

ANXIOUS
BODIES
IN THE
ANXIOUS
CULTURE

Anxiety,
roots and
the struggle
to practise

VICTORIA DE LA TORRE

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for the Master in Fine Arts at the
HKU University of the Arts Utrecht
(2020-2021 / 2022-2023)

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Font: Space Mono by Colophon
Foundry

Printed in Utrecht (The
Netherlands), in June 2023

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ANXIOUS BODIES
IN THE ANXIOUS CULTURE

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struggle to practise

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Dear reader,

I came to live abroad almost three years ago, looking for a specific context for thought and practice that I could only glimpse from there. And now that I am here, I keep thinking of there. This is not something unique, of course: it's just the condition of the migrant. When we find ourselves away, we gain new lenses to look back there, at our former (home)land with a gaze where romanticisation and nostalgia blend to build the image of an almost mythological place. In my fragmented memory there are bits of the past, future and now coexisting together to shape the porous identity that one develops when attempting to root in a different culture.

Perhaps that is the reason why –inspired by Gloria Anzaldúa (2015)– I decided to weave some words from my mother tongue into this global language that I borrow. I find that this way my ramblings are narrated with a more honest voice that is closer to me.

In this essay, I reflect on anxiety, rootedness and uprootedness, myself and my culture. I depart from my physical body to meet my social body, that is the poetic way I decided to think about the society I'm part of. Whether that society is the one here or the one there is not that relevant for me to set in stone; after all, the two of them are daughters of the West anyway. All of this has constituted the main challenge here: to articulate a collection of thoughts, references, emotions, intuitions and practices that have been synapsing in my mind for a while but that I have only now managed to set in a more or less coherent narrative. But isn't that what artistic research is about after all?

In either case, what artists do is make a particularly skilful selection of fragments of cosmos, unusually useful and entertaining bits chosen and arranged to give an illusion of coherence and duration amidst the uncontrollable streaming of events. An artist makes the world her world. An artist makes her world the world. For a little while. For as long as it takes to look at or listen to or watch or read the work of art (Le Guin 1989, 94).

PRELUDE_

MALESTARES

MALAISES

How to describe a sensation only by articulating letters, syllables and sounds? How can a feeling be encapsulated in a word without a body? How can it be extracted into an abstract concept? It seems an impossible task, like pulling an emotion out from the body that experienced it and from its cultural context; it feels like devoiding the emotion from its nuances, the memories it awakens, the experiences that triggered it.

The word *malestar* in Spanish refers to that foggy bodily sensation that precedes a cold or the flu. It is the preamble of the disease that settles between the bones and grows among the guts. But this concept can be expanded to also cover a more abstract and elusive emotion that involves both the body and the mind, a sort of malaise that is a mixture of strangeness, incomprehension, uneasiness and emptiness, and that, when it becomes chronic, it crystallises in specific points of the body.

Its origin is sometimes existential, emerging when we suddenly become aware

of our own consciousness, and face that absurd paradox that is the human condition. Other times it is more earthly, and it shows itself as an instinct from the guts, like a notification that pops up when something is not working as it could, or as it should. That uncomfortable, even painful discomfort works as a connection with our surroundings. That discomfort today speaks to us of precarity, hypersimulation, immediacy, crisis, ending, uncertainty.

El *malestar*, the malaise, is a noun created from the combination of two words: the adjective “*mal*” (badly, ill) and the verb “*estar*” (to be). Stretching the grammar a bit, one could also use it as a verb:

malestoy, I feel ill
malestás, you feel ill
malestá, she/he feels ill
malestamos, we feel ill
malestáis, you feel ill
malestán, they feel ill

Malestoy, therefore I am. *Malestamos*, therefore we are.

1_

**CULTURA DEL
MALESTAR**

*CULTURE OF
MALAISE*

**EL CUERPO
ANSIOSO**

*THE ANXIOUS
BODY*

pressure in my skull bones
tension in the back of my tongue
tasting the iron
of the knot in my trachea
a closed fist at the top of the stomach

that fancies dressing as hunger
it feeds from fear
it feeds from insecurity
it feeds from uncertainty
in this state I cannot think
nor focus

or perhaps the problem is
that I cannot stop thinking
that I cannot stop focusing
as an obsession imposed on me
only by myself

my time and energy are consumed
through the infinite parade of images
that my fast thumb displays
in yet another empty scroll
I seek inspiration –I tell myself–
but ideas never flourish
they come and go
as resort tourists
never leaving a trace or sediment in my
memory

the more I try, the more I fail
I could burst into tears at any moment
without any reason
but I lost the ability to ask for help
or share all of this out loud
maybe I never trained this capacity

pressure to achieve things
pressure to show
'if you are not on social media, you
don't exist'
pressure to produce
'what's the outcome?'
pressure to perform
'I don't know enough to be here'
pressure to be relevant
'art can change the world'
pressure to use my good privileged life

I want to hide
from whom? from myself?
from the world, from the others
I wish I had a cocoon
and could simply stay there
just for a while
to feel all stimuli stop
I need the warmth of a comforting place

I want to enjoy reading again
I want to find joy in creating
I need to reconnect

MALESTARES EN EL CUERPO

MALAISES IN THE BODY

I've always been afraid of heights. Since I was a child, I have always been very aware of the vertigo that appears when my body feels she¹ is losing the ground underneath my feet. The first time I boarded on a plane it was a whole odyssey: my poor mom had to deal with two hysterical children (my younger brother and I) trying to memorise every step of the security board out loud. But once we moved to an island, the habit dissipated the fear as I began to imagine the world outside of the little window as a movie or a videogame. In this fictional screen, the one moving is the world, and I am safely grounded on the seemingly stable floor of the plane.

*

1_ Along the text I will refer to my body as "she/her".

I write at a time when I find myself lost, confused, paralysed. Expectations (owned and inherited), generational hopelessness for the future, increasing social inequalities, precarity, world news, desperation to propose creative alternatives, decontextualized overdesigned lives populate my feed. I find it hard to keep track of everything and I often wonder: how to find ways to navigate through this mess?

