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(Un)Making the Insurrectional City: Illicit Infrastructures of Care and Repression in the 2018 Nicaraguan Protests

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we explore the socio-material infrastructures that maintained and repressed the 2018 Nicaraguan protests, as they made and unmade the insurrectional city. We consider the insurrectional city to be an urban place that is socio-materially reconfigured by the act of revolt and ensuing conflict. In Nicaragua, the insurrectional city (re)emerged as an entangled moral material battleground where past and present practices and notions of insurrection, as well as diverging imaginations for the future collided. With the 2018 protests, new material and human flows settled onto the streets, disrupting extant ways of being in and moving through the city. These were directly deemed illicit by government authorities, who projected the protesters as vandals, thugs, and later even terrorists. A competing ethics of care emerged then, as protesters and (para-)state actors understood the protection and defense of their lives and respective political projects differently. Autoconvocados (self-convened protesters) organized socio-material networks to distribute vital goods for protesters occupying public space, at the same time that the government mobilized its hybrid repressive apparatus to quash and criminalize both the protesters and the care networks supporting their activities. To understand the city-making practices that the protests engendered – both during the months-long insurrection and in its aftermath – examining the interplay between care, repression and legitimacy is crucial.

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It is late June 2018 and night has fallen – it has been a little over two months since massive protests erupted against president Daniel Ortega and his government. A group of self-convened protesters is staked out at a barricade on the West side of León, a middle-sized Nicaraguan city. Over the past weeks the situation has become increasingly tense. With university campuses occupied, weekly protest marches, and hundreds of barricades and roadblocks erected across the country, the government agreed to a dialogue, but quickly retracted and unleashed Operation Clean-Up instead. Tonight, the news – spread via a vast impromptu network of Facebook livestreams and WhatsApp messages – is that a *caravana de la muerte* (caravan of death) composed of heavily armed riot police and government supporters, dubbed para-police, is going to hit this city. Many protesters have hidden themselves away in safe houses in preparation, praying the caravan will leave as swiftly as it arrives, without finding them. A few brave souls guard the barricades.

It's about 2:30AM when a group of armed government supporters aboard an unmarked, silver Toyota Hilux pick-up truck prepares its strike. Stopping two blocks away, they load up and, as the protesters attempt to flee, unleash a blast of automatic gunfire at the barricade. Eight rounds of AK-47 bullets hit a young protester – alias Choreja – in the chest.[1] He is left to bleed out on the street as his friends run into adjacent houses and alleyways, unable to intervene. A heavy silence envelopes the streets, until Choreja's mother arrives at the scene. Her screams over her son's lifeless body tear through the night. In a masked video message for the local news released the next day,[2] Choreja's friends call on the city's population to continue building barricades to help protect the protesters against the attacks of government and para-state forces. In the background, a bloodied Nicaraguan flag marks the spot where Choreja was shot. Reiterating that they're fighting demons with little more than handmade mortars, his friends and thousands of protesters like them have counted on the help and protection of the population for weeks, who have provided them with foodstuffs, cellphone minutes, artisanal gunpowder, and safehouses – all of which have been essential to sustain the protests.

In this paper, we explore the socio-material infrastructures that maintained and repressed the 2018 Nicaraguan protests, as they made and unmade the insurrectional city. Following Merrian-Webster's dictionary definition of an insurrection, to be the act or instance of revolting against civil authority or an established government, we consider the insurrectional city to be an urban place that is socio-materially reconfigured by that act of revolt and the ensuing conflict. In Nicaragua, the insurrectional city (re)emerged as an entangled moral and material battleground where past and present practices and notions of insurrection, as well as diverging imaginations for the future collided. During this prolonged insurrectional episode, new material and human flows settled onto the streets, disrupting extant ways of being in and moving through the city. These were directly deemed illicit by government authorities, who projected the protesters as vandals, thugs, and later even terrorists (Weegels 2018). A competing ethics of care emerged then, as protesters and (para-) state actors understood the protection and defense of their lives and respective political projects differently. *Autoconvocados* (self-convened protesters) organized socio-material networks to distribute vital goods for protesters occupying public space, at the same time that the government mobilized its hybrid repressive apparatus to quash and criminalize both the protesters and the care networks supporting their activities. To understand the city-making practices that the protests engendered – both during the months-long insurrection and in its aftermath – examining the interplay between care, repression and legitimacy is crucial.

To structure our analysis, we first provide a conceptual framework that connects the production and repression of the insurrectional city – that is, work on the political materiality of cities – to work on the materialities of care, as care emerged as a central socio-material relationship of defense and protection. Following an explanation of our methodology, we then explore 1) the political materialities mobilized to produce the insurrectional city, 2) the infrastructures of care that sustained it, and 3) the infrastructures of repression deployed to un-make it. By looking at

1 Events reconstructed on the basis of interviews with two fellow protesters and news reports published the next day, e.g. https://100noticias.com.ni/nacionales/91173-asesinado-en-sutiaba/ (last viewed 30 June 2022). Alias Choreja's full name was Wilber Antonio Jarquín Rostrán, his memorial site can be found here: https://www.museodelamemorianicaragua.org/perfiles/wilber-antonio-jarquin-rostran/?ver=bio (last viewed 30 June 2022).

2 The video is available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ytjTRwdEJd8&t=1s (last viewed 30 June 2022).

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sustained anti-government protests as (illicit) city-making endeavors, we encourage researchers to tease out the interconnections between the material and symbolic affordances of the *things* engaged by social struggles, the implications of particular infrastructural interventions in the urban realm – by both protesters and the state – and the competing moral claims at play as political confrontation materializes.

