

# When discomfort enters our skin: Five feminists in conversation

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The order of author names in this article comes from a collective dialogue based on a generous recognition of each other's needs and work.

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Created around, through and within discomfort, this piece weaves together the voices of five feminist scholars in an exploration of troubling affective and emotional experiences, offering material for critical theorizing and engaged scholarship. This inquiry started at a conference panel in July 2019. Taking on the invitation made by the editors of *Feminist Anthropology* for the five of us to write in conversation, this piece also responds to April Petillo's piece in the first issue of this journal where she compelled us, feminist anthropologists, to listen through discomfort in order to challenge hierarchies of power and knowledge production. Through a polyphonic composition that draws on the different backgrounds, research and life trajectories of five feminist scholars through a collective online writing process, this piece purposefully plays with form, presenting reflections on naming relational discomforts, unsettling academic affects with our writing, violence, precarity and privilege, and how to work with discomfort through feminist solidarity.

**Keywords** affect, discomfort, feminist, precarity, writing

It was in July 2019, during the peak of the summer heat in Madrid, when the five authors of this article met to discuss the topic of discomfort. At the Iberoamerican Anthropology Association (AIBR) annual conference, three of us—Nancy Francis, Kayla Rush and Ana María Forero Angel—presented as part of a panel organized by Elona Hoover and Andrea García-González. The panel explored what attention to affective and emotional experiences of discomfort offers for scrutinizing socio-cultural matrices and politicizing research practices. Together, we set off on a journey of collaboration. First stop: this polyphonic composition.

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Accepting the invitation made by April Petillo (2020) in the first issue of *Feminist Anthropology*, we aim to listen through discomfort and interrogate normative academic affects that shapes knowledge creation—what Petillo refers to as “vocal cues and cadences, language choices, physical stances, and measured emotional silences used to convey an unbiased (if not removed) observer stance” (2020, 15). Paying attention to embodied responses of discomfort can potentially reveal, contest, and transform norms. However, discomfort is not always transformative (Applebaum 2017), and it can even lead to violence. Our work embraces discomfort through the support we find in each other—a feminist praxis developed across screens, margin comments, connections, and cracks being made in worlds that sometimes appear immovable and impermeable.

The creation of this article, in this particular journal, has given us the feminist boost to bring our experimentations with comfort and discomfort (which we understand as immanent within each other) to the act of writing. We play with words, formats, and multilingualism that challenge academic affect and the geopolitical configuration of knowledge production. Our multilingualism draws inspiration from longstanding work by feminist scholars, foregrounding modes of writing that challenge academic affect and foreground the contribution of feminist women of color (Behar 1996; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983; Spahr 2001).

We have conceived this article as a space to imagine otherwise and compose collective academic disruptions. Our text purposefully invites readers to share the intimate moments that nourished our exchanges and witness a process of writing and editing that performs discomfort as it enters our skin. This embodied understanding of discomfort becomes complicated when our skin allows us to reflect on hidden and visible privileges. Our use of skin, as the surface that connects embodied emotions to socio-cultural expectations and exclusions, relates to Petillo’s call (2020) to reflect on our privileges when writing about discomfort. It also comes from our own approach to emotion and affect that recognizes how discomfort is entangled with structures of power and recognizes why we must think not only through the body but also through carnality (Povinelli 2011) and enfleshment (Motta and Bermudez 2019).

We mention scholars that have directly accompanied us in the process rather than attempting incomplete genealogies. Though readers may find many mentions wanting, our hope is that this will generate some discomfort (in this case, discomfort distinct from violence), echo ongoing issues in academic research, and act as an invitation to make more, other, and new connections. What follows is a composition that brings together five voices around four conversation themes: naming relational discomforts; unsettling academic affects with our writing; violence, precarity, and privilege; and working with discomfort through feminist solidarity. We have been developing these themes through ongoing co-authorship and conversations since July 2019. The three first conversations are punctuated by exquisite corpse poems created during a virtual co-writing retreat.<sup>1</sup> First, we start with experiencing discomforts: we introduce ourselves by way of five ethnographically grounded fragments.

## Experiencing Discomforts

**KR:** I am surrounded by artists holding protest signs. Anger is almost a palpable feeling, as the speaker accuses Northern Ireland’s culture minister of taking money from the Arts Council budget to fund her own pet projects. Standing in front of me, a young man remarks bitterly to his companion, “Who designed the art on their building? Oh right, it was *artists*, wasn’t it? Who designed the whole fucking building? Oh right, it was *artists*, wasn’t it?”



**NF:** “Put a feminazi!”, “Τα ἠθέλε ο κώλος σου μωρή που τὰ νά!” “Go back to your country!” “Die bitch!”

Feminist immigrant nomadism: abused in different languages.  
(I start writing)

Lack of immunity to violence is inscribed on bodies, research, writings. I reflect on our feminist activist community. We have shared vulnerabilities and discomforts—some not so shared. I focus on the first until my chronic brain fog clears off.