I could describe this feeling as a disconnection from reality as if I was in an empty white space with no points of reference. No, that's not a good comparison; that is just an infinite and static void. This lostness I keep trying to grasp feels more like wandering erratically through a dense forest, where everything could be as familiar as it could be different; as if I was just condemned to keep walking and walking in circles. To find a direction among the density feels hopeless: there are just too many possible vectors to follow. There is just too much noise blending into one and I cannot distinguish the sounds properly. And still, the spark for a tiny hope keeps me wandering. It is a lostness that comes from the excess which seems to be the norm nowadays (Han 2015).

I describe a sensation of being lost, but what it is accompanied by is an incessant anxious search that grows in my body and crawls through my chest. This is precisely the true origin of this story.

CULTURA vs. SISTEMA

CULTURE vs. SYSTEM

This search brings me to reflect on the society that we live in, particularly inscribed in the neoliberalist capitalist system with all the biases and social weight that it contains. Here I explore my *malestares* from my very own perspective as yet another bodily product of this system, and also how I observe it affecting others and the world.

However, I won't focus on the concept of "system"; I have deliberately chosen to speak about "culture" instead. The reason is that, although these two notions are intimately intertwined, I find that the latter brings in a more economical-political-institutional connotation that escapes my knowledge, and quite frankly, makes me feel so overwhelmed that it blurs my hope.

Moreover, as I'm a cultural worker, I feel more entitled and comfortable thinking about the culture that has produced and keeps reproducing such a system –of which I am also part and subject–. I find more agency for hope by dissecting the current culture in order to be able to contribute to imagining different dynamics, relations and affections that are more sustainable and generative to me, to us and to the (eco) systems we are part of. After all, "culture" shares a Latin root with "cultivate". I see

culture as the place to cultivate new roots for a hopefully new system.

“Culture”, in essence, feels a bit more graspable, a bit more human. “System” feels to me like a cold machine a bit out of our reach, like an AI without supervision. It’s a nuanced difference though, but I find it in the comparison between Mark Fisher and Remedios Zafra, for instance. Fisher connects the social mental health emergency directly with the increasing neoliberalisation of the system. Zafra, on the other hand, while sharing the same diagnosis, points the finger to “the new culture” that emerges with this system and to the bodies that are inscribed in it. This way, I try to incorporate Fisher’s diagnosis into Zafra’s cultural and bodily approach and I also connect them with Latour’s criticism of Western globalisation and its consequences.

The culture I am trying to tackle is that blurry entity that for the moment I’ll refer to as the “Western culture” –the epitome of Modernity, the promised future of progress, the civilised heirs of the Greeks and the Romans–, a homogenising neoliberal globalised culture that is formulated from a patriarchal perspective, rooted in racism and colonialism, that extracts both natural resources and cultures and that praises infinite growth as its fundamental logic. A radically individualising culture (Cuesta Fernández, De la Torre Luque, and

Arnanz Coll 2021) where the social body is disarticulated in its disaffection and where the individual bodies wear themselves out in anxiety.

EL CUERPO COMO SENSOR

THE BODY AS A SENSOR

As a teenager I believed that my body and my mind were two very different substances; one was very limited, and the other one was somehow pure, with a lot of potential in store. Of course, as any teenage girl, my body felt far from “perfect”: I have never had a canonical figure, nor have I had gracility or particularly acute “feminine” features or even interests. So, since I was quite often in my head, I would deliberately ignore my body, dedicating to her the bare minimum just to fit into my social environment, and cherish my mind as a powerful space of growth and development. But it actually makes sense; after all, I was born and raised in a Catholic culture, which indeed enhances the divinity of the mind/soul and conceives the body as a mere temporary carcass. My body was a temple, and my mind was the sacred. What a platonic conception. What a cartesian dualism. What a watertight division it was.

As I grew up, I became more aware of the strong connections between my mind and my physical body. Or rather, my own anxiety

struggles and my somatizing body made me reconsider the nature of this divide. This cultural division suddenly felt unnatural to me, as two realities that are the same but deeply confronted in a bodily civil war. As such, my *malestares* forced me to develop a new relationship with my own body_{mind}². I prefer to see her now as the integral and material place where I am becoming with the world, with all her fragilities and all her resources.

This indeed offers me a better perspective to articulate not only my own very individual *malestares*, but also to see how they relate to the other(s): the context, the humans, the non-humans, the world.

I'm going back to the body, then. A she-body that feels, a she-body that senses; the taste of a traditional dish, the smell of the jasmines blooming, the sight of a willow gently lying on the surface of a river, the sound of a string melody, the skin caressed by the lover. But also, a body that acknowledges herself and her

2_ I call it like this at the lack of a specific word that implies the wholeness of these two categories into one. I also use the musical symbol of the legato to visually suggest the union of these two notions into one, as if they were part of the same gesture. A legato is a musical symbol that indicates to the performer that the notes in it should be interpreted in the same gesture, without interrupting the sound.

own extension, and a body that knows her position in space. A body as a sensor that perceives herself and her *malestares*. A sensorial body that dialogues with the world and its materiality, in all her fragility, intimacy, agency and power.

The sensorial body is a situated body (Haraway 1988). She is modelled by her context, traversed by the culture(s) in which she is inscribed; a vessel of modes of living, desires, fears and expectations inherited. Does my body end on the tip of my fingers, or does she extend herself beyond my skin? After all, this story is not just about my own bodymind in pain; it's simultaneously about a society that is also struggling with these *malestares*. A social body, my social body, that today is anxious, exhausted, precarious, burned out (Han 2015).

Suddenly, my anxious body is not just a body that suffers alone, but a testimony of a whole different narrative: she echoes a social body that struggles under the (mal) functions of the Western culture. I'm not sure whether my_{our}³ *malestares* are just collateral damages of the dynamics of the globalised culture, or whether they are

3_ As I mentioned previously, here the (written) language fails to offer a sign that I can use to talk about "me" as my own individual body, and "we" as the social body I am part of.

just the natural effect of them. However, what seems clear to me is that these dynamics penetrate into my,our cells, my,our neurons, my,our organs, my,our flesh, my,our relationships, my,our communities. They mediate how I,we are within the world.