A MATERIAL APPROACH TO CARE AND POLITICS IN THE CITY

As we are particularly interested in the intersection between illicit city-making and the materialities of care in the context of political crisis, this article combines emerging literature theorizing the political materiality of cities with approaches to practices and relations of care that emerge amidst state-sponsored, violent crackdowns on protest movements. As care theorists since Joan Tronto (1993) have argued, caring involves the meeting of human needs. While the concept has slipped across theoretical and empirical contexts – moving from the field of ethics to more empirically-oriented disciplines and thus acquiring a plethora of meanings (Puig 2017) – it remains useful for exploring questions surrounding 'why and how people take proactive interest in others, assume responsibility for their needs, and take practical action to support their well-being' (Wiesel et al. 2022: 1). In doing so, Conradson (2003) encourages geographers to 'see how relations and practices of care … are implicated in the production of particular social spaces' (p. 451). While recent research has explored how care and (digital) infrastructures shape protest movements (e.g., Xiaoyi & Huang 2020; Tufekci 2017), it is rarely considered how the relations of care that sustain protest movements are *simultaneously* implicated in the (illicit) re-making of cities, their materialities, spatialities, and everyday socio-material flows.

As the materialities of care literature posits, materials 'can symbolise and form a central part of caring relationships between people or groups of people' (Laverty 2019: 711). A lens on the materialities of care can then function as a 'a heuristic device for making visible the mundane and often unnoticed aspects of material culture … and exploring interrelations between materials and care in practice' (Buse et al. 2018: 243). Though it is tempting to foreground healthcare materials herein, examining the functioning of makeshift clinics tending to the wounded during the protests allowed us to see how these rested on larger, decentralized networks of resource distribution powered by *autoconvocados*. Seen in this way, care took the form of a broader socio-material assemblage dedicated to the allocation and provision of resources geared at protecting and sustaining the protests (as a political project) and the protesters (as both human agents and material bodies implied in this project). This material approach resonates with recent work conducted on the political materiality of cities, where the concept of 'political materiality' is deployed 'to refer to the role of objects in mediating relations of power between humans' (Pilo' & Jaffe 2020: 9).

Examining the political materiality of cities means taking seriously the material entities involved in the production of politics, including their particular affordances and symbolic properties. As these objects involve 'the materialization of politics,' Pilo' and Jaffe argue that '[a]ttending to material entities can help us understand how governance actors seek to legitimize a specific order and how people contest or conform to such orders' (ibid.: 10). We take both protesters and para-state actors to be engaged in caring for the legitimation and contestation of political order, considering governance actors to be not only those who compose the formal and legal political order, but also non-state actors who are able to (temporarily) regulate and control particular territories and peoples (see Müller & Weegels, this issue). This process materializes in the making as well as the unmaking of the insurrectional city and renders the provision and materialities of care political. During mass protests, a host of materials and infrastructures are deployed by vying governance actors as they dispute power, stake their claims and seek to bring about their political project: from protest signs to barricades, safehouses to artisanal mortars, and police patrol cars to party-colored AK-47's. Crucially, we should not overlook the role of information and communication technologies (ICT's) as imbricated in the insurrectional city's material (and digital) infrastructures of politics and care (e.g., Díaz 2022; Tufekci 2017; Weegels et al. 2021).

The roles that all of these materials play in enabling politics and care may go unnoticed when they are in abundance, legal and (relatively) uncontested, but their importance becomes

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particularly visible in the advent of their misuse, prohibition or absence – that is, during crises. Crises are important yet understudied empirical contexts for the study of relations and materialities of care. What is particularly interesting about crises is that they rapidly change the needs of those caught in their throes, leading to the emergence of novel practices and relations of care (Drotbohm 2015) and the mobilization of various objects as well as the transformation of urban space to meet human needs. In such contexts of flux, the social lives of materials are anything but 'mundane'.[3] Indeed, the needs that emerged during the 2018 crisis in Nicaragua were many and dynamic. But they were also patterned: gunshot wounds necessitated disinfectants and stitches. Entrapped students needed food, water, and mobile data to get the word out. The persecuted needed secure passage and safe haven – whether at home or abroad. In order to meet these needs, people organized mass socio-material networks dedicated to the acquisition and provision of vital resources. In doing so, they (temporarily) reconfigured the urban spaces, material flows, and daily realities to *make* the insurrectional city.

Finally, it is important to underline that material objects, infrastructures, spaces and people are highly interrelated with political practices of care. The act of entrenching oneself behind a barricade or inside a university implies a specific arrangement of objects – burning tires, bricks, barbed wire, protesters' bodies – which enables and constraints certain subjectivities and spatial flows of resources and people, thus (re)shaping the political materiality of the city. In this article, we take an explicitly material approach to examine these transformations, analyzing how particular (illicit) infrastructures and urban materialities of care and repression become mobilized and imbued with political meaning. Throughout this paper's three sections we explore these interrelations in depth, keeping in mind that the socio-material assemblages that emerge not only enable practices of care but also of violence – even if it is of the defensive or retaliatory sort. In doing so, we do not see violence and care as opposed, but rather as implied in each other.[4] As Ceci, one of our research participants, put it, 'I am not going to say that during the insurrection everything was perfect and cute, and that none of the protesters did anything bad. *Osea,* no. Please. We all went to topple and burn *chayopalos* [metal, tree-shaped government ornaments] – and with a lot of pleasure.'

