POLITECNICO DI TORINO
Repository ISTITUZIONALE

Bodily Infrastructures of Care

Original
Bodily Infrastructures of Care / Rivera, S.. - In: ROADSIDES. - ISSN 2624-9081. - ELETTRONICO. - 9:(2023), pp. 17-22.

Availability:
This version is available at: 11583/2980717 since: 2023-07-26T17:18:45Z

Publisher:
University of Zurich

Published
DOI:

Terms of use:

This article is made available under terms and conditions as specified in the corresponding bibliographic description in the repository

Publisher copyright
ASA postprint versione editoriale con licenza CC BY/Version of Record with CC BY License

Copyright 2023 Author(s). This article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) License.

(Article begins on next page)

26 November 2026

ISSN 2624-9081 • DOI 10.26034/roadsides-202300903

Bodily Infrastructures of Care

Sofía Rivera-García

Introduction

In El Salvador, as in most Latin American countries, caregiving tasks are performed mainly by women. This structural inequality in caregiving relationships has historically constituted an invisible discrimination, since those who must take care of others often perform these tasks under asymmetrical power structures. This condition of inequality is aggravated when caring tasks are carried out in precarious contexts and with labour insecurity, where caregivers care as they can and when they can (Pautassi 2007). This violent cycle of inequality is completed when the principle of reciprocity and interdependence, in which caregivers must also be cared for, is not fulfilled (Soto-Villagrán 2022).

In recent years, the struggle to achieve recognition of care as a right has seen significant advances in the Latin American region, such as with the National System of Care in Uruguay in 2015, the "Municipal Law of Co-responsibility in Unpaid Care Work for Equal Opportunities" in Cochabamba (Bolivia) in 2019, or the recent recognition of the right to dignified care, to one's own time and the creation of a National System of Care in Mexico in 2020. In the case of El Salvador, a Social Co-responsibility for Care Policy was formulated between 2015 and 2016; unfortunately, it was never discussed at the Senate, and the initiative has not been taken up again.

In the absence of recognition of care as a right, the bodies of the caregivers and the spaces they inhabit become essential parts of the infrastructures of care that sustain and support everyday life. By paying attention to caregiving tasks, reproductive activities and collaborative practices, the concept of *acuerpamiento* might help us to understand these practices in a collective way.[1] *Acuerpamiento* is defined by communitarian feminists as "a loving agreement to accord, to accompany each other amid the complexities and risks that the defense of life in the communities entails for [women] and their families" (Cabnal 2017: 100, my translation). In this article, I reflect on this idea and specifically on a theatre company created by a group of women street vendors called La Cachada Teatro, and on the space where they currently practice and perform: the Nave Cine Metro. In this context, the Nave has turned into a refuge for women and their children, supporting bodily infrastructures of care and self-care that can bring us closer to revealing how certain infrastructures are created and gendered in one of the most violent cities in Latin America.

[1] The term *acuerpamiento* can be translated literally as 'surrounding and supporting a body with other bodies.'

Caring on the Streets of San Salvador

The Historic Centre of San Salvador (CHSS) is the foundational area of the city. After decades of abandonment and deterioration due to numerous earthquakes, the relocation of the main functions of the state and the gradual decay brought about by the Civil War (1980–1992), the CHSS has become an area of dispute and conflict, a space for the trade and exchange of almost all types of goods and products, housing six of the city's main markets and thousands of street vendors. In addition, this area has become one of the most fraught battlegrounds for El Salvador's major gangs, in which multiple subgroups (*clicas*, in Spanish) compete for control of commercial streets, markets, drug deals, smuggling and prostitution, among other commercial and criminalized activities (Papadovassilakis and Dudley 2020).

Amid this violent context, the street vendors are mainly women who must daily balance their role as caregivers with the need to sell to support their families. As Soto-Villagrán (2022) argues, care practices are not only anchored to the domestic space but move alongside those who exercise care. In the last twenty years, the thousands of informal stalls have become small spaces of commerce and care, where children stay after school until the end of the day, either doing homework or helping with their mother's business. Added to the above is the fact that El Salvador is a tropical country, where for most of the year it either rains torrentially or the sun beats down. The lack of supporting built infrastructure, such as public toilets, as well as the conditions of harassment and insecurity caused by gangs, complete this situation so poorly suited for caring.