In today's culture, the anxious body is perceived as an illness of the individual that can be treated, like a problem that just needs a solution. Am I feeling anxious and depressed? No worries, the system has a wide offer of pills, more or less scientific therapies and, more recently, apps, scrolls and other time sinks to palliate these *malestares*. The whole point is to cease suffering from these negative emotions (Han 2015). After all, I have to remain productive: the machine needs to keep running. Welcome to the "Estado de *Malestar*"⁴.

Instead of treating it as incumbent on individuals to resolve their own psychological distress, instead, that is, of accepting the vast

4_ State of malaise. It is a wordplay that acts as the opposite of "Estado del Bienestar", the Spanish translation for "Welfare State". In this expression, "welfare" is translated as "*bienestar*", which means "well-being". I borrowed it from the filmmaker María Ruid, who uses this expression as the title of a film in which she explores the relation between the increase of mental health malaises and capitalist societies (Ruido 2018-2019).

privatisation of stress that has taken place over the last thirty years, we need to ask: how has it become acceptable that so many people, and especially so many young people, are ill? The 'mental health plague' in capitalist societies would suggest that, instead of being the only social system that works, capitalism is inherently dysfunctional, and that the cost of it appearing to work is very high (Fisher 2016).

I have to be productive, yes, but not too sharp. Because if I start questioning myself about the nature of my *malestares* (What am I really working for? How am I finding some meaning? How am I contributing to my society?) I could then open a passage with no possibility of returning. A door that would slowly lead to the plateau of awareness. A place where I would get out of the womb and start observing, sensing the reality as it is, as we are producing it (Zafra 2021). The thick veil of normalisation would slowly slip away from my eyes. My *malestares* would get more and more unbearable and I don't want to suffer; I am afraid of suffering. But I'm way more afraid of becoming less and less tolerant and aware of my *malestares*, completely numb to the world, to others, to myself. I cannot stand being in a permanent "plane mode". *"My malestar is part of my awareness*

and I need it for hope⁵” claims Remedios Zafra (2021). I cannot agree more.

Here is where I draw the relation between my own body and the social body, in this necessity of learning how to sense these *malestares*, how to perceive them, how to sit with them, how to articulate them, and ultimately, how to share them. This is probably the most important and difficult one, that is to find ways to put them on the table and make them public. It is in this calibrated vulnerability that I try to find some agency to make resonances grow; maybe from the moment these words find a reader, maybe in a future in the shape of a memory. Because when we keep “washing our dirty clothes at home”⁶, the *malestares* grow knots in our bodies and our organs get rotten inside (Zafra 2021).

So I wonder, how can our *malestares* be our tools for sensing and for articulating ourselves as individuals but also as societies?

5_ Translated by the artist.

6_ It's a reference to the Spanish saying “*los trapos sucios se lavan en casa*”. It speaks of a culture in which the moral imperative was to solve one's issues in private; the importance was to maintain an impeccable social image. It often was applied to silence gender violence situations. I personally have only heard this saying from the women of my family.

INTERLUDE_

CONVIVENCIA

LIVE TOGETHER

Con + vivir, convivir, live with, coexist. *Convivir* is the verb, *convivencia* is the noun: "the act of living together". But not in the sense of "A shares the space with B", as if they were distant housemates forced to live together because of the housing's exorbitant price, limiting their contact and schedule to the bare minimum. To me, that would be a sort of "tolerance", in which they are accepting each other, but not necessarily having a sort of relationship or an actual quality exchange. In Spanish, *convivencia* has a connotation of companionship, of harmony. There is a sense of the togetherness implicit in the definition, a certain responsibility and affection. There is an active empathy, un *sentir-con*⁷, a way of *tejer tejido social*⁸. It is like a very delicate but firm join as the one imagined by the she-wolves tables of the artist Caroline Woolard:

7_ a "feel-with"

8_ weave social fabric

five rectangular wooden sculpture-tables that slightly insert one corner into the next one to form a circular chain (Capitoline Wolves, 2016). What a tiny yet exquisite detail, the almost revolutionary act of letting the other enter a bit into our own selves. A critical *convivencia* that can be developed not just towards others, but also towards ourselves and our own *malestares*.

2_

**CULTURA DEL
DESARRAIGO**

*UPROOTING
CULTURE*

**SISTEMA
NERVIOSO**

*NERVOUS
SYSTEM*

The roots, the home
where the culture that we are inhabits.
The place from where to be,
from where to be with others.
The place to go back to,
to deconstruct,
to reconstruct.
The place from where to develop.

A place without time,
a dimensionless space,
but placed under my feet.
A soil, a base, a grounding wire,
the grass beneath them.

It's part of me
my cultural legacy,
what precedes me.
It's the inherited
the substrate from which I grow,
that nourishes me.
The sun, the water, the earth,
my nervous system
the cultural performance.

A place in memory
with no clear images.
A place to return to
A mythological place,
nostalgic, tempting, almost dangerous,
a recreation.

Twisted, entangled roots,
sprouting from the ground,
raising the soil.
My roots, the mixture.

The empire, the fall,
the oblivion, the silence
the divided territory
the invisible lines
traced through the undergrowth
Roots do not understand maps.

The familiar,
the founding myth,
the original Eden,
the comfortable nostalgia
of the non-lived.

The roots that make us,
the *malestares* that bring me back to my
body.

Malestoy, luego soy°,
in body and mind,
in flesh and in spirit.

9_ I am ill, therefore I am.

