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The caregivers' strike: a tale of violence and care in the entrails of San Salvador

Sofia Rivera

As I write these lines, one year has passed since March 26th 2022, the most violent day since the end of El Salvador's civil war (1980 – 1992), with 87 homicides committed in less than 48 hours due to a breakdown in the hidden negotiations between the government and the gangs (Martínez, May 17th, 2022). Owing to this unprecedented wave of murders, an exception regime started on March 27, 2022. Since then, a series of mass detentions have been carried out, with more than 66,000 captures in one year, most of them arbitrary arrests, over 5,000 reports of human rights violations, and at least 130 deaths of persons in the state's custody (Amnistía Internacional, April 3rd 2023).

Although the fatal consequences of mass incarceration have already been pointed out (Bergmann and Gude, 2021), the current exception regime has tripled the prison population, turning El Salvador into the country with the highest rate of incarceration per inhabitant in the world.¹ In addition to the serious effects of arbitrary detentions, the exception regime has triggered numerous crises, one of the most disregarded crises of care. The criminalization of young, poor, and racialized men has been a pattern in the exception regime (T. Aleman, personal communication, November 28, 2022), the responsibility for looking after the needs of the detainee (providing food packages and basic accessories), support economically, and care for the rest of the family members, has fallen almost entirely on women. In cases where both parents have been arrested, communities have become responsible for the abandoned children (O. Flores, personal communication, November 27, 2022). These ignored collective effects of mass imprisonment on women and caregivers has resulted in new collective forms of care and resistance, which need to be remarked.

This essay aims to contribute to this issue by focusing on the experiences of a group of women (mostly mothers, wives, and daughters)² inhabiting the surroundings of *El Penalito*, an old cinema located within the limits of the Historic Center of San Salvador, which became a temporary jail where almost every prisoner passed prior permanent confinement and where a few prisoners who had been detained and did not have a verifiable connection to the gangs are being released.³ In the midst of arbitrariness, lack of information, and the hope that one day their relative will be liberated, these women have turned *El Penalito* into an extension of their homes, developing their daily life between

¹ Approximately 1,540 incarcerated persons per 100,000 inhabitants.

² I share here some of the first thoughts from the stage of fieldwork I'm currently conducting. I do not share completely the stories of the group of women I've been engaging with during these past months, since I intend to co-decide with them how they would like their stories to be told.

³ Although no official information has been made public, according to human rights organizations most of the arrests have been in committed in San Salvador (O. Flores, personal communication, November 27, 2022), which explains why *El Penalito* has become a key location for both arrests and releases.

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the sidewalk and the black prison gate.

Echoing the call of Kristally and Schulz (2022) to take love and care seriously while researching contexts of violence, relationality, vulnerability, and interdependency become key concepts, rather than “limit the field of vision to death and suffering” (p. 2). This turn in researching violent contexts through the lens of love and care might allow us to understand the practices, feelings, and decisions of individual bodies collectively. By introducing the concepts of *cuerpo-territorio* and *acuerpamiento*⁴ from communitarian feminism, I intend to unveil how bodily infrastructures of care become visible in the context of extreme and chronic violence by caring for socio-spatial practices that affect and transform spaces.

Violence in the streets of San Salvador

The recent history of El Salvador includes two military dictatorships and a 12-year civil war (1980–1992). From the post-war period to the present day, the gang phenomenon has been one of the main triggers of criminal violence in the country. The two main gangs (MS-13 and Barrio 18) originated in Los Angeles, California, and arrived as part of the deportation program initiated by the US, with more than 81,000 ex-convicts portrayed between 1998 and 2014 (Dudley & Martínez, February 16th, 2017). As a result of escalating gang violence, in 2015, San Salvador was considered the most violent city in the world, with 199,3 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants (Valencia, January 26, 2016; Cantor, 2016).

In the last two decades, the strategies to confront violence have been “widespread discretionary arrests and extensive use of lethal force” (Bergmann and Gude, 2021:46). Hume (2007), Hume and Wilding (2020) and Aguilar (2006) have delved into the consequences of the repressive policies of *mano dura* implemented in El Salvador since 2003. These policies have failed to address the structural causes of violence in El Salvador and reduce crime; on the contrary, they have opened the gate to human rights violations, resulting in mass incarcerations that have “strengthen prison-based criminal organizations at the expense of the state” (Bergmann and Gude, 2021:52), allowing gangs to establish hidden negotiations with the government. Since the first pact was uncovered and broken in 2012 (Martínez, Martínez, Arauz and Lemus, March 14th 2012), homicides have remained as “a currency of power in the relationship between Salvadoran gangs and governments” (Bergmann and Gude, 2021:54), leading to the wave of murders that resulted in the exception regime that today appears as the President’s sole and total strategy to control not only gang violence, but also the entire population.

Caring in violent contexts

In El Salvador (as in Latin America), caregiving tasks are performed mostly by women as a result of an invisible discrimination historically constituted by asymmetrical power relations (Pautassi, 2007). In low-income urban areas, where deprivation and lack of access to basic public services are part of everyday life, caring requires much more dedication (long working shifts, surviving each day with a bare minimum, walking long distances to obtain water, among other challenges). As a result, caregivers practice care in inadequate conditions, sacrifice their own well-being, and break the principle of reciprocity in which they must also be taken care of (Soto-Villagrán, 2022).

