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DOI | 10.21307/borderlands-2022-012

borderlands

Vol 21 | No 2 2022

‘I feel I cannot write anymore’

Exploring violence through discomfort in a feminist approach to the Basque armed conflict

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Abstract

Learning to explore the embodied affect of discomfort allows us to identify the violence that is usually concealed in structures of power, and to identify our complicity and responsibility in sustaining that violence. From the starting point of my refusal to stay with discomfort in the process of writing an academic article, I put into question how easily we can drag ourselves into the same power structures that we criticise. Exploring my own discomfort leads me to delve into the violence of dichotomies that permeate my research context, the Basque Country, and myself as a researcher. The experiences of those who lived through the Basque armed conflict illuminate the possibilities of the disruption of binaries that embracing the vulnerability inherent to discomfort can entail. The teetering movement of tambaleo emerges, adding a new dimension to the interpretation of discomfort. Tambaleo represents the internal move of the body shaken by discomfort. Tambaleo is a proposal for knowledge generation in academic settings and in periods of crisis such as post-ceasefire processes, where certainties get blurred, and the unstable ground of shattered identities makes of wobbling steps potential spins for social transformation.

Keywords: Discomfort, affect, violence, Basque Country, feminist epistemologies

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> I feel I cannot write anymore. No sé qué me pasa, no puedo escribir.[1] I reach out to my friends in an SOS cry. It's January 2021. Pandemic lockdown, once again. Maybe that's the reason I'm finding it so difficult to write the article that I have to finish by the end of the month? Is this a normal writer's block? 'You might laugh at this, but I'm seriously considering whether this foggy brain could be one of the Covid symptoms.' 'Yes, it's possible', is the answer of one of my friends on the other end of the line. Ok, not reassuring. There is a discomfort here, in this block, in this incapability. Why is this all being so hard?

The article I was writing at the time I experienced the emotions expressed above (hereafter 'the January Article') was going to display part of the research I had carried out for my doctoral programme. This research is situated in the Basque Country, where an armed conflict took place between supporters of Basque independence and mainly the Spanish security forces for more than fifty years (1959 to 2011). The Basque armed conflict left around 1,200 dead and countless others injured, exiled, imprisoned, and deeply affected. In 2011, the Basque pro-independence armed group ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, 'Basque Homeland and Freedom') announced a permanent ceasefire. ETA disbanded in 2018. The socio-political process since the ceasefire has been characterised by its unilaterality and the absence of peace negotiations, since the other main protagonist in the armed conflict, the Spanish government, has remained reluctant to set up a space for dialogue. The January Article was part of a special issue that aimed to examine how suffering is being mobilised in the configuration of memory in so-called post-conflict contexts. Not only was this the first time that I would have made public part of the analysis that I had developed in my doctoral thesis, but this article was being written in Spanish

for an academic journal based in my former university in Madrid. I was aware of the fact that participants in my research, as well as those with strong feelings about the Basque armed conflict (possibly a significant part of the population in Spain from my generation and older), could have access to the contents of the article.

Discomfort. Discomfort in the writing. Just a matter of letting it flow, I thought. And then I found the way for my words actually to flow. I sent the article over to my other colleagues who were creating a collective publication where, in a feminist approach to knowledge creation, we supported one another, discussing our work before final submission. In the morning of our meeting, I read my article and felt satisfied with it. It was well written, well referenced, with strong statements, coherent conclusions. Then the meeting starts, and the feedback is harsh: 'Yes, it is very well written… but… You use a tone that makes me feel like asking "Who are you to speak like that about the pain of others?"'; 'There is no ambivalence, your expression is very Eurocentric'; 'As a victim of armed violence, I feel annoyed'. It was tough, but also part of feminist praxis, an alarm bell that allowed me to realise how easily we can drag ourselves back to the norm, to the same structures of power we aim to challenge. 'Mira a ver qué te está pasando ahí': Another colleague in the group suggested I explore my own discomfort. What were my fears? Those fears that I dismissed when focused on my writing deadline. Not confronting my fears, fleeing discomfort instead of tarrying with it (DiAngelo, 2011, cited in Applebaum, 2017), redirected me to a place of comfort, the place of the norm, where I run the risk of reproducing the violence I criticise, committing epistemic violence towards the participants of my research and probably to certain readers.