A NOTE ON METHODS

In order to grasp the political materialities of the insurrectional city and the practices that produced them, we rely on a combination of media and document research, digital ethnography, and interviews with (exiled) protesters and (former) political prisoners. Neither of us were physically present in Nicaragua during the protests. Yet during her previous research, Julienne spent about 34 months spread over the course of 7 years (2009–2016) conducting a multi-sited ethnography inside and around Nicaragua's prison system, inadvertently documenting the reemergence of the Sandinista state from within the institutions of crime control (Weegels 2018; 2019b; 2021). As she remained connected to her research collaborators in Nicaragua, the eruption of the protests and their brutal repression hit very close to home. Dividing her network along pro- and anti-government lines, including police and prison authorities once deemed friendly, she spent months glued to social media as events unfolded – following livestreams and tracking friends and collaborators as they moved from barricades to safehouses and sometimes (back) into the prison system. In the process she collected a wide range of digital materials, visual as well as narrative, and began to re-focus her analytical attention on the expansion of Nicaragua's hybrid carceral state and its contestation. With time, she conducted numerous interviews with protesters, activists, exiles, (former) political prisoners, and other victim-survivors of state-led violence from a wide variety of backgrounds.[5]

3 While this makes it tempting to see materialities as 'normally' stable, or even static, we say this from a viewpoint of materialities as always-already *becoming* and implied in the social, as well as in the social production of space (Miller 2005).

4 As much as violence can be used to break and maim relations of care, it can also be deployed as a caring practice – to care for or protect another person (e.g., Auyero & Berti 2015), or even for a political project (as we show later on in this article).

5 This included more structured interviewing required for the documentation of state crimes. See RIDH (2020) and UPPN-RIDH (2022) for examples of collaborative, justice-oriented documentation processes the author engaged in.

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Conducting his research with Nicaraguan exiles amid the pandemic in 2021, Ricardo directly focused his ethnographic attention on the socio-material assemblages of care that girded these former protesters' participation in the 2018 uprising and their subsequent exile. Since the protests, more than 250,000 Nicaraguans have sought international protection.[6] In a country of approximately 6.5 million people, this amounts to one in 26 people. Over the course of three months, Ricardo conducted a series of in-depth interviews and focus groups with a dozen Nicaraguan exiles, mostly awaiting asylum in Europe. Motivated to flesh out a relational (Burkitt 2016) and affective understanding of (forced) migratory agency, he was interested in how relations of care shaped the way that political exiles navigated different stages of the 2018 crisis – from the protests to the subsequent refugee exodus. Through his interviews, he found that food, medicine and cellphone minutes were the *stuff* of the relations of care that sustained the protests and steered people's lives as they moved through the crisis.

Inspired by Pilo' and Jaffe's 'processual, historically-informed and practice-oriented approach to materiality' (2020: 10) in urban research, as well as research in geography linking urban spatialities and care, we were inspired to link our research together to explore how the relations of care that sustained the very *life* of the protests also (re)made the insurrectional city. Interestingly, this exploration points to the possibilities of researching (illicit) city-making ex-post facto, where the physical research of the materialities at hand was paradoxically not possible. While this inevitably presents particular limitations, we were able to contrast participants' narrative accounts with the plethora of open-source documentary sources and visual materials available about the protests, and vice versa. Similarly, we were able to contrast participant narratives between each other, discerning recurring patterns and understandings of protest and repression, as well as the practices, material infrastructures and social networks that sustained them.

BARRICADES AND MORTARS: (RE)MAKING THE INSURRECTIONAL CITY

By June 2018, much of Nicaragua was paralyzed by roadblocks and barricades. These blocked main transportation arteries between cities and rural areas, and halted traffic within urban neighborhoods as well as around occupied universities, transforming the everyday socio-material flows and lived realities of Nicaragua's urban centers. Especially after protest marches were met by heavy-handed repression – including sniper gunfire at the 'Mother of all Marches' on 30 May in Managua (GIEI Nicaragua, 2018) – these protest infrastructures materialized to maintain an occupation of the streets while ensuring a better protection of occupied territories in doing so. To this end, swaths of self-convened protesters (*autoconvocados*) erected hundreds of urban barricades, building them with heavy cobblestones (*adoquines*) pried from the streets with crowbars. Stacked one on top of the other with the help of community residents, they were built high enough to hide behind. Protesters also dug trenches in unpaved streets and laid burning tires and other piles of debris across asphalted avenues. A vast assemblage of obstacles then quickly emerged across the urban terrain, which blocked the country's vasculature and signaled the government's loss of territorial control. For the governing party – the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN by its Spanish acronym) – this was the first time in forty years that they lost control of what they considered 'their' streets and 'their' people, albeit temporarily. Yet it was not the first time that Nicaragua was paralyzed by an insurgent population.

In a strange twist of fate, the FSLN was confronted in 2018 with protest infrastructures that resembled both in their intentionality and materiality those erected during the series of popular insurrections that swept the country in 1978–79, which brought the Sandinistas their revolutionary triumph over the Somoza dictatorship. Initiated by the FSLN's founders almost two decades earlier, the culmination of the revolutionary process famously involved a sequence of popular insurrections, particularly in the urban centers (Sierakowski, 2019). Even as the struggle against Somoza did not pivot entirely around urban insurrectional tactics, these insurrections both united the FSLN's distinct factions and granted its revolutionary project

6 A still growing total of 284.000 Nicaraguans have left the country since 2018 (*Expediente Público*, 5 April 2022, https://www.expedientepublico.org/migracion-incontenible-284-mil-nicaraguenses-abandonaron-el-pais-desde-2018/).

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significant popular legitimacy. The first insurrection to materialize was in February 1978 in Monimbó, the 'indigenous neighborhood' of Masaya, ignited by the assassination of journalist Pedro Joaquín Chamorro on 10 January 1978 (Sussman 2010). Monimbó's insurrection was brutally repressed by then-dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle and his National Guard. In August 1978, after months of intense persecution, the FSLN managed to successfully occupy the National Palace. A month later, the first nation-wide insurrection was called for – the so-called 'September Insurrection' – provoking heavy fighting in León, Managua, Estelí and various other cities (Sierakowski 2019). This time, Somoza's regime waged a veritable war against the insurgents, leaving hundreds dead across the country. By the spring of 1979 some believed the FSLN had been decimated, but then a series of international events coincided with what has been historicized as the 'Final Insurrection' – lasting from 4 June to 19 July 1979 – which ended up toppling Somoza's regime.