CUERPOS EN DESARRAIGO

UPROOTED BODIES

From the eye of the *malestar*, a recurrent need keeps haunting my anxious body: a wish for a refuge, a shelter, a temporary safe space. It is a primal instinct, like the need to find a shadow to protect myself from the ruthless sun of August. It sets my body into an ancient state of survival, as if I was about to confront an imminent danger. Such an ancestral mechanism was probably very useful for a species that was not particularly strong or powerful, and it indeed allowed the species to survive. But today and to me, these threats are honestly minimal (at least, for my integrity). My body is not confronting a mammoth or the possibility of a bad harvest like the people in the caves of the forgotten dreams (Herzog 2010). Quite the opposite, in fact, being a privileged comfortable middle-class daughter of the West. And still, my hectic mind gets my body sick,

dealing with imaginary giants that are, in fact, windmills¹⁰. Or are they not?

*

What is the difference between being lost and feeling a loss? It appears to me that the first one is related to the impossibility of finding a position or a direction to follow, and the second one crosses some temporalities: it speaks from a present in which something is missing, something that was owned or enjoyed in the past. It narrates a mourning process or a void that was left. When attempting to articulate my *malestares* I feel them both very close, one highlights the state I'm in, and the other one refers to the reaction I get. In the density, I need to find a ground.

To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul. It is one of the

10_ This is a cultural reference taken from the Spanish novel *Don Quixote* (Cervantes 1615). In the book, the self-proclaimed and delusional knight Don Quixote battled against windmills that he had taken for giants.

hardest to define. A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active and natural participation in the life of a community which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future. This participation is a natural one, in the sense that it is automatically brought about by place, conditions of birth, profession and social surroundings. Every human being needs to have multiple roots. It is necessary for [her]¹¹ to draw well nigh the whole of [her] moral, intellectual and spiritual life by way of the environment of which [she] forms a natural part (Weil 1949)¹².

The longing for a ground to set the feet on, for a safe place, for roots to sustain us is a very ancient human need as well. But in the same way that I feel this longing in my body, the social body is traversed by a parallel loss of its common ground. Latour described our common need to land somewhere as we are confronted with the global threat

11_ In the original fragment, Weil employs masculine pronouns. I decided to change them into feminine in order to feel more directly addressed.

12_ Translation by the artist.

of the climate crisis, a phenomenon that our culture is producing and that is both literally and figuratively uprooting us (Latour 2018). It is destroying home-lands and territories, but it is also forcing us, especially on this side of the globe, to confront our hegemonic culture, our way of being and the very way we live. It is forcing us to face –and not offset– our responsibilities with the victims of our abundance. The consequences are already palpable: not only massive migrations and the increase of social inequalities globally (Latour 2018), but also extreme social reactions –totalitarian discourses, nationalism, far-right extremism, conspiracy theories...– articulated around these phenomena, blowing up any sight of *convivencia*.

Whether the climate crisis is the root cause of such a break in the social *convivencia* or whether it's just another factor to sum to the social body's *malestares* (yet a crucial one) is not up to me to decide. However, what I am trying to glimpse is how the latent social *malestares* are products of our current culture, a culture that uproots us in many different ways, blowing up our *convivencia* by crafting worlds that grow irreconcilable.

How are we supposed to *convivir* in such a precarious present that erases any possibility of a future (Fisher 2016)? How are we supposed to *convivir* if any

chance of dialoguing is cracked through this increasing polarisation? How are we supposed to convivir if we are obsessed with the control of the future, but haunted by the ghosts of the past? How are we supposed to *convivir* if we cannot find any sort of foundations to build on? How can we learn to convivir with our *malestares* and learn to recognise what they are trying to tell us?

EL FIN DEL MUNDO EN COMÚN

THE END OF THE COMMON WORLD

The end of the common world has arrived when it's only seen under one way and it's allowed to introduce itself solely under one perspective (Arendt 1958, 67).

What I'm trying to say is that the culture we are producing makes us anxious, and the anxious body is in survival mode. She cannot think about the past nor the future, she is just trying to survive. The anxious social body feels the same way, it produces a culture that just fosters progress and newness, and production, and real-time information, and on and on. It isolates us as individuals trying to make

us more productive and efficient; it cuts off any superfluous poetic meaning that is not susceptible to be commodified; it devoids our roots of meaning by selling them; it transforms the spaces of encounter into spaces of consumption; our common identities are erased in the process, our individual ones are put into question.

We are left in an anxious limbo full of complexity, uncertainty and struggle. The loss, the confusion, the fear, the numbness. What happens to our identity, to our self-confidence? Where can we develop comfort when everything suddenly looks unfamiliar or threatening? Any certainty as any sort of truth –of root– is embraced like a salvation.

In this vulnerability we need roots, we need to be part of something; we build those little echo chambers where we find a refuge among similars and that are propped up with our own biases, always with the invaluable help of mass media algorithms. But how to build these safe spaces without creating worlds that exclude? Indeed, conflict is inherent to democracy, but when worlds are set up in a way that some worlds annul others, that is a very dangerous path to take; democracy itself is at stake. The *convivencia* is broken. This is familiar to my social body; it's only a matter of having a look at the twentieth century. Both Simone Weil and Hannah Arendt, first-hand sufferers of WWII, reflected on the

fundamental human need for rootedness and the dangers of the contrary. Uprootedness, yet another face of anxiety. *The absence of a common world we can share is driving us crazy* (Latour 2018, 2). Crazy as anxious, disarticulated, disconnected. Crazy as every “man for himself”. As anxious as being in a survival mode in which the other is just another possible threat.

And I personally share this uprootedness; an uprootedness from a culture that is built on the premise of othering and that keeps failing to acknowledge its own past mistakes in order to prevent itself from reproducing them.

*

I want to believe that the making of worlds is a power within the reach of our fingertips. Worlds that don't annulate, but contain. Worlds that don't exploit, but empower. Worlds that recognise the complexity and the uncertainty, that allow us to *convivir* with our anxiety, to live in common.

To find a world, maybe you have to have lost one. Maybe you have to be lost. The dance of renewal, the

dance that made the world, was always danced here at the edge of things, on the brink, on the foggy coast (Le Guin 1989).