From this starting point, and drawing on pedagogies and politics of discomfort, in this article I aim to explore discomfort for the purposes of knowledge creation (in and out academic settings) and ultimately for social transformation. Learning to explore discomfort allows us to identify the violence that is usually concealed in structures of power, and to identify our complicity and responsibility in sustaining that violence. I first dig into the epistemic violence that we risk committing when we flee discomfort. Secondly, I examine the violence of dichotomies that underlay what I thought was writer's block. Along with decolonial and feminist scholarship, I bring experiences of those who in the

Basque context have challenged binary compartmentalisations while navigating discomfort. The concept of *tambaleo* as the internal movement that appears when standing on the ground of uncertainties and shaken identities arises in the analysis as adding a further dimension in interpreting and staying with discomfort. The proposal for an epistemology of tambaleo comes from the understanding of the transformative potential of an 'I don't know' as an answer, which creates cracks in Western patriarchal and colonial consideration of science as a distant endeavour and encourages us to embrace the vulnerability generated when dwelling in spaces of unfixity. Loosening the fixity of compartmentalised identities, challenging cherished beliefs and established worldviews that staying with discomfort entails, requires mutual support. The bodily signal that discomfort represents can lead to disrupting structures of power and is linked to awareness of interdependence and desire for connections established across differences.

The embodied signal of discomfort

Drawing on scholars who have explored discomfort as a way to question the violence that we receive and commit (Ahmed, 2014, 2017; Applebaum, 2017; Boler, 1999; Chadwick, 2021; Petillo, 2020; Zembylas, 2013, 2015), in this article I define discomfort as an embodied signal that allows us to identify the violence in structures of power that we suffer and reproduce. Challenging patriarchal and colonial epistemologies, discomfort brings the corporality of emotions into knowledge production,[2] in contexts that can go from educational and academic settings to processes of peacebuilding. There is a way to be in the academy, and in the world, that takes the stance of the know-it-all observer (Sholock, 2012), whose foundations are not shaken by the experiences of others. Discomfort represents an affective shaking of our self that could lead to personal and social transformation, through critical awareness and mutual support. Even though discomfort is not always generative and could lead to more violence (Applebaum, 2017; Zembylas 2013, 2015), it has the potential for the transformation of systems of domination.

The exploration of discomfort can be a mode of inquiry and a proposal for radical change, as indicated by Megan Boler (1999) in her seminal work on emotions and education. Boler explains the pedagogy of discomfort as the

process of questioning cherished beliefs and assumptions, a process that needs to be a collectivised engagement in learning to see things differently. The emotional selectivity that omits and erases all those experiences that are difficult to face can be disrupted by what Boler describes as a collective witnessing that leaves the comfortable safety of distance. The knowledge acquired when in connection with others is no longer just that of a spectator, the privileged observer, and takes responsibility through the uncomfortable move from certainty to an ongoing inquiry that undertakes 'historical responsibility and co-implication' (Boler, 1999, p.186).

Complicity in structures of oppression is part of the challenge of an honest approach to discomfort. Barbara Applebaum (2017) advocates for a form of support that does not comfort but tackles 'uncomfortable critical discussion around complicity'. In her proposal, the vulnerability that opens up in those uncomfortable situations needs to be encouraged and embraced, with support that does not ignore how we reproduce systems of oppression in our everyday practices. April Petillo (2020), in her feminist proposal for decolonising knowledge production, encourages us to listen to gut-level resistances to challenge the violence we reproduce when embedded in comfortable privileged positions.