At 39 years from these historical events, facing another regime that overstepped its legitimacy by killing those who opposed it, the idiom of insurrection was readily invoked by the protesting population (Mosinger et al. 2022; Weegels 2019a). In fact, due to the lethal state response, protesters bearing home-made signs and caricatures drew direct analogies between Ortega's and Somoza's regimes. Historical and contemporary notions of popular resistance, regime il/legitimacy and state-led violence then collided as people took to the streets to voice their disapproval. Linking themselves into a popular history of resistance and propelled by a now-or-never sense of urgency, many – if not all – urban Nicaraguan protest movements drew on historical insurrectional frames to re-make the insurrectional city.[7] In doing so, protesters' personal and family histories often motivated their participation. 'Now it is my time to *tomar la vida en serio* (take life seriously),' Leonese protester Layo said for instance, as he went underground to support the protests. In doing so, he interpellated both a famous revolutionary song[8] and the death of his uncle, a young Sandinista guerrillero who was killed at the hands of the National Guard during the Final Insurrection.

Back in 1979, on 20 June, León had been the first city to be liberated. Masaya fell soon thereafter, on 27 June, following the famous Repliegue Táctico. Then, on 17 July, Anastasio Somoza fled the country and the FSLN claimed its triumph – filling Managua's newfound Revolutionary Square with masses of people and guerrilleros returning from battle on 19 July, the date historicized as the anniversary of the revolution. As the 2018 protests evolved, hopes ran high that this timeline could be redrawn. Protest signs read 'Ortega and Somoza are the same thing', 'Every dictator is met by its 19th' (referring to respectively the start date of the 2018 protests, 19 April, and 19 July, the formal end of Somoza's rule), and 'Police, traitors of the people' – countering the police's own discourse of being 'born from the people' and equaling them to Somoza's National Guard. Likewise memes began circulating online that reinstated León as 'indomitable' and Masaya as the 'cradle of revolution.' Urban sites of the Final Insurrection re-figured as today's insurrectional cities.

While Managua's universities became the student-occupied sites of insurrection, Monimbó was recast as the epicenter of popular resistance. Soon, dozens of barricades emerged, proclaiming the neighborhood a free territory. Masaya's protest movements even managed to cut off the central police station, encircling it with dozens of barricades and locking the police in for nearly a month. Though the police did not surrender, many young protesters expressed the hope that Masaya would be the 'first liberated city' of this insurrection – they even set up an intermediate city council. In Monimbó, older generations shared with younger protesters forms of insurrect knowledge that amplified their capacities for resistance, including the manufacturing of artisanal mortars and explosives (e.g., *bombas de contacto*). Though a brutal incursion was unleashed to quash Masaya's barricades, which was most violent in Monimbó, local protesters prided themselves on causing the first interruption ever of the Repliegue Táctico's anniversary. It has in effect been four consecutive years to date that the Repliegue's caravan no longer ends at Monimbó's central square – its historical end point. By invoking an insurrectional past and constructing an insurrectional present, protesters have reimagined possibilities for liberation,

7 See also Mosinger et al. 2022. On popular histories of resistance, see Tatar 2009.

8 In the song 'No se me raje mi compa' by Carlos Mejía Godoy there is a strophe narrating the death of a guerrillero at the hands of the Somoza's National Guard that goes 'he died as a real man / out by the cemetery; / for he had committed the atrocious crime, *de tomar la vida en serio* (of taking life seriously),' that is, to have joined the revolutionary struggle.

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casting the present in light of the past as an illegitimizing rather than a legitimizing strategy of Ortega's government. Beyond the Sandinistas' socialist ideology, the key pillars of the Final Insurrection were redrawn as *anti-authoritarianism* and the fight for *popular autonomy*. Their claims to justice and freedom (*justicia y libertad*) in the face of state violence, and the particular political materialities they used to defend themselves, effectively re-popularized the possibility for insurrection and thereby destabilized the FSLN's claim to 'its' historical legacy.

Still, a key difference remained. This time the insurrection consisted of spontaneous, rhizomatic protest movements. These were largely not previously organized and unarmed, where leadership was multivocal and generally expressed horizontally rather than vertically (Rocha 2019), which molded the material geographies of the protests. In fact, this made them much more akin to the mass anti-government protests of the Arab Spring (e.g., Tufekci 2017) than the armed insurrection led by the Sandinista guerrilleros in the '70s. Interestingly, however, the present 'civic insurrection'[9] both constructed new values and invoked ones that had been marginalized in the FSLN's construction of its dominant, victorious narrative (Sussman 2010). This interpellation of revolutionary resistance was also disputed. Calling for a 'Free fatherland to live!' (*patria libre para vivir*) student-protesters nodded to but radically altered the revolutionary call for a free fatherland or death (*patria libre o morir*).[10] In an attempt to redraw the old frame of insurrection, which required and heroized self-sacrifice and death, myriad protest movements sought to embody a protest praxis centered on enabling life through mutual care (Bran Aragón & Goett 2021; Weegels 2019a). This meant that the barricades and roadblocks were largely conceived of as protective and defensive mechanisms rather than offensive ones. It also meant that it was generally buildings and objects taken to represent the government that were targeted, rather than people or military objectives.[11]