“Nik sinesten dizut.” “Hermana.” Doxxed. “He knows where I live.” “PUTA!” “FEMINAZI!” Rape threats. Publishing the rape video. Laughing. Targeting the “fat girl.” Trauma in overdrive. “Tienes dolor, laztana?”

(I start taking notes)

Deadnaming. “Is she ok?” Defend her but don’t feed the trolls (don’t feed the trolls?)  
“Ba al daukazu minik?” (Hold me ...)

I’m running. Right-wing mob and police vans versus a purple and green sea. Keep dancing. El violador eres tú. Her visa is expiring. My settled status application is rejected. (*Unsettled*). “I don’t want to go back.” (“Worse” has gradations?)

“Ni feminazis, ni machistas” ... Πονω.ά  
(I stop writing)

Fuck writing.

*Fuck precarity. (Paid sex behind a university building, the ceiling is low).*

*Resume writing. (Remember to style the affect!) Write in discomfort.*

*Write together.*

*Write.*

**AGG:** I explore conflicting narratives, contestation, and uncomfortable disruptions in post-ceasefire landscapes. Analizo narrativas: qué testimonios son expuestos en lo público y cuáles resultan uncomfortable in the representation of the “new era” in a “reconciliation” process. Representations embodied in the flesh of the victims, representations that take up stages of memory production. Narrativas que generan el confort de un closure, de una vía por la que caminar, excluding those that do not fit.

I analyze narratives. And I create narratives. I am a creator of what must be considered knowledge if I want to fit in in the academic place. The recognition of knowledge entails narratives being perceived as coherent, que muestran el chispazo de un eureka, and not the hesitation of the I don’t know, I still don’t know (García González 2019). Avoid making your reader feel uncomfortable. Spell it out, unpack... It’d be interesting to read all the comments in the margins of my dissertation from those who helped me in the writing process. These comments indicated the way I had to express myself to finish my PhD and then follow the academic path, a foggy path in a cartography made of ever-elusive recognition.

## Naming Relational Discomforts

**AGG:** When I identify why my stomach has shrunk, why I’m feeling pressure in my chest, why that pressure blocks my throat, and why I feel incapable of talking, then I understand. I understand the structures that sustain certain behaviors based on power relationships and hierarchies that

diminish, make you feel less capable, less valuable, less strong, less sharp, less attractive (is not attractiveness also part of the academic affect?). Then I can react. I can find ways to displace discomfort.

**KR:** I listen for discomfort in the field. I listen with my body, with my soul. The sideways glance. The whispered aside. The bitter tinge to a statement. Without these, I would be distracted, lost, blind, allowing the obvious and the forward-facing to dominate and thus to obscure. It took me a while to identify this as feminist praxis. Is this feminist praxis?

**AGG:** Can you listen when you don't understand?

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*Discomfort: Not being able to identify qué sucede bajo la superficie, qué sucede en mí, y alrededor de mí.*

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**EH:** I was drawn to discomfort early on in my fieldwork as a way of sensing the difficulties of relating. I asked questions about experiences associated with named emotions of discomfort or unease. I also attended to unnamed feelings and sensations (including my own), translated—more or less explicitly—through body language, expressions, sounds, or sketches. Then I examined how discomforts can generate a desire to recognize what such feelings tell us rather than bring an immediate judgment. This brought me to concepts of openness and vulnerability (Gilson 2011).

**AMFA:** Esto me hace pensar en mi propia práctica. Trabajo con soldados: oigo historias atroces, hago un ejercicio curatorial con sus narrativas. Elijo qué queda, qué escondo. El discomfort es evidente. Se relaciona con apertura y vulnerabilidad, pero sobre todo con la pregunta por la escritura, la estética y la política ¿Cómo dar cuenta de esos encuentros? ¿Cómo no demonizar o santificar a los soldados? No son víctimas, no son victimarios. El discomfort me invita a romper categorías. La ruptura es visceral. Pienso con obsesión en cada palabra que uso y en la forma que deben tener los escritos. Vuelvo a mi recién recuperado manifiesto: Donna Haraway (2016), Michelle Rosaldo (1984), y los pensamientos incorporados, Bakhtin (1984) y el privilegio del conflicto en los personajes.

**NF:** Living with discomfort feeds into writing with discomfort and into writing discomfort. Coming back to what Elona said, vulnerability is a key concept here, and part of our affective work is reclaiming it. Vulnerability has been a contested term, mainly for lack of specificity (Butler 2004; Cole 2016), but it is important for me to think vulnerability alongside discomfort, as a way to link tissues between marginalized subjectivities with multi-layered experiences of oppression and violence. Residual imprints of lived experiences and collective knowledges denied materiality. Tools to strategically reclaim collectively and hold on to in turbulent times ... solidarity in discomfort.