Under these circumstances, life has been reproduced and sustained in the streets of the CHSS. The Covid-19 pandemic brought with it a crisis of care in all its dimensions – not only for children but also for the elderly and infirm, representing a greater burden for caregivers. In the case of El Salvador, the confinement and restriction measures were among the most severe in the region, with a lockdown that lasted ninety-five days (López and Domínguez 2021), which precipitated a total inability to work for a large part of the population from the informal sector, including women street vendors in the CHSS.

The Ship that Sailed in the Midst of the Storm

It was during this period of crisis that La Cachada Teatro[2] and Teatro del Azoro[3] founded the Azoro Cultural Association (ACA) and initiated the Nave Cine Metro project, in the bowels of the CHSS. The Nave ('Ship') started in March 2020 when ACA repurposed the old Cine Metro, turning it into a space dedicated to creating and researching performing arts with a focus on the community of vendors and their children, specifically on Delgado Street. Since their beginnings, both theatre companies have worked in testimonial and documentary theatre, addressing multiple issues of Salvadoran society, from different types of violence to mental health. At the same time, their performances aim to provoke the audience to transform the reality they see described.

[2] La Cachada Teatro was set up by a group of women street vendors and domestic workers. See: http://cachadateatro.com/

[3] Teatro del Azoro was founded by four Salvadoran women pioneers of documentary theater (FES 2020).

In its almost three years of existence, the Nave has become a space in which vendors can come to rest and practice self-care, a place for their children to play and take part in various workshops while they are out working in the streets. In this way, the Nave can be interpreted as a space that supports the bodily infrastructure of care, not only satisfying the life-sustaining needs of those who require care but also giving space for self-care and healing practices for caregivers themselves – a forgotten dimension and one not experienced by the vendors. Part of these healing processes of self-care are triggered by the emotions that arise from breaking the silence through the theatrical performances, which reflect testimonies from their daily life as street vendors, helping the women recognize the different types of violence they have experienced.

In the Nave's day-to-day activities, these bodily networks of care become visible. Women's bodies are an essential part of this infrastructure, as living mediation of what organizes and sustains life (Truelove and Ruszczyk 2022). However, what does caregiving imply in contexts where conditions of exclusion and inequality allow violence to proliferate? If we think of infrastructures as originally understood, as a material system, it is clear that any infrastructure will erode and thus require maintenance, support and care. When bodies are an essential component of these infrastructures, they also become vulnerable and susceptible to harm, and thus require care. This rough analogy can help us to connect with one of the main concerns when thinking about infrastructures of care: who takes care of those who care?

This same concern struck communitarian feminists in Guatemala, when they identified that in the struggle for the defense of their territories they had neglected their own bodies (Cabnal 2017). By recognizing their bodies as the first territory to retrieve, they discovered a shared path of healing through supporting each other's bodies. The practice of acuerpamiento describes this path, and in the absence of recognition of

the right to self-care, to care for others and to be cared for can help us to acknowledge and support the actions, emotions and decisions of individual bodies as a practice of collective resistance.



← Workshop on the Cachada Method at Nave Cine Metro.
Photo: Gerardo Bonifacio, 2021.

↓ Workshop Festival al Parque by Nave Cine Metro crew.
Photo: Melissa Castro, 2022.



Both in the workshops and in the Nave's theatrical practices, the infrastructures of care and self-care are materialized in exercises of contact and support between bodies. These practices can be interpreted through *acuerpamiento*, as bodies supporting other bodies, ensuring not only company but also emotional support and wellbeing. This practice of *acuerpamiento* breaks with the narratives of violence and fear imposed by both the official discourse disseminated by the state and the criminal organizations that control the CHSS.[4] No surprise, then, that through *acuerpamiento*, understood by communitarian feminists as a 'loving agreement' (*acuerdo amoroso*), the vendors' children have appropriated this space of mutuality and reassurance as their place of leisure and rest. Although the need to work and sell every day does not allow the vendors to fully occupy and enjoy the Nave, as they give priority to their children (putting their role as caregivers first), the possibility of accessing a space of self-care for the first time reveals the importance that proper support for bodily infrastructures of care should have in the city. Although there is still a long way to go towards co-responsibility and recognition of the rights of those who care in El Salvador, the Nave Cine Metro is opening the way for new care networks to consolidate in the capital city.