LA MEMORIA COMO LUGAR DE ARRAIGO

MEMORY AS A PLACE FOR ROOTING

From *mi cuerpo ansioso y desarraigado*¹³ I have some perspective to look back into my own social body with some distance and a diverse set of lenses (feminist, intersectional, queer, decolonial...) that allows me to reflect about my own (cultural) roots.

And in doing so, I look at my social body, anxiously trapped between the obsession with progress in the culture of the West and the oblivion of her past, haunted by monsters and fears of blood. That homeland that could be, that common territory where to *convivir*, keeps cracking among flags and colliding worlds.

“Go back to your roots, you always find inspiration there” is the advice that my mother has always given in times of anxiety and fear; there is probably nothing more accurate than an observation from the

13_ my anxious and uprooted body

woman who carried me in her womb. So, even recognising the importance of moving on to build a future that now seems cancelled, I especially find that *we must have a past to make a future with* (Le Guin 1989).

I want to borrow here the concept of “*the luxury of amnesia*” from the Barbadian artist Alberta Whittle. In her practice, Whittle uses this expression to describe the privilege that exists in the willing obliviation of histories of those othered by oppression in colonial relationships (James 2022). Extrapolating it to my context, the “*luxury of amnesia*” to me speaks about stories lost within the seams of the hegemonic discourse, most recently manufactured by the dictatorship and later skipped by the young democracy that tried to quickly transition from 1975.

Among these forgotten roots, I find a special resonance with María Zambrano. Zambrano is one of the most lucid thinkers of the twentieth century, a very prolific philosopher-poet that was close to the brilliant Generación del 27 (Instituto Cervantes 2022) –the artistic generation of the poet Federico García Lorca, the artist Salvador Dalí, the filmmaker Luis Buñuel, the Nobel-awarded Vicente Aleixandre, etc. and whose feminine figures, “*Las Sinsombrero*” were absolutely erased from history– (Ballo, Jiménez Núñez, and Torres 2015). She was a firm defender of democracy and the republican regime so, when they were

blown up by the national-catholic military coup that started the bloody Civil War, she had to go into exile in 1939. She wouldn't return until 1984.

From her own *desarraigo*¹⁴ in such dramatic conditions, she articulated and proposed the "*poetic reason*" as a way to move forward from the polarisation that had led to the biggest catastrophe in the recent history of our home-land and of our continent (Zambrano 1977). Her "*poetic reason*" is both a claim and a proposition. She laments how Western thought since its Greek roots has been insisting on the separation of two dimensions of the human embodiment: the philosophy and the poetry, the thought and the emotion. She experienced the result of such an artificial dislocation: the hyperrationality of the modern West, the cold pragmatic reason, had broken any attempt to *convivir*. She appealed to get the emotion back, to feel, to experience, to perceive, to exercise our lost poetic reason.

Nowadays, this notion resonates in how I see my practice of artistic research: a way of melting together rationality with poetry, criticism and imagination, history and speculative future. I would like to appeal to this othered knowledge that

14_ uprootedness

dissolves these dualisms in wholes, that questions current silos of thought, that evaporates rigid belief structures, that traces forgotten roots. I like to call it poetic knowledge. Poetic knowledge that I'm trying to exercise through my practise of artistic research, in this attempt of world-making by exploring roots that make me feel more grounded.

MAL DE MADRE¹⁵

MOTHER'S MALAISE

A través de mi cuerpo vivo mis malestares¹⁶, but my *malestares* are not unique nor am I the only one suffering from them... and less now. Every day more people are gaining awareness to claim the suffering of similar conditions of anxiety, depression and/or other related (mental) health issues with a revealing higher incidence in women, queer people, young people, non-white people, and the intersection of this and other othered bodies (Borgogna et al. 2018).

15_ The literal translation is "mother's malaise". It's the term used in the Baroc to call the pain and other symptoms produced by the period. In it, the *madre* (mother) is a metaphor of the uterus or womb ("*útero o matriz*", in Spanish). I love the concept as a wordplay to talk about womanly *malestares*.

16_ Through my body I live my malaises.

As a woman –as a queer woman– I feel the presence of some of these ghosts as longtime companions; a continuous impostor syndrome and self-questioning, spiced with self-exploitation and a constant necessity of (self-)validation. Overworking to achieve “perfection”, to demonstrate to myself that I am good enough and that I am placed somewhere I can perform. A distortion of a toxic effort culture that grows heavy in my guts. And the guilt... *Por mi culpa, por mi culpa, por mi gran culpa*¹⁷. *A guilt that is tied with a double knot in our souls* (Zafra 2021).

These ghosts have long bed sheets; they tie me to the women before me. My grandmother was the first woman of the family that fought to be allowed to go to university, but she was never allowed to work; her career was at home. Her daughter, my mother, studied as well, but she had to choose a different study than the one that she desired because that one was in a different province and she was not allowed to leave. Her two brothers left, the three sisters had to stay. Later she would give up a promising

17_ Because of me, because of me, because of my great fault. It's a verse from the prayer "Yo confieso" ("I confess"), collectively recited in any Catholic mass at the moment in which the members, softly hitting their chest with their fist, perform their guilt feeling to seek forgiveness for their sins.

teaching career to follow her husband's – my dad–. Her career is at home too. Both of them have always –always– encouraged me to be independent and to build my own path. I cannot ignore the privilege that it is that two generations ago, a woman in my family could get university studies and especially in a poor agricultural city in the south of the country in the ultraconservative society of the national-catholic dictatorship.

I am the first woman in my family who was born and raised in a democracy, who could freely choose her career and, with the family's caring support, could go abroad to try to build a (public) creative voice of some sort; I am the result of the battles that they could and could not fight for.

But maybe for this reason, the burden and blessing are even more present with me; their fears and frustrations are carried with me in my body, as inherited spirits, joined with the ones before them. Women of different generations living between their (self-)suppressions and their intimate domestic resistances inside of their *gruesas paredes encaladas*¹⁸.

18_ thick whitewashed walls. My family is originally from the south of Spain, Andalusia, and there the traditional popular houses are whitened with lime.