Discomfort is an epistemic and interpretative resource that is part of an anti-colonising transformative practice, as stated by Rachel Chadwick (2021). In her argument for staying with discomfort for an ethical and accountable feminist research praxis, Chadwick (2021, p.3) proposes a handy definition of discomfort in the research realm: discomfort is conceptualised as 'both an embodied and affective product of sociomaterial relations, physical spaces and locations, body-to-body exchanges and power relations *and* an affective force which does things in methodological, interpretative and analytical spaces'. According to Chadwick (2021), closing down discomfort risks perpetuating hierarchical ways of knowing and committing epistemological violence.

Identifying discomfort is part of the creation of *conocimiento* that Anzaldúa (2015, p.237) explains as 'the aspect of consciousness urging you to act on the knowledge gained'. First, knowledge needs to be gained in that painful exploration of feelings of fear, unsettlement, breath constriction, and obstructed

words that may allow us to identify structures of power imposed on us—and our position in them. Once we sit with that discomfort, we could reflect on what risks we are willing to take when undertaking change. There is no straight answer. If we want to make a move, it would be important to be surrounded by supportive compañera/o/es. That move does not entail that change is conquered for good and discomfort domesticated in coherent and conclusive narratives in a transformed world. Discomfort continues to puncture and appears as an uneasy reminder in the ebbs and flows of everyday practices of social change.

When we don't listen (epistemic violence)

In connection with feminist colleagues and scholars working on pedagogies and politics of discomfort, in this article I explore discomfort as a way of disrupting the potential epistemic violence that I experienced in relation to my research, both during fieldwork and in the writing of so-called 'findings'.[3] I go back to the process of writing the January Article, when I avoided my discomfort and the fears behind it. From this exploration, the sections that follow will examine the violence of dichotomies that was revealed when listening through discomfort, the challenges posed to this violence by those who experience the violence of armed conflict and the potentiality of an everyday embracement of the 'I don't know': the embracement of the tambaleo of unclarity.

Although it is contrary to my aim to reproduce here what I wrote in the draft of the January Article, I consider it necessary to explain the type of speech I used as a cosy blanket to cover up my discomfort. The expression that opened the January Article was *muy sufriente*, a made-up hyperbole that referred to suffering as the prevalent emotion in the representation of the experiences of violence in institutional memory initiatives in the post-ceasefire process in the Basque Country. The problematic element of my writing was not the examination of public discourses on memory as mainly articulated around the emotional language of suffering, but the type of voice used and the way I introduced the analysis, which could be taken by the reader (including those affected by this or another armed conflict) as dismissing the suffering experienced by those who had lived through the violence of the conflict. This

use of a kind of a sarcastic literary device, and the deployment of the conclusive academic voice I had been trained in, connected with the comfortable safety of distance of the spectator that Boler (1999, pp.183-184) refers to, i.e., the place of privilege, of avoidance, of an illusionary armour of invulnerability.

In the process of writing the January Article, I avoided the vulnerability of being exposed: exposed to the judgement of the readers, of the academic community. I ran away, I talked, and I did not listen. By listening I mean practicing an active engagement with the experiences of those I write about, in an honest and respectful way. Instead of listening, I swallowed their experiences through a speech created against the clock and against discomfort. I did not breathe.

> Speech, instead of bearing breath, takes its place, replaces it, which invariably stifles and preoccupies the place for silence. People who pay no heed to respiration, who breathe poorly, who are short of air, often cannot stop speaking, and are thus unable to listen. Speaking is their way of respiring, or more precisely of expiring, of exhaling, in order to take a breath. And so, they stifle the inspiration—in the strict sense, general or figurative—of others…[and] might well lead to a lack of respect for life; for one's own life, for the other's life, for others' lives.… (Luce Irigaray, 2016, cited in Motta and Bermudez, 2019, p.431).