Still, there is a material representation of the regime that suffered the wrath of the protesters in particular: the so-called *chayopalos* – a composite of 'Chayo', short for Rosario, the name of the first lady and vice-president who designed them (Rosario Murrillo), and 'palo', for stick or tree. Of a more contemporary origin than the red-and-black party flag, this new symbol of the government – formally called the 'tree of life' – was directly targeted for vandalization (see also Selejan 2021). This Gustav Klimt-inspired symbol with curly branches initially appeared as a graphic shape in the background or watermark on the letterheads and websites of public institutions. Then, in 2013, they were transposed into the urban realm, materializing the Ortega-Murillo state-building project in the city. Built as 42- to 56-foot-high metal structures, lined with dozens of colored light bulbs, they quickly became referred to as '*arbolatas*' (a composite of the Spanish words for 'tree' and 'tin can') or *chayopalos*, after their designer. Costing around 25,000 US dollars each to build, they have been objects of scrutiny since their installation in the urban terrain. According to some, they also represent Murillo's occult power over and vision for the 'new FSLN' – in particular its pro-life stance and its purported concern for the environment. The latter is poignantly contradicted by the cost of their maintenance: colorfully lit at night, each 'tree' consumes nearly 1 million US dollars' worth of energy per year.

Over the past decade, Managua has been lined with about two hundred of these 'trees', many times replacing natural, shade-providing trees. All departmental capitals have also been fitted

9 The adjective 'civic' points here to a (desired) distinction from 'armed', and to civilian rather than guerrilla command-led. We insert these parentheses to acknowledge that within this multivocal struggle there were also groups who did seek to arm themselves, though in very provisional ways, and largely for self-defense. To somewhat counter their real and discursive exclusion from the main oppositional organizations that later emerged on the political terrain to represent the protesters' demands, we avoid the over-usage of the terms 'civic' and 'pacific' in referring to the protests overall, following both our research participants and the work of Nicaraguan sociologist José Luis Rocha (2019, 2021). While in many senses appropriate, these adjectives have namely served to make invisible many of the popular actions and self-convened people involved in the 2018 uprising.

10 Young feminists even altered this to '*Matria libre para vivir!*' which translates to a free motherland to live (Bran Aragón & Goett, 2021).

11 This is not to say that no people were targeted: close to 30 police officers were killed during the protests, a small number of which were lynched. Others died in confrontations with armed protesters, though the directionality of the violence deployed has been debated. Some say the FSLN needed 'a few of their own dead' to legitimize the lethal crackdown on the protests. The police certainly encountered more heavily armed resistance in the countryside, particularly where the Contra (US-backed counterrevolutionary groups of the 1980s) used to be strong. Yet in these remote areas, the government continues to deploy a combination of military and paramilitary operatives to 'weed out' insurgents, instilling terror in the population by killing indigenous, peasant and former Contra leaders (e.g., *Univision*, 28 July 2019; *Expediente Público*, 23 July 2020; *La Vanguardia*, 19 March 2022).

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with the statuesque ornaments, generally along a prominent access route to the city, signaling the FSLN's take-over of municipal government. Perceived as the material representation of the government's drive for power by (literally) installing itself in the urban landscape, the *chayopalos* were ready targets for protest vandalism. Their vandalization was imbued with a particularly iconoclastic impetus, as their take-down was experienced as a direct victory for the insurrectional city. In fact, it became a ritual of sorts to take down the 'trees', repeated time and again – tree after tree – on hundreds of livestreams. First, protesters would climb the structures to attach ropes to them, then they would douse the base of the structure in gasoline to set it on fire, and as the fire smoldered at the base, dozens of protesters would pull at the ropes until the 'tree' toppled.[12] Once the structure would come crashing down, the crowd would euphorically storm onto it, singing and chanting protest slogans while victoriously jumping up and down. Many left such scenes taking some of the tree's colored light bulbs as keepsakes, proudly showing them on their social media feeds, or wearing them on necklaces during subsequent protest marches. In a way, this demonstrated their investment in the insurrection and conversely, their rejection of the government's political project.

This very particular, symbolic attack produced actual socio-material rearrangements as police were deployed to protect the *chayopalos* and blocks of concrete were permanently installed around the 'pinnacle of trees' – the Rotunda Hugo Chávez – in Managua. Four years on, such anti-riot material infrastructures continue to surround both the Rotunda and El Carmen, the presidential residence in Managua. As the torn-down 'trees of life' have yet to be put back up by the government, the toppling of *chayopalos* engendered a more permanent transformation of the urban terrain. The barricades, on the other hand, were of a more temporary nature. Yet even as they became impossible to maintain in the face of heavily armed repression, their (re) emergence has provoked lasting transformations in the ways urban communities are policed. Before moving into this, we explore how socio-material assemblages of care emerged to sustain such (temporary) transformations and enabled the reproduction of the insurrectional city.

FOOD, MEDICINE AND *RECOLECTAS*: CARE AND THE REPRODUCTION OF THE INSURRECTIONAL CITY

> 'The medical brigade was in reality just a section of [the daycare center in the university], and there were these very tiny chairs, and I remember that we put two desks together and we covered them with black plastic. These were our improvised stretchers, and we also put mattresses on top of them that were donated by the people. Everything was donated by the people. Everything.' – *Ceci, 2021.*

As upheaval gripped Nicaragua's streets, Ceci – a medical school graduate – left her stable job at an insurance company and became a 'full-time' doctor with a medical brigade stationed at an occupied university's daycare. During her time at the brigade, Ceci worked at the front lines of the conflict, providing medical care to victims of state violence. In this section, we analyze the socio-material assemblages of care that emerged during the 2018 protests through interview data gathered from the people who participated in them – now political exiles. While we use the term networks to indicate the web of relations between people, we consider assemblages to emerge out of various actors' activities, built on those networks, but also through the infrastructures, objects and places involved, producing broader socio-material arrangements. Analyzing how these were shaped by contestations over the protests' and the states' legitimacy, we consider how they sustained the insurrectional city.