Crimes, homicides, extortion, and other forms of direct violence are also part of this scenario, in which women have remained in the middle of two groups “whose main logic of action is the use of violence; (...) the gang group that dominates the community’s territory, and (...) the police or the army that confronts the actions of these groups” (Zetino, Brioso y Montoya, 2015:123, my transla-

tion). When the exception regime started, levels of repression, fear, and police violence increased exponentially, notwithstanding the fact that women had to continue carrying on their caregiving tasks, extending them to their detained relatives.

Caring outside of *El Penalito*

In *El Penalito*, mothers, grandmothers, wives, and daughters become essential in the process of detention. They were the first to arrive and discover the situation of their relatives. One of their first tasks is to buy a prisoner’s pack of essential items (shampoo, toothpaste, toothbrush, toilet paper, white clothes, and foam sandals). Additionally, caregivers must provide three meals a day during the first weeks of detention until their relatives are relocated to a bigger prison. Once transferred, caregivers have to send a package of supplies once a month. Owing to the lack of information and the impossibility of communicating and visiting their relatives (Urbina, March 17th 2023), it is impossible to know if the packages are received. This impossibility of communication has been considered by human rights organizations as torture against families perpetrated by the state (T. Aleman, personal communication, November 28, 2022).

This exchange of goods essentials for life can be interpreted as infrastructures of care in which women’s bodies are an essential element that maintains the prison system as a whole by sustaining the lives of their loved ones. By inhabiting collectively *El Penalito*, these women have created collaborative networks in which, in addition to supporting each other with resources, transportation or information, they embody the concept of *acuerpamiento*, as a loving agreement through which bodies support other bodies amid the complexities and menaces that the defence of life entails for them (Cabnal, 2017), accompanying each other in their struggles and hopes. Even though infrastructure is a category that must be critically approached to avoid conceiving it as a “catch-all category for a multiplicity of relations, phenomena, and systems” (Buier, 2023:48), it might allow us to engage with “complex combinations of objects, spaces, persons, and practices (...) reproducing life in the city” (Simone, 2004:408). Simultaneously, the relational dimension of infrastructure resembles the principle of interdependence that lies beneath the ethics of care.

Among these bodily infrastructures of care, the scale of the body is fundamental as it supports and makes life possible. In the context of extreme and chronic violence, where low-income areas are harassed and criminalized and the possibility to circulate freely is denied, the body becomes the only safe place to inhabit. The concept of *cuerpo-territorio* as the “inseparable ontological relationship between body and territory: what is experienced by the body is simultaneously experienced by territory in a codependent relationship” (Zaragocín and Caretta, 2021:2) also recognizes the body as our first territory to retrieve. In this sense, women around *El Penalito* experienced forced displacement. While they express resentment and chagrin towards their previous houses and neighborhoods, their lives travel along with them in a backpack as migrants in their own country. Their most precious belongings are their relatives’ clothes and shoes because of the urge to change them the moment they exit the prison, as the white clothes they wear symbolize their criminal record, which must be erased. Their bodies become their homes, and the bodies of their loved ones become their main territory for retrieval.

By remaining there waiting, adapting their daily activities to this unique space, and paying to use a restroom or charge their phones, women around *El Penalito* end up embodying the condition of incarceration. As bodies become their only territory of refuge, a paradox emerges when most caregiving tasks are destined for their sons, husbands, or fathers, even if they have not heard from them in months or for a whole year. The act of caring for a body that is absent, to the detriment of their own health and physical well-being, is related to the experience of communitarian feminists in Guatemala, when they identified that their own bodies had been neglected in their fight to defend their

⁴ *Acuerpamiento* is a concept that comes from communitarian feminism in Guatemala and can be translated to English as surrounding and supporting a body with other bodies.

territories (Cabnal, 2017). In the same way as physical infrastructure, caregivers' bodies also require care (and self-care), as they are worn-out, tired, and infirm. The lack of recognition of care as a right and the absence of care for those who care makes this infrastructure unsustainable, like almost all the processes of exploitation derived from the violence of the capitalist system.

To conclude this brief journey through the surroundings of El Penalito, it is important to recognize that women's bodies have sustained bodily infrastructures of care for centuries. In El Salvador, the exception regime made them visible, bringing them to the surface. As Simone (2004) stands, "people as infrastructure describe a tentative and often precarious process of remaking the inner city" (p. 411), and in violent contexts as the one portrayed in this essay, these infrastructures of care demonstrate us that without them life would not be possible. The way mothers, grandmothers, wives, and daughters inhabit this space and the dynamics of collaboration that they have generated arise from the pain and despair that, when shared collectively, manage to withstand the impact of the numerous forms of violence that they experience. In this context, the boundaries between the public and the private disappear, the street becomes the stage for intimacy, and care is provided without seeing, speaking, or holding. Acuerpamiento becomes necessary to articulate collective resistance by collectively sharing injustices and oppressions suffered by other bodies.

Despite the terrorism that the Salvadoran state is exerting on the population through the fear of being detained without cause, women are standing up to decades of structural violence. Caregiving tasks such as bringing food might be considered quiet politics, actions considered minor but fundamental in stop perceiving women as passive victims, but active subjects who seek through subtle actions to fight for survival "or even recovering dignity." (Hume and Wilding, 2020: 3) In a territory where chronic violence has reign for decades, and the idea of having a good relationship responds the principle "nobody messes with anybody" (Zetino, Brioso y Montoya, 2015: 124), building networks of cooperation and care is revolutionary. Sustaining, nurturing, replicating, and physically supporting infrastructures of care will be fundamental to reweave what this exception regime has torn apart.

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