In this way, I'm finding in feminist voices a way to give materiality to these blurry ghosts and cast some light on some of these tight knots. Through the voices of women – of yesterday and of today– I'm discovering other narratives of the reality which make me feel more *grounded as a human being* (Le Guin 1989); narratives that talk about carrier bags and not spears (Le Guin 1989), more about cooperation, the domestic, the care than about heroes, *conquistadores* and domination. Stories that focus on the care of the she-wolf and not on the battles of Romulus and Remus (Woolard 2016). Narratives about *convivencia* and not *violencia*¹⁹. Narratives that build places where the walls are soft and translucent, like warm skins that envelop us intimately, and that, in their envelope, allow us to gently see what is happening outside.

19_ violence

3_

**CULTURA
DE LA
PRODUCCIÓN**

*CULTURE OF
PRODUCTION*

**CUERPOS DE
PRODUCCIÓN**

*PRODUCTION
BODIES*

Produce produce produce.
Be productive
 be consumed by productivity.
Productivity to produce.

Produce more more
more.
 Reproduce more
more.

Consume me
Consume more.
Consume anything. Just consume.

Design a product,
produce a product,
consume a product,
 become a product.

My impulses, my biases, my affections, my
knowledge.

All products!

My fears, my weaknesses,
the desires I don't need,
the needs I don't have,

All produced!

The city where I walk,
the square, the benches,
the air I breathe

All consumption spaces!

Fix the world
consuming,
Fix the world,
producing,

Your reflection in the mirror: a consumer
good.

PRESENTE CONTINUO

PRESENT CONTINUOUS

My grandfather grew olive trees; perfectly aligned seas of olive trees, green and silver leaves, on dry and cracked soil. Time, then, had to be one more ingredient to make the tree grow strong and healthy, and the olives to be abundant and juicy. The tree was raised with patience.

Today time is the enemy, we live in the now. Everything is instantaneous, instant messaging, instant noodles, fast food, ultra-fast food, on demand. In the infinitely small instant of now, the urgent and the important merge and get confused by an endless number of alarms and notifications. All prioritisation disintegrates on the same plane; everything is presented as something to be done by yesterday. Sometimes I wonder if we are capable of covering what already, if our capacity allows us to live in that permanent deadline (or for how long). So it seems that reality is speeding ahead

of us and we are running behind trying to catch up.

I used to exchange letters with my cousin, who lived in a different city. Even when cell phones, emails and instant messaging were already widespread. There was something very special about letters: they gave the writer the time to reflect on what she wanted to transmit, and, at the same time, they were restricted to the number of sheets or by the writer's bodily effort and fatigue. I also remember the patient impatience of the waiting between letter and letter, which would just feed the expectations and the illusion when the reply was suddenly found among the bills.

I sometimes envy all those philosophers, artists, writers and other intellectuals who could only use letters to communicate over long distances with other colleagues. They must have had a lot of time to do so, to reflect and to savour the answer they wanted to deliver in the next missive. But also they were mostly men. And had their food, chores and clothes made.

There's no time for that anymore. There is just no time. The time is thick, dense. I just wonder where, when and how we can make, cherish and preserve some spaces of quietude, such as letters, through the density.

PRODUCCIÓN CONSUMICIÓN

PRODUCTION CONSUMPTION

I used to spend each summer holiday learning to do something new, just for the fun of it: typing without looking at the keyboard, digital drawing, photography and video editing, watercolour painting, playing the piano... During all these activities, my process of (self)learning by experimenting and trying things out was the main enjoyment; the outcomes or the quality of them were the least of my concerns, almost like accidental testimonies of the progress.

When I entered the professional world, though, especially as a creative and cultural worker, all these innocent pleasures became part of my production skills. Every content I consumed was susceptible to be useful for my work. The breaks were painted with guilt. The pleasure of learning for the sake of learning vanished; where before there was the freedom and self-acceptance of being an apprentice, now it grew a sense of duty and an imposed (self)expectation to perform professionally. And with it, the anxiety outbursts. Anxiety to perform, not only in the professional sphere but also in every other aspect of my life. A pressure and an expectation to produce (value) and to be productive within our production-based culture, that encourages the professionalisation of hobbies, of

wellness, of the daily organisation, reproducing so high standards of perfection and virtuosity that fall onto me as an internalised urge to keep being productive to catch-up with the distorted reality that I perceived from the rest.

And because of this pressure to perform, and to perform excellently, placing the value in the productive potential rather than in the joy, the care, or any –of course, non-productive– other emotions, the anxiety in my throat grows ghosts in my mind. But my anxious body cannot produce, she can only observe, she can only absorb.

So this is the reason why the concept of “production” makes me squirm in my seat now. This culture’s production-consumption paradigm permeates to me-us to a level that it’s even believed that “the world can be saved” by producing and consuming.

And I am especially sensible to this because I was trained to be a literal part of any chain of mass production, in the epicentre of the production-consumption logic²⁰. But the tension between my *malestares* and this paradigm centrifuged me to the peripheries of the design world in an attempt to find ways of practising that exercise alternative values. I came

²⁰_ I hold a Bachelor in Industrial Design Engineering and Product Development

into the art world, not to reject design, but to incorporate fundamental languages and sensibilities that allow me to weave a voice (or voices) and a practice (or practices) that attempt to resist this self-destructive cycle.

I think there is a close connection between the self-exploitation I described and the fact of being a worker in the creative and cultural field; my practice(s) and my identities are very close. After all, my practice(s) are a very (privileged) vocational choice, and they are so closely connected to my very own self and my urgencies and *malestares*. How could I separate them from my own self? I “am” an artist. I “am” a designer, or any other professional label I can use to brand myself. But am I my work? Also, in a period in which I am unable to produce it, would I still be an artist, or a designer, or a writer, or an educator? In a culture that praises the capacity of an individual to produce and accumulate value, creative workers are the ones that create (new) content to consume, and we do so because we “love to”, because it’s our vocation, because it is what we choose as our identity. And this circuit of production, consumption is reproduced by us in the anxiety to create something new, impactful, ground-breaking. But the value, at least to me, is not there; it’s in selecting carefully what is honestly and directly speaking to myself and my

malestares, allowing me to articulate and share them.

