

The trans anti-carceral experience of the Cuerpos en Prisión, Mentes en Acción collective

Mutual aid and self-care are the central axis of 'Imprisoned Bodies, Active Minds'

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There is always a story behind every criminal conduct by someone from the LGBTQ

community. Women and trans men, lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, genderfluid people, impoverished and racialized people—we have populated the prisons of Colombia and across the world.

When we declare that we were incarcerated for questioning the norms of the regime of compulsory cisheterosexuality, the responses are multiple: Are you innocent or guilty of what you are being accused? Observations from the outside are usually uniquely centered on the fact of breaking the law, while the question of what was the context that co-produced the criminal activity is nowhere to be found: What was the socio-political context in which each of us was in before we were imprisoned?

Which possibilities did we have to claim fundamental rights like healthcare, education? We affirm that there is an undeniable link between the chain of structural violence that we

experience and the reasons why we have been or are incarcerated.

Many people think that incarcerated LGBTQ people are “anti-social” beings, who don’t know how to live in community. They imagine that we are violent people. However, little has been said about the violence we experience for freely expressing our genders and sexualities.

When a trans, gay, bisexual, lesbian or queer person expresses themselves and it does not correspond with the socially established norms, society excludes us. That is why you do not see trans people or people from the community in certain positions, we are always working in less visible jobs.

We permanently grew up in marginality, in the dark, in the shadows, trying to survive with the miseries and leftovers that society has wanted to give us. Therefore, we are nothing but the product of a society that has permanently driven us to live in an unworthy way. Historically we have been denied the most fundamental rights.

People continue to view us as scum, as garbage, as being imprisoned because we deserve it. Growing up in the shadows is a synonym of being understood and branded with a criminal body. In Colombia, homosexuality and presenting as the opposite sex, or to dress culturally in a feminine way, was criminalized formally until 1980. Today, the laws have transformed — thanks to our work as social movements — but the criminalization still exists. Dynamics such as the expulsion from family spaces, marginalization in impoverished spaces, zones of sex work and micro-trafficking are some of the manifestations in which these punishments materialize.

We are the Cuerpos en Prisión, Mentas en Acción collective. We are people with transgressive genders and sexualities that defy the cisheterosexual standards. Most of us have been or are in prison right now. Although there are also people who have never been there. The group was born in La Picota prison, born out of rage and pain, born out of the need to confront systematic violence that, through the force of brutality, abandonment and contempt, seeks to reestablish “correct” sexualities and genders in our bodies. As Katalina Ángel, one of the founders, says:

"I spent four and a half years in a prison, while there I understood all the violence, all the needs and all the institutional, family, social abandonment that people deprived of liberty experience, especially when we are people with identities of diverse genders or diverse sexual orientations. Cuerpos en Prisión, Mentes en Acción was born then from the need, from the pain, from the rage, to confront injustice. I think that this whole process all those situations of violence, of pain, all that shit that one was forced to accept in there—was the first step to start a project like Cuerpos en Prisión, Mentes en Acción in a context as violent as prison."

Katalina Ángel and Natalia Espitia are the official founders of the group and the people who named it. The group was born with the fundamental objective to create a care and support network for trans, gay and bisexual people who are incarcerated in La Picota prison.

Since 2013 we have developed actions within this prison: pedagogical, artistic, expository, and political advocacy actions. Art has also been a very important ally; dance, art therapy and theater workshops have also been daily endeavors.

In many ways, our existence has had the fundamental purpose of defending our genders and sexualities in prison. Defending our right to exist amid a very violent context, which in various ways seeks to erase our existence, to hide it or, better yet, to make it disappear.

Our activism has been aimed at finding a way to stop those processes of forced masculinization, feminization and heterosexualization that are central to what they call "prison treatment and discipline."

Our process has also been a path of healing through the search for justice and transformation. As a colleague says:

"For me it has been a bridge of healing in the face of many situations that I had to endure in prison, and it really became a great relief. Not only for me, but also from the understanding that actions were being taken against that violence. But also, for those other people who were left inside. I think it is an example of how anger and pain can

be transformed into strength, and how that strength can positively transform the environment."