**EH:** There is something hopeful in the focus on the transformative potential of discomfort (Ahmed 2014). There is an emancipatory thrust in this move, a desire, a kind of critical hope (Boler

1999). It also requires acknowledging that discomfoting relations are not all positive, that they also include difficulties.

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*Discomfort: Not understanding. Unknown origin. It moves fast. Under no control. I don't understand. I don't understand. What's going on? I don't understand. I don't, I don't.*

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**AGG:** Exploring discomfort makes us rethink what we study, how we study it, and what representations we create. As I return to my experiences, I wonder: Is the discomfort that I feel in the space of the interview or during participant observation something generative? Can I allow myself to not be empathic while also listening? There is a question here about overvalued and under-critiqued empathy. Emotions contained during the interaction in the field appear in the desk analysis and in the writing—¿cómo manejamos esas emociones?

**EH:** Do such emotions need to be managed?

**AMFA:** En mi formación como antropóloga se daba por sentada “la empatía con el interlocutor” Pero ¿Cómo respetar el deseado carácter dialógico del ejercicio antropológico cuando este tiene que ver con los militares? ¿Cómo establecer la aspirada complicidad con la alteridad cuando en el ejercicio antropológico se analiza un grupo descrito como victimario? El discomfort está en la escucha. La empatía no siempre es posible, no siempre es deseable.

**EH:** This makes me think of what Elizabeth Povinelli (2011) has written about empathy and care. For her, empathy is a way of thinking about relations of care through a neoliberal lens; it's a reaction to events that are seen as “requiring empathy.” I'm not sure empathy is always negative in the way she mentions, though focusing on care does open up ways of approaching discomfort in the field and in our practices of listening, analyzing, and writing. As Puig de la Bellacasa (2017, 78) reminds us, care also involves dissent and conflict. Discomfort might then be felt when we care without assuming shared understanding, with care that involves violence and pain.

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*I counted the different types of pain, lying awake at night, staring into the spreading dark. I placed each gingerly in a jar, painstakingly wrote out the crisp-edged index-card labels. Line by laborious line, letter by laborious letter. There is the pain that envelopes, a fragile globe around my hand, so glaringly bright it has exited me entirely and crushes from without. There is the wildfire pain, the burning that scythes upward from my wrist and back down again, peeling away the skin in its smoke-choked wake. There is the stabbing pain, the sudden rapier strike when my back is turned. There is the tidal pain, crashing up and down, up and down, like a wave. Almost peaceful, almost a caress. Almost. Then there is the throbbing, throbbing, thump-thump-thump, which echoes in my chest: is the pain attuning itself to my heartbeat, or has my heartbeat realigned itself to echo the pain?*

*There is something distasteful in this numbering, this domestication: a colonial taxonomizing impulse that feels, somehow, like a betrayal. Caucasoid. Anglo-Saxon. Primitive. To name is to tame (Gray 1999), and (perhaps) it is also to lessen. One must dominate in order to defang.*

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**AGG:** “To name is to tame”—that is such an interesting affirmation.

**EH:** This reminds me of the trouble of naming affective experiences. Anderson and Ash (2015) led me to question the naming of affective atmospheres and articulate how and when we should do so. When do we identify things as uncomfortable? Does doing so fix something that might be volatile and deliberately ambiguous? Nevertheless, it is difficult to write about affect without naming. Discomfort can be readily identified through feelings or emotions, and it is perhaps less volatile than other affects like urgency. Sara Ahmed reminds us, however, that naming emotions is “not simply naming something that exists ‘in here,’” in our bodies (2014, 13). Through naming, we are also showing an orientation toward a situation. Naming an experience uncomfortable is different from naming it as something we are afraid of or as something that doesn’t even merit naming. Naming affects produces effects, shows orientations—not all of which we can know or control.

**AMFA:** Me haces pensar, otra vez, en que cada palabra tiene que ser sopesada. No existe algo así como la descripción de un hecho o de una emoción. Cada palabra es un bautismo. Si nombramos tristeza la creamos, si nombramos discomfort lo creamos.

**KR:** Still ... what to do with this discomfort that has invaded my body, that makes its home in my hands, my fingers, my nervous system, too deep to excise? When it enters my skin, does it cease to be ethnographic object? Or does that come only when its dominion is complete, when it no longer seems Other and becomes wholly Self? When I don’t notice it anymore?