Both food and medical resources afford the continuation of biological life. Thus, in the context of the 2018 protests, when lives themselves were under threat, they were some of the most sought-out materials. Since they enabled the sustainment of protests and with it the (re)production of the insurrectional city, they also acquired a political character, mediating relations of care and power between the state and protesters occupying public spaces. Medical brigades, the people holding up the barricades, and entrenched university students were some

12 Again, a historical parallel was quickly drawn here with the toppling of the statue of Somoza atop his horse by a euphoric crowd in 1979 Managua. In fact, on social media protest images circulated that juxtaposed both images, and a poster design that graphically rendered both 'topplings' was widely shared among protest networks (see: https://observatoriconflicteurba.org/2018/10/31/managua-las-regresiones-de-una-ciudad-sin-centro/).

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of the main groups in need of these materials. Held up behind university walls and barricades, protesters needed food and water to make prolonged occupation feasible – and their protest against the regime loud and meaningful. Military-grade attacks on these occupied spaces, which left multiple people hurt or dead, meant that medical supplies and means of transporting the wounded were among their growing list of needs.

In order to tend to these needs, various members of civil society donated food, water, and medical supplies. Jacinta was one such person. On 20 April, she was allowed to leave early from her job because 'everything was collapsing,' so the store where she worked closed for the day. She then went to pick up her daughter from school, who was also let out early. With the roads in disarray, she drove through shortcuts and back alleys to try to get her daughter to her mother's house. It was then that she stumbled upon an occupied university and became motivated to get involved in the protests. Amid the turmoil, she could see students were also asking for help. As she recounts, 'what I did next was go to the supermarket and I started to buy water, all the foodstuffs that I could get, cookies, and then I went to the pharmacy, and I bought medicines and other basic things.' But delivering the supplies amidst the chaos was not easy: Jacinta remembers needing to weave through clouds of teargas and burning tires to get the supplies to the students. After parking the car in a hidden back alley, she walked to a drop-off point near the university. 'You had to leave them [the goods] there,' she explained. 'The *chavalos* (kids) were stressed. They didn't let you in unless you told them that you were going to help, that you were bringing supplies, because they were scared. I understood that.'

Jacinta's use of the word *chavalos* to narrate her acts of care provides a window into both the broader moral imaginaries sustaining such relations of care, as well as the competing claims over the protests' il/licity and the governments' il/legitimacy implicated in the (re-)making of the insurrectional city. In Nicaragua, youth (and particularly students) have historically been projected as the bearers of the future of the nation (Sierakowski 2019). Especially during the revolutionary process, their political participation was both instigated by the FSLN (many of whom were quite young themselves) and particularly repressed by Somoza. At the time, this youthful determination to sacrifice oneself for the defense of their country and ideals was idealized. This was later instrumentalized by the revolutionary government in the 1980s, when thousands of youth were drafted into the Sandinista army to defend the revolution against both local resistance and foreign intervention (Montoya 2012). They were heralded 'Sandino's *cachorros*' (puppies) and lovingly referred to as *los muchachos* (the boys/kids). Entrenched at universities and behind neighborhood barricades, determined to influence the political future of their nation, youth in 2018 – long perceived as apathetic (Bran Aragón & Goett 2021) – were again heralded as drivers of political change. As a result, their participation was directly met with both popular endearment and government repression. Barricades were erected to protect the *muchachos* entrenched at the universities, soup kitchens were organized to feed and support the *muchachos* manning the barricades, and safehouses were arranged for the *muchachos* fleeing brutal government attacks. Conversely, prison cells were prepared to punish the 'anti-social vandals'.

Donating resources was, however, not only a matter of spontaneous, altruistic actions, such as Jacinta's initial involvement in the protests. Tightly organized networks of resource collection and distribution quickly emerged at the neighborhood level (for the barricades), the city level (for the university occupations), and the level of broader family and social networks, for inter-city help to protest movements in need. These operations entailed different stages: collecting the resources, transporting them, and delivering them to where they were needed. Ron, for instance, once organized a *recolecta* (fundraiser) through a Facebook group. Those who wanted to participate had the option of sending money to a bank account (one that could not be traced back to Ron), or physically giving him cash or donations in species. Ron would then use this money to buy supplies, which he would deliver to the university through a trusted contact entrenched there: his brother. Initially, Ceci also organized *recolectas* at her work. She remembers that during one of these 'clandestine' *recolectas* she was confronted by her boss. 'He said, what are you doing?' she recalled, and she replied that she was 'collecting money, because I was going to gather food for the *muchachos*.'

Importantly, these *recolectas* provided an opportunity for individuals to participate in wider assemblages of care in an indirect, anonymous fashion – even from abroad. Through their participation in these informal mechanisms, which only represented one part of the larger,

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decentralized operations of resource-distribution, members of wider civil society, much like Ceci's boss, entered into a collective assemblage of care and political struggle. Especially for those who potentially faced severe state retribution for their direct participation in oppositional activities, such as government employees, this was (initially) a relatively risk-free channel of indirect participation. The *recolectas* were promptly criminalized, however. The soon clandestine nature of these informal arrangements of care and solidarity illustrates how people negotiated competing fields of illicity. On the one hand, the state's attempts to repress the protests and the widespread mobilization of civil society were premised on the protests' perceived illicit nature and the state's claim to legitimate defense in the face of 'vandalism and violent societal upheaval'. On the other, the protesters' and their supporters' actions were premised on the state's brutal response, deemed disproportionate and illicit, mobilizing them to protect the insurrect *muchachos* and victims of state violence (categories that often overlapped).

