

Between violence and care: socio-spatial practices of (un)care amid extreme and chronic violence in El Salvador

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Summary:

El Salvador, after more than two decades of anti-gang policies, high rates of incarceration, repressive measures, and excessive use of lethal force (Bergmann and Gude, 2021), levels of insecurity have not decreased, and violence has continued to be used as a means of resolving conflicts not only by gangs but also by the state itself. Almost three years ago, 26 March 2022 broke the bloody record as the most violent day of the post-war period, with 62 murders in a single day. From that day to the present, an Exception Regime has started, and more than 83,000 people have been arrested, turning El Salvador into the country with the highest rate of incarceration in the world. Emerging political and social crises, such as the Exception Regime in El Salvador, demand new critical approaches to the entanglements and connections between violence and care, which are to be addressed throughout this research.

As a result of mass imprisonment, Salvadoran prisons transformed into spaces that enabled unconventional practices of care and resistance, where hundreds of people (mothers and others) crowded together to obtain information or wait for the release of their loved ones. The lives of the caregivers were completely altered, and the search to provide the care necessary to sustain the lives of detainees (despite imprisonment) altered the way care is practiced. Simultaneously, state violence and imprisonment become the ultimate means of ensuring security, protection, and care for a certain part of the population (Sirimarco, 2021). While punishing and denying the possibility of a future to others (Gilmore, 2007), the boundaries between punishment and protection are blurred, domestic space becomes carceral, and public spaces configure territories of surveillance and control.

To approach this complex context, I propose situating the embodied, spatial, and affective dimensions at the centre of the analysis. The body becomes fundamental in grasping “how space is felt and used’ (Sweet and Ortiz Escalante, 2017:3), allowing us to trace the immediate and long-term effects of violence both in the body and in space, acting as a mediator between the effects of violence in space (Markowitz, 2022). At the same time, care is practiced, received, or rejected by the body (Jirón et al., 2022). As the caring process often responds to unequal power relations where violence and oppression are inherent, the role of the caregiver is imposed on women by a gender mandate (Guizardi, Lopez, and Gonzalvez, 2021), turning women’s bodies into “complex sites of both care and violence” (Bartos, 2018:2).

To this end, this research aimed to investigate (1) how caring relations and practices are produced, spatialised, mediated, and embodied in the context of extreme and chronic violence;

(2) how multiple types of violence are embedded in caring spaces, practices, and relations; (3) how control, punishment, and violence are practiced and spatialised within the grammar of protection and care; and (4) how caregivers resist through their bodies and reweave the web that sustains life.

As a result of this massive imprisonment, hundreds of relatives began to gather in the prison's surroundings as acts of hope and resistance, one of which was *El Penalito*. With the first prisoners released at *El Penalito* in September 2022, mothers (and others) began to gather there as an act of hope, developing their daily lives between the sidewalk and the black prison gate. I conducted eight months of ethnographic fieldwork (November 2022–July 2023) in *El Penalito*, where I had ongoing conversations with 29 women. In addition, I collaborated with the Azoro Cultural Association (ACA) and La Cachada Teatro on the Nave Cine Metro (NCM) project, an alternative care space for informal female street vendors. The main research methods included participant observation, informal conversations, 16 semi-structured interviews, written and audio notes, and two collaborative activities with *Servicio Social Pasionista* and *Abordarme*. This was complemented by a dataset of news articles that helped reconstruct the context, public discourse, and some of the main events throughout the research.

The experiences and accounts of how caring relations and practices are produced, spatialised, mediated, and embodied in violent contexts are reconstructed in four chapters: (1) *La Mochila* seeks to contribute to the body of feminist literature on carceral geographies on conceptualising the ways in which caregivers' bodies are connected to and affected by the prison system, by embodying carceral ways of living their everyday lives; (2) *El Paquete* aims to contribute to feminist geographies of violence and care, by analysing how the care process is disrupted when mothers have no contact with their loved ones who are detained, and how the oppressive role of the caregiver is intensified by the institution of motherhood; (3) *El Comedor* pretends to contribute to critical security studies and urban geographies of incarceration, analysing how through extreme security policies such as *El Régimen*, which are described as strategies to protect the population, the prison logic extends into non-punitive spaces (*El Comedor*), which in turn becomes an alternative space for care; and (4) *El Bordado* intends to contribute to reconstructing the ethical and relational dimension of care, through the recognition of care as a series of relationships that form affective care tissues, the idea of *comadrisimo* is taken up here in order to rethink the notion of motherhood in its political and collective dimension.