**AGG:** Uncomfortable inapprehension? Theoretical concepts can become a revelation when you feel them, when they resonate within you. They become abstract, unreachable bubbles when they are disconnected—like a bubble in a comic strip with no drawn connection to any body, floating in a perfectly closed circle in the air. No están a mi alcance. Until someone creates the access to it—a small triangle connected to a body. The bubble then becomes part of a conversation. Reachable. Desde las otras, con las otras.

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*Discomfort: A bubble—Kayla says. A buzzing sound, unpredictability—Nancy says. You give me words. I need words. What can I do with no words? Unsettled with no answers. How can discomfort become the embodied listening that Petillo (2020) suggests as a feminist, transformative way to be in the world?*

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**EH:** My feminist practice takes seriously the role of more than human relations—with spaces, objects, materials, beings, infrastructures—in the generation of discomfort and the potential that its feelings might afford.

**AGG:** More-than-human relations and discomfort: an overlooked relation?

**KR:** My own readings in feminist anthropology have also tended to elide more than human relations. I tend to categorize this (unthinkingly and wrongly) as material for tech anthropologists, or human-animal-relations anthropologists—in other words, those who are Other to myself and my research. But, of course, we are all more-than-human anthropologists, aren’t we? To ignore the





## Unsettling Academic Affects with Our Writing

**AMFA:** Me gustaría suscitar inconformidad, me gustaría despertar molestias que no se queden atrapadas en la preocupación por los ranking.

**AGG:** You pose important questions about creating discomfort through different writing formats and uses of language. Though Petillo describes “vocal cues and cadences, language choices, physical stances, silences” (2020, 15) in relation to physical performance and encounters, academic writing is also part of academic affect. It is a prescription for structure, tone, and format that constrains the flow of our voices, aiming to tame wild tongues (Anzaldúa 1987). Has normative academic language become more a realm of fitting in and approval than a place for generous knowledge sharing? Can unsettling writing be generative or is it too disruptive for readers to engage with?

**NF:** Such to-the-point questions. Otherwise, what’s the whole point of writing?

**KR:** Exactly!

**AMFA:** Creo en la necesidad de una escritura no domesticada, pero ¿Significa esto que deba ser siempre experimental?

**EH:** Good question. What is experimental? For me, there is a permeability between the supposed boundaries of normative academic script and those of more transformative writing. It is important to write in a way that shares our desire for critical inquiry, engaging in modes of expression that can still be recognized and thus be part of ongoing conversations. But there is also a need to play with this notion of recognizability or comprehensibility. I am interested in the difficulties of relating to that which is crazy, insensible, or deliberately opaque, inspired by concerns of anticolonial, more than human, and posthuman scholars (Glissant 1990; Harney and Moten 2013; Jazeel 2019; Tuana 2006; Yusoff 2013). In our writing, this might mean using poetry, neologisms, strange sentence structures, or fragmented narratives ... a certain playfulness in styles of writing that shows a critical engagement with the material ... a thoughtful consideration of form and meaning-making (not the mere adoption of a list of tools or techniques). We have attempted to practice this in this piece: weaving together fragments of conversation and creative writing, writing in different languages, and affording ourselves the playfulness of composing exquisite corpses.

**KR:** Writing as the only non-Spanish speaker in this group forces me to contend with my own missing Spanish. With the void in my own family where a second language should be. My mother speaks it, having grown up in Bolivia. But we’re not Latina, so this makes it complicated. Her Spanish, my missing Spanish, is the product of her missionary parents, servants of God and colonialism. Hard to explain, to stake your own anticolonial claim in the same breath. I’ve never asked her why she didn’t teach me Spanish. I wish she had. Maybe I’m afraid to know the answer.

**NF:** That’s such an eye-opening input for me. It is interesting, particularly as my mother tongue is Greek. Spanish, English, and even Basque are for me, too, not languages I have been trained in—I’m what they call “a new Basque speaker.” Detached belongings and linguistic discomfort are also

present more often than I care to admit ... so I've tried to engage with this a bit more in my writing here.

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*Me: By making explicit reference to the film Gladiator, the sign-maker argues that art is not unlike gladiatorial combat in which the worker's labor is cheaply exploited for the entertainment of others in an extremely hierarchical and ultimately bloody system that heavily favors the wealthy and forces the less-wealthy to fight one another (in this case, for what funding is left post-cuts) in order to get by.*

*A colleague: That's a bit much, don't you think?*

*Me: It's not, though. A study that I often heard quoted by research participants found that the average artist in Northern Ireland earns less than £7,500 from their art each year (Arts Council of Northern Ireland 2010). That was less than I made as a PhD student or as a recent graduate working minimum-wage service jobs to make ends meet. A more recent study estimated that nearly 60 percent of artists had "a probable mental health condition" (Shorter et al. 2018: 15-17). 30 percent had had suicidal thoughts within the previous year (ibid.: 20).*

