusion and Culture, and the organizations Diálogo Diverso and CARE Ecuador; the elected wall belonged to the Ministry of Transport and Public Works (Quito Informa, 2019). Beyond furnishing a physical site, this backing revived the image in an air of officiality that solidified through public endorsements and access to considerable media coverage. An inauguration ceremony on the morning of 6 September 2019 made the national news. A reporter from *El Comercio* even live-streamed proceedings on Facebook as he walked up and down the length of the wall to interview the artist and representatives from partner organizations (El Comercio, 2019b). Their voices collectively emphasized the painting's potential not only to beautify the city but to stimulate reflection and debate amongst the populace (El Comercio, 2019b). A press release issued that same day by the Municipality of Quito similarly framed the inauguration and the mural as a celebration of diversity (Quito Informa, 2019). Such official lines played a large role in cultivating public visibility for the revived mural.

What this publicity delivers, more specifically, is a statement of intent for the painting's reproduction. Disparate discursive and concrete acts of support fuse together to incorporate Apitatán's image into a larger enterprise. Working along these lines, several prominent figures used the inauguration as a platform to announce that *Love Has No Gender* would be the first of ten murals dedicated to themes of diversity, and promoted by the municipal government, to be painted throughout the district (El Telégrafo, 2019d; Quito Informa, 2019). This umbrella framework resituates Apitatán's mural as advancing an established policy objective to transform Quito into *una ciudad inclusiva* (an inclusive city), an agenda adopted by city officials in 2016. The kissing couples come to visualize an image of inclusivity beyond its original celebration of the equality found within love. Such circumstances sit somewhat uneasily with Martin Zebracki and Ryan Leitner's cautionary note about the risk faced by LGBTQ culture and symbolism of "being incorporated as instruments into political and marketing strategies to promote diversity and progressive citizenship [...] which would detract from their 'queer potential'" to disrupt heteronormative environments (2021: 18). Thus, while integral to the mural's revisualization, institutional endorsement also sets up conditions for its visibility by folding the painting into the vision of a broader diversity program as conceived by the state. More than physically reposition the mural in the cityscape, the act of repainting reframes the meaning contained within the image, too.

Visualizing the Mural

"The mural *Love Has No Gender* now has a place in the city," wrote Apitatán on culminating this journey (2019c). In many respects, the story ends with a positive outcome: the mural repainted; its image sanctified by city officials and reintegrated back into the urban imaginary. This success was achieved, in no small part, due to direct-action activism by Quito's LGBTQ community and behind the scenes work by organizations like Diálogo Diverso, who rallied around the painting to keep its presence alive and circulating in public memory. This saga corroborates a vision of queer public art and monuments as "stimulating sites" where their contested existence, amplified through media coverage and public debates, pushes "activists, communities, and policy makers to take bolder public positions on gender and sexual minority rights and to continue working toward equality" (Orangias et al, 2018: 719). Digital research methods – the excavation, triangulation, and layered readings of multimedia

online sources – proved essential to uncovering the mechanics of these public effects. A deliberate recasting of this digitized corpus through storytelling similarly strove to make visible diverse reverberations of the act of erasure. Drawn out through narrative prose, my attention to the mural's temporal and spatial evolution grants insight to "the manifestations, and mobilities, of power relations that reconstitute sexual and gendered lives, cultures, politics and embodiments" within the cityscape (Browne et al, 2021: 7). With a twist of irony, erasure controversies, like this one, come to generate visibility through their ability to shape local conversations about LGBTQ communities and their place and rights in society (Zebracki and Leitner, 2021: 21-22). The mural's resuscitation calls attention, too, to the fragility of erasure, the limitations of its effects and effectiveness. The visual impact of erasure may linger in a particular spot, but the suppressed image can also resurface to thrive elsewhere.