In the culture of the production-consumption there is not a visible place for those who don't produce but who create the conditions for production to occur. I'm thinking concretely about that hidden labour that is so fundamental that is assumed it will be done anyway as an act of "love" or "duty" or even of "decency"; the labour that the pandemic brought out as "essential work": the labour of care. A labour (emotional and physical) that has traditionally been rendered as feminine in the Western culture, and for that reason, as worthless.

And I was also seeing that with my young neoliberal eyes. I wanted to escape so badly the same destiny of "worthless care" as the women before me, like my mother and my grandmother, that I mostly focused on building a career, in order to prove that I could be contrary to them; I wanted to be "valuable" to me and to my society.

But when I had the chance to do so, I felt my body collapsing, taken by my *malestares*. For some time I managed to ignore them, but at some point, I could not stop perceiving the incoherences surrounding me and that I myself was part of. So, clumsily, erratically, slowly, experimentally, and even without realising, I started to develop practice(s) that value the non-productive, the care, the enjoyment, the

vulnerability, the feminine as places, not of production, consumption, but of nurturing *convivencia*. I am trying to be part of not a culture that produces, but a culture that engenders, that regenerates.

DE PRODUCIR AL HACER

FROM PRODUCING TO MAKING

Against the pressure to produce, I get absorbed by the thinking, but the thinking is a castle built on clouds, with fading staircases and labyrinthic corridors in impossible spirals, so I cannot find the place to root.

Imagine a carriage with two horses pacing through a steppe with two different rhythms. One runs very fast, but also it is hectic, dispersed and erratic. The other one is a bit lame; it runs very slowly, insecurely, fearful of the bumps on the road. But in her slow pace, she is aware of the others, generous and eager to share her path with them. The movement of the car doesn't feel very comfortable though. The first horse sometimes feels that she could do all the job alone, but when she takes the lead so much, she gets the carriage on a road to nowhere. The second one needs a bit of push, but in the rare moments that she finds herself confident enough, she has the perseverance to go all along.

My whole practice in the last years has been to reconcile these two and find a way to not really merge them anymore, but more to find a syncopated rhythm in which each of them is cherished in all their fragility and potential.

For the moment, I'm trying also to redefine what production can be for me, because I am aware, after all, of the paradox that I'm posing here: I'm keen on developing a practice of production that doesn't produce products, but that makes objects, spaces, conditions, that are thought; after all, I'm a bodymind that makes and thinks, that thinks and makes.

And I said "make" in the same way I was differentiating "culture" from "system" before, because "make" feels a bit more bodily to me, as a "make with my hands", in opposition to "produce" that entails to me all these industrial connotations of black-boxed chains and uncertain origins and conditions. A way of making that makes me aware of the othered worlds, of the obscured stories, of the cultural and physical roots and biases, a way of making and thinking that roots me with myself and with others. A making that can inspire other worlds for me and others. Inspiration literally means "to get air inside", as a way of making flows of ideas soaring through the air.

To think about making and not about producing makes me change my conception slightly from outcome-based practice to a more process-based one. A practice through which I'm trying to allow space for experimentation, imperfection... and the presence of others. A porous practice that embraces the sharing where resonances spring and lucky encounters emerge. A practice not exempt of frustrations, insecurities and fears but that finds in care and patience the comfort to deal with the unknown; a *making with sense* (Zafra 2021), with *sosiego*²¹, with generosity.

21_ quietude

*

DESDE LO OSCURO

FROM THE DARKNESS

I keep attempting to make. Make make make. I keep trying to model materials, find shapes, produce objects. Make make make.

But the fear keeps haunting me: there are always too many steps ahead, too many possibilities and the knot is too thick and the wall is too big.

I am afraid of the making that I knew, of pulling down the bridge between the vague ideas and the reality of the choices; too many repetitive scribbles on the paper. And still, I want to; I feel to.

And the fear grows, and the spiral grows wider.

From the depths of my *entrañas*²² (Zambrano 1989), I yearn for a refuge to make my body feel a bit safer, to reduce the triggers and to find some rest. If only for a moment, I'd like to reduce the world outside to this silent mental space.

How to erode this hiding impulse, an avoidance so rooted in my body?

22_ guts

*

DESDE LO LUMINOSO
FROM THE LIGHT

From the depths of my *entrañas* I yearn for a refuge to make my body feel a bit more safe, to reduce the triggers and find some rest. If only for a moment, I'd like to reduce the world outside to this silent mental space.

But in this intimate anechoic chamber, the body would sound as loud as the outside. And still, I long for connection. I need the other.

Maybe I should listen with my hands and my gestures, and just model.

I was in a prenatal state (Zambrano 1989) as if I was still inside my mother's womb, or as if I went there again. There were orange lights, and moving shadows through the embracing membrane; inside I was safe, warm, calm, in peace.

I would find rooting there, in that cocoon, in that womb. A place from where to engender, from where to be born, from where to connect, to share, to invite, to dialogue, to be, to play.

UNA (NUEVA) RELACIÓN CON LA MATERIA

A (NEW) RELATION WITH MATTER

How bodily are my our *malestares*. How material is my our body that thinks and makes, my our body *que malestá*. The material body that thinks and makes leaves the imprint of her beliefs and biases in the way she models matter. Material spaces embody the values inherent to the social body that engendered them, including or, on the contrary, perpetuating logics of inequality and exclusion. So this property of the matter to act as a mediator is very relevant to me. In this way, I can imagine it as a vessel that can *tejer tejido*²³, that can weave social bodies and engender spaces for *convivencia*.

My relationship with matter is wicked though. I do have a sensorial affinity with it in the way it awakens my senses and triggers my memory, but, at the same time, it brings me back to the logics of extractivism, hyperproduction and blackboxing. A material culture that has become so complex and distanced from the origins of the matter through its many processes and intermediary logistics that it just uproots us in the impossibility of recognising its context and impact.