[4] Since March 2022, a state of exception has been in place in El Salvador. In February 2023, four thousand vendors were evicted from around the Nave.



Final presentation of a workshop with children in the CHSS at Nave Cine Metro.
Photo: Gerardo Bonifacio, 2022.

References:

Cabnal, Lorena. 2017. "Tzk'at, Red de Sanadoras Ancestrales del Feminismo Comunitario desde Iximulew-Guatemala." *Ecología política* 54: 100–104. https://www.ecologiapolitica.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/054_Cabnal_2017.pdf

FES, Fundación para la Educación Superior. 2020. "'Abrir el telón.' El teatro como instrumento para ver el 'nosotros'. Análisis cualitativo de las actividades de la Asociación Cultural Azoro." Santa Tecla, El Salvador. http://www.fes.edu.sv/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Libro-2-FES-Serie-Conociendo.-Abrir-el-telo%CC%81n.pdf

López, Alejandro and Rhina Domínguez. 2021. "Medidas de contingencia ante el COVID-19 en El Salvador." *Alerta* 4 (1): 78–79. https://doi.org/10.5377/alerta.v4i1.10762

Papadovassilakis, Alex and Steven Dudley. 2020. "De depredadores a socios: Las pandillas se toman San Salvador." *Insight Crime*, 1 October 2020. https://es.insightcrime.org/investigaciones/depradores-aliados-pandillas-san-salvador/

Pautassi, Laura. 2007. "El cuidado como cuestión social desde un enfoque de derechos." *Serie Mujer y Desarrollo* 87. Santiago de Chile: *CEPAL* https://www.cepal.org/es/publicaciones/5809-cuidado-como-cuestion-social-un-enfoque-derechos

Soto-Villagrán, Paula. 2022. "Paisajes del cuidado en la Ciudad de México. Experiencias, movilidad e infraestructuras." *Íconos. Revista de Ciencias Sociales* 73: 57–75. https://doi.org/10.17141/iconos.73.2022.5212

Truelove, Yaffa, and Hanna A. Ruszczyk. 2022. "Bodies as urban infrastructure: Gender, intimate infrastructures and slow infrastructural violence." *Political Geography* 92: 102492. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2021.102492

Cite as:

Rivera-García, Sofía. 2023. "Bodily Infrastructures of Care." *Roadsides* 9: 17-22. https://doi.org/10.26034/roadsides-202300903



Sofía Rivera-García is a Salvadoran architect and a Ph.D. Candidate in Urban and Regional Development at Politecnico di Torino. She is also an Assistant Professor of Architecture at UCA University (El Salvador). She graduated as an architect from the UCA and has a Master's degree in Architecture from the University of Chile. Previously, she has worked on topics such as housing cooperatives, place attachment and the role of women in the history of architecture, collaborating as a writer on the project Un día|Una arquitecta (Argentina). She is currently working on urban violence, affects, bodies, emotions and socio-spatial practices of care and healing in the context of the Historic Center of San Salvador.

Roadsides is a diamond Open Access journal designated to be a forum devoted to exploring the social, cultural and political life of infrastructure.

roadsides.net
editor@roadsides.net
@road_sides
@roadsides_journal

Editorial Team:

Julie Chu (University of Chicago)
Tina Harris (University of Amsterdam)
Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi (University of Fribourg)
Madlen Kobi (University of Fribourg)
Galen Murton (James Madison University, Harrisonburg)
Nadine Plachta (James Madison University, Harrisonburg)
Matthäus Rest (Max-Planck-Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, Leipzig)
Alessandro Rippa (University of Oslo and LMU Munich)
Martin Saxer (LMU Munich)
Christina Schwenkel (University of California, Riverside)
Max D. Woodworth (The Ohio State University)

Collection no. 009 was edited by: Sneha Annavarapu and Yaffa Truelove
Managing editors: Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi and Tina Harris
Copyediting: David Hawkins
Layout: Chantal Hinni and Antoni Kwiatkowski

ISSN 2624-9081

Creative Commons License
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

University of Zurich[UZH]
Swiss National Science Foundation
UNI FR
UNIVERSITÉ DE FRIBOURG
UNIVERSITÄT FREIBURG