As a highly visual matter, the (dis)appearance of a mural is embroiled in the political and ideological alignment of the city. Viewed in this light, a closer look at the interface between the removal and revival of Apitatán's painting reveals how a condition of visibility is always contingent. Such contingencies emerge in the reliance on displacement to secure the mural's reproduction. Embedding the image into an institutional framework – subsumed not only under a wider political agenda but repainted on government-owned property and at a core site of legislative power – lends legitimacy to its message. Yet the embedding process moves the mural away from the original point of conflict; it becomes withdrawn from a risk of exposure to further public controversy. This modified placement also enacts a shift in scale, transposed from a nondescript locality to a location of centrality. The painting's displacement spatially reiterates a sustained disjuncture between an expanded sexual citizenship under the law and the articulation of those rights in everyday spaces and interactions. Apitatán's mural controversy thus attends "to the current paradox between the growing recognition of LGBTI rights and virulent homophobia and transphobia" by illuminating how these contradictions persist and coexist within the urban geography (Bueno-Hansen, 2018: 137).

Contingent visibility reveals itself, too, in a sustained policing of the cityscape, the mechanics of which surface quite literally in this story through the spectral presence of the police. While the initial police altercation, detailed earlier in this article, may have been the most pronounced in its manifestation and objective, uniformed bodies continued to circulate at two other critical moments. In a video documenting the mural's rebirth in front of the National Assembly building, footage of the artist and his assistants at the wall cuts away to ambient shots of the day (Apitatán, 2020). The camera captures passersby and reporters observing the artwork in progress, before pausing on a group of on-duty police. They lean leisurely against a car parked directly in front of the painting activities. In sharp contrast to the police presence at that first wall, this time their bodies and attention turn towards the image, relaxed. The officers watch as the artist elaborates his craft, now charged to protect the production of a mural halted by this same state apparatus only months prior. The light brown uniform of the Ecuadorian police emerges once again in a video of the *besatón* protest. As the camera focuses on the content of activist speeches and the energy of the crowd, suddenly a single police officer appears in the background (Iker Revista, 2019). He stands at a distance, perched on the opposite side of the street, and holds a smartphone steady in his hand, recording evidence of the protest for some unknown purpose and destination. This policing body makes for an ominous presence, a visceral reminder not to push the limits of permissible behavior and visibility too far.

Despite officers' divergent postures and public posturing across these three scenes, what remains consistent is their performance of surveillance. Monitoring movements and markings that might contravene delimited norms, these "more 'subtle' practices of policing" contribute to a process of "order-making" in the urban environment (Christensen and Albrecht, 2020: 391, 388). Like the legal architecture of the legislated city, such enforcements are "neither apolitical nor purely instrumental;" these mutable modes of restriction and regulation within the public sphere "often reflect specific ideological constructions of what urban space should look like and how it should be used" (Christensen

and Albrecht, 2020: 392). This continuum of policing activities highlights how – in addition to enabling empowerment and rendering recognition – a position of "visibility may be related to control, regulation, increased vulnerability, as well as processes of normalization and depoliticization" (Edenborg, 2019: 10). Being visible, after all, enables something to be tracked and tamed. Or even suppressed to the extent it disappears. Yet, just as logics of erasure and policing shape the politics of visibility in Quito, so too do other unexpected reactions and mobilizations from the public. These unforeseeable dimensions of connectivity are precisely what motivate Apitatán to paint the surface of the city:

> When I intervene on a wall, in any corner of any city, I hope that its message embarks on a journey that moves, in some way, each person who looks at it and that dialogues, debates, actions, changes arise from this encounter. *Love Has No Gender* far exceeded my expectations and most importantly: it allowed [me] to make an emotional connection and to achieve something much, much greater. (2019b)

In the end, Apitatán created an urban image that became bigger than the mural itself.

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BIO

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IMAGES

Image 1: Two acts of vandalism (source: Apitatán)

Image 2: Police prohibiting the mural's completion in July 2019 (source: Apitatán)

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