*Do I have your attention now?*

*He backed down a bit when I wrote about a research participant, a friend of mine, who had been homeless for a period.*

*Austerity fundamentally posits economics as a zero-sum game. I believe (we) academics have made the mistake of believing this. When we see austerity, we are first drawn to its more extreme effects (affects?): poor families going hungry, people with work-preventing disabilities told to go back to work. By comparison, a few million pounds cut from the arts budget is nothing. But it is not so for my research participants, for my friends. The challenge was to convince my fellow academics of this without seeming to belittle the admittedly greater struggles of others.*

*More accurately: I attempted to start a whole new genre of ethnographic writing to convince other academics to take seriously the discomfort of my research participants. After more attempts than I care to recall, it took shape as a piece of science fiction (Rush 2020). In the denouement, the protagonist finds a cavernous room full of half-lifeless beings who write arts funding grants in their own blood, the product of their labors spilling from their typewriters directly into paper shredders. That's a bit much, don't you think?*

*Are you not entertained?*

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**EH:** Experimentation takes time, takes convincing supervisors and readers that you will get there. What happens when trust is lost? When the process isn't evident or transparent, precisely because it is different for everyone? We seek models, methods, statements of progress, and timelines to completion.

"Reference the standard methodology." "Tell us more; justify."  
 "You are not taking your work seriously." "Too many assumptions."  
 "Not enough words."

copoetics saved me. Maybe. I turn to materials. Turn to concrete. Turn to tether. Turn to tie my thoughts to some things ... para que no se vuelen.

**AMFA:** La inconformidad que despierto y la que siento van de la mano con las formas en las que escribo: ensayos "tradicionales" (Forero Ángel and González Quintero 2020), obra de teatro (Forero Ángel 2017) y, en proceso, una novela gráfica. En los distintos momentos de escritura he sentido: 1) Que la escritura académica (entendida como papers tradicionales) adquiere su sentido en lógicas de producción universitaria que no se relacionan, necesariamente, con ampliar los horizontes de las disciplinas, con promover diálogos entre colegas—la escritura académica termina siendo el instrumento privilegiado para posicionar a las universidades en rankings; 2) Que la escritura experimental ayuda a hablar mejor de temas difíciles (o me hace sentir más cómoda haciéndolo), puedo abrazar la cripto ficción (en la obra de teatro está claro que la concepción de historia de los oficiales es una narrativa de heridas; en la novela gráfica la falsa biografía y los testimonios dan vida a los movimientos de inconformidad y conformidad que asocio a los clásicos movimientos de ubicación y reubicación propuestos por Rosaldo 1984).

Retomo el listado de Elona. Escritura D O M E S T I C A D A. La muerte de la imaginación, de la creatividad, de la narración y del narrador. Papers planos ajenos al discomfort.

**AGG:** I'm inspired by feminist thinkers opening paths for expression, for the recognition of bodies and emotions in knowledge creation, by speaking "otherwise" (Abu-Lughod 1990; Behar 1996; Behar and Gordon 1995; Esteban 2015; Gregorio Gil 2014; hooks 1990; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983; Motta and Bermudez 2019). They give me strength when I dread having to conform to academic norms if I want to escape precarity. Do I need to tame myself to escape from the discomfort of precarity? How much taming is self-imposed? What are the cracks that we could explore but we don't? What if we say a collective "no" to being in the continuous discomfort of production anxiety?

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*Stop! Being unable to [stop]. Being unable to pause—and breath—to hesitate (...), ... to ... disappoint ... a void to avoid*

*Conference presentation: @I need to present myself as articulate-assertive-confident #MyTime #YourTime is \*gold\* Why are you wasting it saying nothing?<sup>1, 2, 3</sup>*

*Don't  
 stop  
 me  
 don't stop ME!*

*Get up and go to the room next door / to one of the other ten parallel sessions.:) Tweet:) so you feel que nada te detiene nothing will stop you;) Tweet;) keep-connected-keep-going.*

*Me siento fuera. Discomfort that makes me feel paralyzed. Seré yo, que soy poco articulate. Then I go for a walk with a friend and she reminds me of the epistemological violence against those*

*traditionally marginalized: women, immigrants, those from backgrounds with no access to codes of articulation. Unheard.*

*Un-heard.*

*The tension in my body of being rejected, expelled to the feared eternal return of precarity.*

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**NF:** Taking the leap from activism into academia felt at times as discomfiting as walking into a glass door while thinking it was open. Hours of training and retraining, rehearsing the formulaic attire of an academic writing model. I have always somehow felt I've been wearing it with the pins still on the hem all along. A self-inflicted prickling discomfort. The battle of genres, or purposeful barriers?