23_ weave fabric

Materials, and especially, the objects that they compose, as cultural devices that contain and transmit meanings, can also embody fragments of alternative worlds, and, at the same time, offer a certain sense of relieving rooting. Stories that speculate about alternative and situated ways of producing –like Formafantasma’s Autarchy (2010)), in which this research-based design studio imagines a self-sufficient community that produces their goods with the fundamental ingredient of their gastronomy: flour–; other ways of creating non-productive conditions to be in the space with others –like Maïke Hemmer’s This Deep Becomes Palpable (2022-2023), an artistic installation consisting of large scale paintings inspired by daily bodily scans and large soft sculptures with different organic textures and weights accompanied by an invitation to meditate–; or to transform individual processes into spaces for collective experiences – like María Mallo’s Cíclica (2021), an architectonic installation in which, through different sensorial human-scale sculptural spaces, she narrates her own personal cycle of self-acknowledgment.

*

I filled my anxious body with these expectations, and she just collapsed. I went back to the basics; to think with my hands. Through primal gestures, caresses and tender pressure, I am giving space, time and thought for my *malestares* to breathe, to prevent them from slipping through my fingers, to hold them close. Just like that, with my_our hands that might have been the first carrier bag.

EPILOGUE_ LA SOBREMESA²⁴

This whole text started as a fragmented compilation of my different *malestares* in disjointed thoughts, but it has ended up being almost like an exercise of enunciation of my position. I feel I have done so by accompanying myself with some of the authors that are very dear to me and I feel that they are standing with me in this exercise of articulating myself. I call it an exercise of enunciation more than a research as such because it has completely challenged what I used to consider a research to be. I have definitely discovered this other very own way to do so. Maybe this was the way of weaving poetic knowledge, after all.

24_ In Spanish, “*sobremesa*” is the time in which people remain sitting around the table after a meal, frequently having a conversation that can even extend for hours.

In this introspective (artistic) research I've attempted to give meaning to my struggles and fears, to my *malestares*, and to connect them to a reality bigger than my very own. I've also traced a parallel between myself as a body and the wider body I'm part of, that blurry entity that is "society". I feel that the context that we are living together is quite a complex and especially tensioned one, and in this exercise, I wanted to play a bit with the scales to not end up being purely academic or purely emotional; it was at the same time a protective gesture to preserve my own intimacy and an exercise of empathy as an attempt resonate with other possible realities radically different to my own.

This process has been painful and I want to stress that. It has been watered by insecurities, blocks and fears, and I lost count of how many times I've questioned the depth and the relevance of my thoughts and wanderings, and even the very worth of my practice. But in the end, I can say that I have found a strange and intuitive coherence in how I can now recognise some images, words, patterns that make me suggest that I've finally got in touch with something I could call my voice. Probably this was the act of the enunciation I was referring to before. I feel I have encountered myself a bit more.

Another sensation that has been accompanying me is an urgency to find a

sense of relief, a hope, a positive note, even if tiny, despite or beyond all the criticism. In this sense, stretching the concept of culture in an attempt to problematize it a bit, made me feel that, as an artist, as a cultural practitioner, I can have a bit more agency to contribute to it.

Something I've definitely learned along this process is that, if my practice was a building, I would like it to be a patio. In traditional Mediterranean houses, the patio is in the centre of the building; every other construction surrounds it. The *patios* are open spaces with the main functionality of giving the rest of the construction more light. But, at the same time, it is a space for resting, enjoyment, gatherings, a space to connect with the outside, acting as a liminal space between the exterior and the interior, the public and the private. Spaces under the sun, tattooed with arabesques and dotted with ceramics; scents of *azahar*²⁵, jasmines and bay leaves; the sound of fresh water running. And a table. In my patio, there's always a table. A table to host, a table to share: people, conversations, food, time. I have learnt that my practice is my very own way of finding rooting, with myself and with others. Maybe, after all, I have learnt how to dialogue with my horses.

25_ The smell of the lemon tree and/or the orange tree blooming

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS_

I've been very well accompanied in this introspective journey by people who have been and are to any degree part of it, sometimes more consciously, sometimes feeding it through a casual conversation or a comment. I want to thank them all for sharing their thoughts, associations and beautiful serendipities.

Out of everyone, I would like to thank closely:

To the Master in Fine Arts team: Annette Krauss, Domeniek Ruyters, Christina della Giustina, Falke Pisano, Katia Krupennikova, Manju Sharma, Ron Bokje, Tiong Ang and the rest of the lecturers, guest lecturers and other members of the MAFA community. Their eagerness for unlearning, rethinking, remaking and, most importantly, the humanity and care that they exercise daily create the most special and unique space

for sharing; this is the main reason why I first chose this program after all, and how it has grown to become my inspiration. I want to particularly thank Manju Sharma, our most caring tutor. We have cried and laughed, but without all her support I don't think I would have managed to put myself together. I also want to mention here our most amazing facility manager Ron Bokje, who, with his shining energy and overflowing wit has even changed the whole vibe of the building. Thanks to Christina Della Giustina for the long conversations and the empathy that have poetically guided me along these lines.

Thanks to all my classmates and peers at the MAFA, both from this year and the previous one. Their diverse practices, backgrounds and multiple understandings of art-making have been privileged sources of inspiration and bonding.

Thanks to all the friends outside of this academic context who have offered their valuable input and a little bit of their time. I want to thank in particular to Sarah for her sharp ideas and always emotional support. Also to Elisa, Daniel and David, my first readers and long-time companions of adventures.

Thanks to Joyce, deeply and daily, for all the support and care along this journey. I cannot wait to keep learning together how to practise these crazy and beautiful

things that are our lives. Also, I'm finally believing that I'm not my work.

Thanks to my parents for their always unconditional support, patience and care; their love encourages me to always keep trying. Thanks to José for the incredible encouragement and beautiful words. Always the first reader and always so enthusiastic. Thank you all for being my roots.