Communication technologies played a key role in maintaining the care networks that emerged. They enabled people at the frontlines of the protests to denounce the regime by broadcasting their daily realities, to communicate their specific needs, and to coordinate with larger networks powered by *autoconvocados.* Ron's brother, who was entrenched at the university where he studied, used his phone to tell him that they needed food and medicine, but above all, *recargas* (mobile data packages), which they used to post videos and to coordinate the transportation of the wounded – by making calls to people with cars, for instance. Since Ron worked in a telecommunications company, he was able to easily purchase and send these data packages to the numbers his brother gave him. Cell phone applications also allowed for the formation of informal, trust-based networks (with different degrees of access and security pending the social media platform at hand). Through these networks vital resources could be safely distributed and, at the height of the protests, some were also used to exchange passwords required to pass the barricades, as Layo explained.

Driven by their denouncement of the Sandinista state's illegitimacy, as well as by their conviction to care for the victims of repression, these bottom-up assemblages of care fed the insurrectional city's infrastructures, spatialities, and everyday mobilities. Simply put, the barricades, roadblocks and university occupations could not have been achieved or maintained without the life-sustaining assemblages of care that emerged to support the protesters. Moreover, the (re)making of the insurrectional city spread far beyond these spectacular spaces, as other infrastructures, like housing and university classrooms, were repurposed to support caring activities. Family homes became storage units for foodstuffs and more dangerous items to keep around. Hand-welded mortars and the artisanal, paper-wrapped packages of gunpowder needed to detonate them (dubbed *caramelos*) passed swiftly from hand to school bag, to temporary *caletas* (hiding spots) such as bedrooms or sewage holes, toward the barricades among groceries or school books, moving as inconspicuously as possible from point of fabrication to point of detonation. Many protesters like Juanol, Layo and Nestor used their homes to hold meetings in order to plan protests and the delivery of goods (cf. Müller 2021). Located close to a hotspot of violence, Nestor's house was in a strategic location to cater medical attention to the wounded. Ron remembers that him and his friends organized *recolectas* to bring medical supplies to Nestor's house, connecting this impromptu medical post to the broader socio-material assemblage that enabled its medical functionality. Like Ceci's makeshift clinic at the occupied university, all these spaces then became implicated in the maintenance of the insurrectional city as logistical nodes in the care assemblages that supported the protesters.

PLOMO: THE INSURRECTIONAL CITY UNMADE

As state violence increased and the government began targeting specific individuals for their involvement in the protests, people's needs transformed. To sustain the insurrectional city's reproduction, it became imperative for *autoconvocados* to safeguard their identities while delivering resources. According to Juanol, 'the police began stopping the vehicles that were getting too close to the universities, and if [they] saw you close to the university with full grocery bags, they would take it away. Even if they were for your house, they would take it away because they swore that they could go to the university.' In response, our participants came up with inventive tactics to circumvent the state's surveillance practices. As general precautions when delivering supplies, some of our participants would avoid bringing their identification cards, use cars borrowed from their work places, or if they could afford to, polarize their car

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windows. This would make them feel safer if the police or paramilitaries stopped them, since it would make it more difficult to ascertain their identities.

However, as state violence intensified and the government's attempts to identify protesters bore fruit, protesters ended up fugitives in their own cities. Now on the run from the state, the protests' protagonists needed above all safe accommodation and secure passage through the increasingly aggressive climate of the insurrectional city. After the police came looking for him at his house at the end of May 2018, Layo decided to not return home, a decision motivated by his family's safety as well as his own. Instead, he began to live, as he says, 'in clandestinity.' Clandestine living necessitates secure means of transport and safe places to stay. During this period of the protests, networks providing safehouses (*casas de seguridad*) began to emerge in order to meet these needs. With the start of Operation Clean-Up, the government-led operation geared at quashing the protests, 'we began coordinating safehouses with allies from the struggle, among *autoconvocados*,' Layo recalls. 'We lent each other our houses and coordinated this in secrecy … with *conocidos* [acquaintances], but who we trusted a lot.' By setting up a clandestine infrastructure of safehouses, people were able to sustain a life outside of home, thus minimizing the chances that the police would find them. Fleeing persecution, many of the exiles we interviewed recounted periods spent at safehouses both in the city (rented in richer parts of town with the help of *recolectas*, or shared in marginalized areas among networks of acquainted *autoconvocados*). Interestingly, homes in the countryside and small villages outside of the cities were drawn into these networks too, as they offered temporal relief from the heavy repression unleashed against the urban occupations.

Deeming the protests illicit and their intentions criminal, the revolutionary call for a free fatherland or death (*patria libre o morir*) was quickly reinstated by the party-state as 'PLOMO' – supposedly its acronym, but also the Spanish word for 'bullet'. PLOMO was then (re-)operationalized as the protection of the revolutionary project from an internal enemy supposedly reeled up by imperialist, foreign interventionist actors. These 'criminals' and their 'destruction of the nation' had to be stopped. A competing ethics of care emerged then around the protection of government interests, which explicitly mobilized familiar historical frames (especially from the 1980s) around foreign intervention and the imperialist attack on the Sandinista project. To fight back against this attack, all means were justified. Under the slogan '*vamos con todo*' (going all-out), the government armed riot police and part of their own *militancia* (party membership) to the teeth, including with AK-47 assault rifles and Dragunov sniper rifles (Bellingcat 2019). Perched in the cargo beds of police pick-ups and unmarked Toyota Hilux trucks, openly toting guns and party flags, the masked men in the joint operatives established between the police and government supporters (dubbed para-police or paramilitary groups) set out in caravans to quash the protests and dismantle the barricades.