My first ever academic coming-out as a survivor of rape came in the form of a semi-accepted anthropology paper. "We found your section on the notion of victimhood to read more like a manifesto." Baietz, it was conceived in a manifa. Con mis amigas, victims of gender violence, and siblings from the margins—*μου επιτρε΄πετε να πω «θυ΄μα»?*—survivors, my longterm friends and fellow activists that became my research participants and collaborators. Their voices enter my writing in multimodality through their songs, poetry, pancartas, protests, performances, and tears in a vigil for victims—mini, fiery manifestos that set the research agenda. There is pain and explosive anger to share. And love. *How do I do justice?* I'm here broken by years of involuntary therapy, I still hear the roar (though I'm half-deaf), one that seems to echo collectively. Yet, there's the feeling that I'm failing them as I fail to fit our/my(?) anger and pain in this new channel. Unmediated anger is an offence to the reader and the listener; it is not academic. How do I style falling apart in a field that coincides with my life? How do I inscribe snapping? How do I find my voice? Calm and serene. To cause a slight discomfort to attract interest but not too much to unsettle. "Academic." *Έχω μερικές ερωτήσεις επ' αυτού, κύριε...* . I remember initiating a conversation about "angry writing" with Sophie Tamas (2020). Her advice was to not cause discomfort in the (academic) audience with unpolished triggers. Black and Indigenous feminist scholars have had to constantly spell out for the rest of us how "anger management" solutions have been historically associated with violence, particularly at the intersection of gender and race (Chemaly 2018, xv). Writing from the perspective of a mestiza, Sara Motta speaks of writing separated from trauma as an artificial "sanitized distance," one that fits "hegemonic normalcy" but not the language of trauma (2018, 4). "My reply is 'FUCK YOU.' No apology" (Motta 2018, 4). "Es una GUERRA," mis amigas wrote on the pancarta with purple paint. Can there be room for peace without acknowledging the war?

**EH:** We should question the so-called norms of academic writing, knowing that these have been made and changed through practice and disciplinary histories. Anthropology, geography, and science and technology studies scholars—especially feminist ones—have long challenged the boundary between creative and academic writing: feminist science fiction writers "are theorists for cyborgs" (Haraway 1991, 173). Yes, it's difficult. It's messy and perhaps dangerous, tricky. Mistakes can be made. Isn't that the point? We need to open ourselves up to the possibility of doing things "wrong" or "badly" or in ways that need adjusting, that point to gaps, to holes, los huecos en el pensamiento, en las prácticas, en los textos.

**AMFA:** Gracias Elona. Insisto en que la pregunta 'está bien o está mal' puede llevarnos a la dicotomía que Haraway destruye. Esto hace que piense en este ejercicio que estamos llevando a cabo ¿Tendrá sentido para alguien más?

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*T(r)ying 2 things 2 takes 2 time 2 too*

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**KR:** I recently started writing science fiction, not for academia but for myself. I thought I wrote because I liked the genre. I thought I wrote for the pleasure of writing, of turning my hands to something other than my profession. This is partially true. But really, truly, deep-down-at-the-heart-of-it, I write because I am angry. I'm not allowed to be angry in academia, not in that way, not in a fuck-it-burn-it-all-down fiery rage. So I write that anger into private spaces in the recesses of my laptop.

I write because I love extravagance, I love excess. I love the glory and sensuous beauty of using far too many words when fewer would suffice. Of the sheer unnecessary of unbound sentences, leaping and circling like dancers. I'm not allowed to be excessive in academia. So I pour that excess out, profligately, in other spaces (not meant for my colleagues).

**NF:** I'm in love with this! It touches upon my struggle and the concept of "angry writing" I mention above.

**AMFA:** Yo no sé dibujar. Mi hermano, cuando éramos pequeños, decretó la división de los talentos: usted escribe, yo pinto. Y después de veinte años de trabajo de campo con militares, encuentro que en la elaboración de la novela respeto mi discomfort. Mi hermano y su maldición me ataron a las letras, así que busqué la complicidad de Esteban Borrero, quien dibuja y me empuja a un constante discomfort. Esto me lleva a la necesidad de establecer alianzas, de respetar la finitud de nuestra disciplina y abrirnos a ejercicios colaborativos, a tomarnos en serio las contaminaciones con otros saberes y habilidades y perder el miedo a ¿Lo que hago sí es antropología? Debemos asumir que un relato antropológico es de alguna manera ficcional. Gracias, Kayla.

## **Exquisite Corpse #2**

esquema de escritura

there is some discomfort in the effort

creo en la necesidad de una escritura no domesticada

don't

stop

ME

expelled to the feared eternal return of precarity

a realm of fitting-in approval

la preocupación por los ranking

attuned to the sounds of a collective NO

DO I need to tame myself?