In such a violent context, it was essential to create and sustain this network of affection and support. Mutual aid and self-care are the central axis of our action, because at the face of a cis-tem that wants to see us dead, taking care of ourselves is revolutionary. At the face of a cis-tem that tells us our existence is undesirable, recognizing that our lives are valuable is revolutionary. At the face of the monster of the prison system, which seeks to devour us, staying together is revolutionary. As Laura Katalina says:

"Anything that happens to a person in life is almost impossible to resist if we do not have a support network. The purpose of prison is to isolate people, punish them and break all those ties and relationships that make the person able to cope with each situation, right? That is why I believe that it is essential to create mechanisms through which you can maintain these support networks, where you feel that despite the circumstances, you are not alone. So I believe that yes, effectively we cannot speak about resistance without support networks, without a group of people around you, even if it's a small group, but we need to have groups of people."

But in prison, nothing is so simple. Here, we learned that self-care also involves taking care of those around us and choosing well who we tell about our pain and our hope. Taking care of yourself in this place means being very careful not to give someone a stick to whip you with, and not allowing people to abuse you with language.

In prison, learning to raise your voice, to speak, to empower yourself, to defend yourself is also essential to not allow yourself to be silenced, to be subdued. And well, taking care of yourself also implies what it implies outside of prison, although with many more difficulties. It means doing everything in your power to avoid getting sick and stay as healthy as possible: fix your food to eat better, exercise, feed your thoughts even if it's very difficult, educate yourself, don't let your creative capacity die.

Taking care of yourself in prison also means keeping yourself regal, adorning your body,

beautifying yourself, making you continue to feel pretty, liking and finding that image you see in the mirror beautiful. This may seem secondary or superficial to many, but it helps us with our reality.

Perhaps deep down, self-care aims to build the certainty that your life matters. The certainty that your life is valuable. Although an apparent majority, represented in the punitive regime, insists that it is not. As a colleague says:

"Right now, the most important thing, I think, is that to achieve self-care and collective care, the most important thing is to empower yourself, to understand the value of your own life. We are people who want to self-destruct and die all the time because it is a super frustrating life for most trans people. That's why I think the important thing is empowering ourselves, understanding how valuable our lives are. Understanding that we can achieve everything we want if we unite. But I think that, so far, we are taking the first steps. The trans movement is a very new movement that is still being born, until now we are in the process of collectivizing our feelings and our interiority to be able to achieve something much bigger and much more powerful. The first step has been to build self-care and collective care. When we all understand that we must be united and on the same page for our rights. When that happens, we will generate space for collective care."

Our path as a collective has left no doubt in our minds that prisons are obsolete, as argued by Angela Davis. An overwhelming majority of those who populate prisons are people of color, impoverished, victims of the war and of a chain of multiple expulsions, of which confinement is just one more insult. People who profit from war, from extractivism and from exploration never see the inside of prison. The ones who profit off hunger, off forced displacement, off death—they are immune to prison.

Therefore, those who read us here must also be convinced that we need to build true forms of justice. Prison has never been [a true form of justice], and prison will never be [a true form of justice]. As Dean Spade argues, we need to stop asking the law to further strengthen punitive systems, because at the end of the day, it's just another delusion that legitimizes and funds the places that imprison us. Other kinds of justice, focused on

reparation and care, are possible. We must start building them in our closest circles. This means many challenges, without a doubt.

After our experiences, we were firstly asked to break the spell that makes us demand people who hurt us to “rot in prison”. We need to end the myth that prisons serve to deliver justice. We need to see prison how they truly are, as a mechanism of prolonging social injustices of the racist, colonial and gendered system we exist in. This isn’t easy. The spell is well cast. But beginning to break it is urgent.

It also means building strategies in our closest circles to confront racist, cisgender, heterosexist, and sexist injustices from which we are not exempt. We believe that the anti-incarceration path must recognize that we have to face the multiple injustices with processes that help us heal. For this, we must build networks that support us, and be an active part of them.

We must convince ourselves that our lives are valuable. We must train our voices so we can raise them and be capable of communicating our needs. We also have to train our listening skills and be able to recognize other people’s needs. But overall, we must have the conviction that it is possible to build collective responses to our need for justice.

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