Between 30 May and 19 July, the historical date by which the government wanted to regain its control of the streets, numerous videos of terrified protesters were shared to social media as they filmed the incursions. These figured operatives roaming the streets guns in hand or, as mentioned in the opening vignette, aboard caravans of Hilux trucks, shooting rounds of live ammunition at protesters, bulldozing barricades, and sieging and destroying roadblocks and university occupations with excessive lethal force (e.g., GIEI Nicaragua 2018). As the body count rose, protesters explain, the party colors came to signify blood and death. Many former protesters still have trouble seeing Hilux trucks and authorities in uniform. The repression took on a particularly vindictive character in former Sandinista strongholds, such as León, Masaya's Monimbó and Estelí, as the government punished 'its' people for 'betraying the revolution' (see also Thaler & Mosinger 2022). Finally, on 17 July, as the last barricades were dismantled, the Sandinista-majority National Assembly passed a law against terrorism with a definition so ample that anyone who pries a cobblestone from the street can be imprisoned – and anyone who participated in the *recolectas* can be prosecuted for 'financing terrorism'.

On its part, the government adopted the discursive framework of a failed coup attempt to legitimize its response. Following that framework, hundreds of protesters were soon arrested and processed through the country's heavily politicized criminal justice system (OMCT 2021; Weegels 2021). Criminalizing the very actions and political materialities that once formed part of their own struggle against a dictatorial regime, the current Sandinista government prosecuted swaths of youth for the erection of barricades and roadblocks as the 'disruption of public services' (*entorpecimiento de servicios públicos*), punishable with up to five years

of imprisonment. To further dismantle the insurrectional city and delegitimize the protest movements, the police accused them of illegal drugs and weapons trade, photographing known protest leaders with stashes of cocaine and handguns. Terrorism charges were often added to the list of accusations (see also Amnesty International, 2021). Before trial, human rights organizations registered numerous violations of due process. In many cases, people were taken into police custody without warrants and kept for months without charges. Excessive force was often used to detain them, and in many cases, violence continued when in custody. Soon, even testimonies of torture emerged (UPPN-RIDH 2022). Old infrastructures of repression, such as the infamous El Chipote jail built by Somoza (where many Sandinista guerrilleros had been held back in the day), again appeared to be functioning as torture centers. In Masaya, the same police that had been encircled for nearly a month violently sought revenge on the citizenry, debasing the bodies of the political prisoners they took (UPPN-RIDH 2022).

In the meantime, government supporters targeted private infrastructures to quash dissent with fear, spray-painting graffiti reading 'PLOMO' and other menacing phrases on homes identified to belong to anti-government protesters, churches and NGOs perceived to have supported the protests. Threats made online were reified by police cars and para-state operatives patrolling the streets. People began to flee the country en masse – by October 2018, more than 80,000 Nicaraguans had already crossed into Costa Rica. Effectively geared at destroying the insurrectional city's infrastructure, terrorizing the population and criminalizing both the materialities and practices of care and solidarity needed to sustain it, the government reasserted its sovereign power. Though this brutal crackdown and the continuing persecution is deemed illicit by many, the party-state has been able to sustain itself both legally and extra-legally – passing a series of laws that cast an ever-wider net over activities it deems subversive (OMCT 2021), enacted by its hybrid network of enforcers. The infrastructural and material power the Ortega's government wields then, as the operator of the state apparatus and head of the FSLN's ample community surveillance structure, means it no longer depends on popular approval. Yet whether this approach has definitively unmade the insurrectional city remains to be seen. If the historical frame tells us anything, the distance between the potentiality and actuality of a new urban insurrection may well be very short, even as it appears increasingly remote.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have shown how insurrectional infrastructures and socio-material assemblages emerged during the 2018 Nicaraguan protests, mediating the relations of power and care that made the insurrectional city. By analyzing the political materialities implicated in this form of illicit city-making, which the protests engendered, we concretely tied projects of state-making and unmaking, and the negotiations over different actors' il/licit status that shaped these, to the socio-material realities of the insurrectional city. The city thus became a key material stage on and through which state-(un)making occurred. Flows of (vital) materials, such as cobblestones, food and medicine, (re)made the city by allowing different urban spaces' and infrastructures' functionalities to transform – streets became barricades, universities symbols of discontent, and 'regular' citizens houses impromptu clinics and safehouses for victims of repression. These materialities were anything but static: as the crisis evolved, so did the care networks that attempted to meet protesters' needs, transforming the spatial distribution of (in) security and forms of everyday urban mobility that composed the insurrectional city. In many ways, the protests derived their power from the mobilization of social networks, popular protest materialities and their insurgent infrastructures. At the same time, so did the modalities and materialities of counter-insurgent repression levied against them.

These protest-driven urban transformations were shaped by contestations over il/legitimate and il/licit political action. Civil society's attempts to care for the victims of violence, imagined through the notion of the *muchacho*, were animated by the protesters' delegitimizing discourses of the state, while at the same time they were restricted by the state's attempts to repress and criminalize them, successively casting them as vandals, criminals and coup-mongers. The symbolic tension between the *muchacho* and the *vandálico* is only one facet of the fields of il/licity that shaped the course of the protests. The evolving realities of the insurrectional city – the erection of barricades, the reproduction of the very *life* of the protests, and the state's repressive practices – were also deeply dependent on conflict and collaboration between the 'formal' state, the criminalized

protesters, and involvement of illicit, violence entrepreneurs on both sides. Reproducing, contrasting, and resonating with the imaginaries and materialities of Nicaragua's history of urban insurrection, protesters and (para-)state actors sought to respectively delegitimize or protect the once revolutionary state. Having examined sustained anti-government protest as an (illicit) city-making endeavor here – in particular as they produced and maintained an insurrectional city – we hope to have demonstrated how researchers can engage the *things* protesters deploy, to better understand how and why political confrontations materialize on the urban terrain.

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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