## Violence, Precarity, and Privilege

**AGG:** The violence <> discomfort link continues to appear through our writings and in our conversations. Where, and in what ways, do we experience or notice the violences of discomfort? Our discomfort can point to those spacetimes where and when one doesn't fit and can reveal violences that are made invisible by the very structures that generate discomfort. Our discomfort can also talk of the privileges we inhabit (Applebaum 2017; Petillo 2020) <> Comfort acquired with the blood of Others (Anzaldúa 2015, 118) <> Privilegios: el fractal infinito del espejo roto, como describe Ana en nuestras conversaciones.

Is listening to discomfort a way to displace the violence of displacement? Demarcations and frames that establish violent categories. Fenced categories. What are those fences? Where are we in relation to those fences? Sometimes in, sometimes out, sometimes painfully trespassing. Hacernos responsables de la incomodidad.

**KR:** Violence and discomfort come together in our academic lives. A year after our panel at the AIBR conference, I began working in my own slightly-less-precarious academic space. While organizing yet another 2020 digital conference, I asked presenters to alert me to scheduling conflicts. This was absurd, according to a (senior, securely employed) colleague: "I think people can just cancel their teaching on the day they present."

I bring up a friend of mine who has been on a string of precarious teaching contracts. I say, "We can't ask her to do that." I say, "If she doesn't teach, she doesn't get paid." I say, "Asking her to cancel her teaching would be an act of violence against her." He takes affront to the word "violence."

In the moment, I apologized for the word but in retrospect, I don't think I was wrong. It *is* violent to ask someone to choose between performing membership in our club and paying the rent. I am left grasping, thinking: Why did this word make my colleague so uncomfortable? Months later, one of this article's reviewers pointed out the violence within that exchange: the senior male colleague's demand to be comforted, at the expense of effacing my own precarious discomfort and that of my friends and peers. In academia, it seems that comfort tends to flow upward, to the more powerful (or at least those who have been told they are entitled to power), while discomfort-as-violence thunders downward, falling on our heads like hail.

**EH:** This makes me think of the distinction between discomfort as an affective experience and discomfort as a "a form of physical distress" or "subjective violence" (Martin 2011, 1051) that can take the form of privation or danger. I am less convinced of this distinction now—or at least of its strictness. The way discomfort circulates and is expressed affectively can lead to violent relations, reactions, institutional structures, or, indeed, infrastructures—often taking on forms of slow violence (Nixon 2011). Perhaps when discomfort isn't generative it also leads to less obvious forms of violence. In my fieldwork, this can emerge through cynicism

- in reference to potential hot-deskers: "rich hipsters with beards"
- in reference young designers and architects helping organize the project: "une bande de gouines et pédés"
- in reference to residents from emergency housing: "c'est des bons à rien"
- in reference to alternative projects: "they think we're all middle-class millennials doing shmanarchism"
- in self-reference: "the front line of gentrification"

I also see how cynicism only works for those of us who have the capacity to laugh or see beyond the rigidity of such statements, those of us who have enough joyful experiences to counterbalance such statements' potentially depressing effects and affects. If we're not careful, such statements can poison collective endeavors.

**AMFA:** Sin poder tejer todavía una idea clara, pienso que el cinismo es una gran herramienta cuando se experimenta violencia o se experimenta discomfort. Hay cinismo como dice Elona que sirve para conjurar y sobrellevar las situaciones de campo, hay cinismo en mi trabajar sobre una institución que me conflictúa y de la que no quiero ser cómplice (me encanta el cinismo como herramienta que los soldados usan para narrar sus desgracias, para sobrellevar la vida). Cinismo y discomfort van de la mano.

**EH:** Coming back to the first theme explored in this article, I do find working with the difficulties of relation challenging, especially having focused so much on generative discomfort. What is left out? What about the violences? Some of you are there already, so I listen and learn. I also hold onto the knowledge that violence extends beyond human social relations: there is violence in our disregard for environmental racism, for the political ecologies of extraction. How to hold both violence and hope, transformation and pain?

**NF:** As I mentioned earlier, it is difficult for me to disentangle the violences of discomfort in my experiences as an activist and researcher, my writing and fieldwork, my theorizing and lived experience. There's no "safe" distance, there's no shutting the computer down and forgetting about it. That's an unsettling discomfort in itself.

**EH:** I think that comes across very strongly in your work, Nancy. This entanglement is slightly different for me. Comfort and discomfort infuse my work in Paris and London as well as the globalized modes of consumption and production that these locations are embedded in. The notion of comfort is entangled, since the nineteenth century, with "values, consumption patterns, and behaviors crucial to the formation of a middle class" (Crowley 2001, 292). So I'm interested in how discomfort is linked to histories of gender violence and inequality, colonialism, and consumerism (among other things).

**AGG:** This is worth further exploration and relates to the link between discomfort and violence, discomfort and histories of colonialism. Comfort is a capitalist creation and is part of consumerism and exploitation.

But don't we need to feel comfortable? Couldn't comfort be a feeling that allows us to fight against the violence of (or revealed by) discomfort? Comfort is a sign that guides us toward what we want to accept or reject. This is similar to the approach taken by Audre Lorde (1984) when theorizing the transformative potential of giving attention to pleasure and joy and of denaturalizing structural violence.

I wonder, does comfort always mean que hemos aceptado el camino marcado? ¿O puede ser que hayamos reconfigurado el camino? Can we move from the displacement of normative comfort to a place of collectively created comfort, comfort que se genera en compañía, found in reliance and trust?

### **Exquisite Corpse #3**

There is some discomfort in the effort

I've been wearing it with the pins still on the hem all along.

Escritura experimental (definir)

Cynicism

una gran herramienta

only works for those of us who have the capacity to laugh.

Can there be room for peace without acknowledging the war?

Maybe I'm afraid to know the answer ...

a bubble in a comic strip with no drawn connections

so we felt each other again

towards a dancing space where we can virtually hold hands.

## Working with Discomfort through Feminist Solidarity

*Feminism as movement: a place to go* (Ahmed 2017, 3, 30). *Collectively embracing the out-of-place. The need to re-envision our alliances, in the field and in the academic setting, to move from the patriarchal frame to an embodied decolonization of anthropology* (Berry et al. 2017).

**AGG:** Where and how do we move when displaced by discomfort? Cuando el malestar se hace político. Juntas. Moving together towards uncertain, sparkly spaces. That was the way I experienced my entrance into feminism. Not fitting in the girl category was transformed into a new understanding of gender as an impossible, socio-cultural norm that I could challenge in the company of others, through conversations.

This year: pandemic lockdown after being awarded with a PhD. Feeling pressed into publication production (fear of missing the academic train, of being left alone on an empty station platform!). Anxiety. What if I make some calls? What if we resume collective projects? Remember that conference last year, how we played around the idea of discomfort, how well we worked together? ... Let's plan a special issue. So we met. So we felt each other again. Excitement and shared care. Displacement from uncomfortable places of arrogant, unflashed arguments toward a dancing space where we can virtually hold hands.

**KR:** There's a surprising amount of room for exercising feminist praxis in conference spaces. Often, in my experience, this looks like the quiet kindness of panel chairs and conference organizers. This is the behind-the-scenes, emotional and mental labor of a more feminist academia.

I presented my initial conference paper for this panel by Skype, sitting at my parents' kitchen table at 3 a.m., wearing a blazer and worn pajamas bottoms. The conference organizers had said no. Multiple times. Andrea and Elona pushed back, prepared to fight so that I could have my virtual twenty minutes, voice crackling across the ocean. This was an act of deep compassion.

Feminism is the big things, yes, but it is also the small things. And this, I think, is feminist praxis writ small: allowing our sacred spaces to be a little less comfortable for us so that we can bring more people to the table.

**NF:** This conversation, as space of collaborative writing, as a feminist praxis, feels like a *topos* of affective affordances and a space for experimentation. Discomfort here feels safe. Andrea's



messages comforting my anxiety. Elona's playfulness inspiring me. Kayla having my back when out of tune. *"I'm with the band."* Affective nourishment. I write.

**EH:** I come back to discomfort as collective, more than human, affective experiences. This is part of feminist practice. It takes the burden of change from individuals; it refuses to set the ethical imperative of generative discomfort on the shoulders of those who already feel out of place. It is also the work of committing to multiple and perhaps contradictory forms of "we." This conversation is one we: we five. It is five I's. We. Specifically. This is our discomfort. Is it yours?

**AMFA:** Madrid, Elona y los ejercicios de expresión corporal. Madrid, Andrea y su genuina generosidad compartiendo experiencias, bibliografía y discomfort. Bogotá: el miedo a escribir en inglés, la complicidad de todas. Bogotá: la cuarentena más larga del mundo, las clases por zoom. D I S C O M F O R T y la escritura a diez manos. Sintonía. El feminismo se hace práctica. La práctica es escritura.

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*"We got an email!" Sparkling exchange of messages when we received the journal editors' decision on our manuscript. Critical acts of care. Burning feelings of understanding, excitement, motivation ... to nourish a dancing space that extends beyond our pixelated skins.*

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## Note

- 1 The exquisite corpse is a literary tool popularized by the surrealists and inspired by the game of consequences, where one person writes/draws something on a piece of paper and conceals it for the next person to add the next contribution. When unfolded, it creates a fragmented and playful composition. Our exquisite corpse poems were created by each of us selecting words or fragments of texts from our writing in a shared document and bringing them together into poetic form.

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