My fears covered my breathing. I spoke and spoke, with a voice that tried to avoid being placed on one of the sides of the armed conflict that I study, which seems an impossible task. 'Al estudiar la violencia, te atrapa como investigadora', said a friend whose research is also focused on the Basque armed conflict. The violence in the Basque Country is indeed not separate from me. In my PhD thesis, I called my relationship with the Basque Country a 'displaced attachment'. One of the starting points of my approach to the violence in the Basque Country comes from memories of my grandmother. She was born in the Basque town of Orereta. When she was thirteen, after the fascist coup d'état in Spain (1936), she became one of the so-called children of the war. She had to flee and develop her life in the Soviet Union, far away from the French exile of her parents. The violence of the coup, the civil war, and the forty-year dictatorship uprooted the subsequent generations. I grew up in Madrid where the only connection with the Basque Country was through the

news and my own experience of ETA violence. It was commonplace to have classes at school interrupted by *avisos de bomba*, which we took as an opportunity to hang out in the streets during school time. Far from that untroubled way of approaching a bomb alert, ETA's armed activity[4] provoked painful deaths and wounds close to home. The bewilderment (and I could say discomfort) that I experienced as a journalism student for the lack of context given in the news to this constant violence prompted me to get in touch with community and grassroots projects in the Basque Country that made me conscious of the harm ETA caused in people's everyday lives, while at the same time opening my restricted eye to the concealed violence of torture and incarceration of Basque citizens due to their pro-independence political activity, regardless of their links (or not) with ETA violence.

Carrying out a three-year funded PhD to explore the socio-political situation after ETA's permanent ceasefire felt like a responsibility to contribute to the end of the multiple violences in the Basque Country. Even though I enjoyed the research process, it was not easy. As I indicate elsewhere (García González, 2019b), the aim to understand different stances towards the open peacebuilding process (participant observation carried out with diverse groups from ETA victims to relatives of Basque prisoners) led me to fall ill frequently during fieldwork. Going back to my host university in Brighton to go through the stages of analysis and writing up was a relief, getting some physical and emotional distance, in a place where people do not have intense gut feelings about the topic, where I could express my multiple contradictions, and where the English language of my writing gave me a kind of shield. In the January Article, that shield disappeared and the space of its publication (the academic journal based in Madrid) brought up the suffocating fears related to the armed conflict context that enveloped me.

Reflecting on our willingness to undertake change, Minnie Bruce Pratt (1984, cited in Boler, 1999) states that what we learn not to see is shaped by fear.[5] In my case, the fears that I had not paid attention to during the writing process prevented me from listening and made me adopt a chimeric, distant narrative form. What were the fears I was trying to hide under the disguise of an analytical observer? One was linked to the embodied tension experienced during fieldwork: the fear of being seen as sympathetic to the 'other'. In the

field, being placed on the side of the other could have entailed distrust and withdrawal. In the material expression of an article, I feared that my writing would bring up feelings of disappointment or even betrayal among those who had generously offered their experiences to me. I feared that the article and maybe my whole research project would be dismissed if I were placed on one of the 'sides' of the conflict. In Spain, it is usual for vehement judgements to arise when discussing the Basque armed conflict and ETA violence. I feared that those judgements, if thrown at me, could mean being displaced from Spanish academia and hence thrown back into a precarious work situation or condemned to my current economic exile.[6] And beyond material insecurity lay the fear of not being recognised, not being accepted, not fitting in…

My fears moved me from discomfort to the norm, a move that Rachel Chadwick, in her analysis of the politics of discomfort in research, wisely warns against:

> In relation to research practices, closing down feelings of discomfort can be dangerous, given that the erasure and dismissal of discomfort can be implicated in the reproduction of hierarchical and dominant forms of knowing and power relations. At the same time, feelings of discomfort can threaten to expose our secret selves (as researchers) and puncture any pretence of research objectivity (Chadwick, 2021, p.8).

'You are studying violence and therefore you are immersed in it', my friend said. The exploration of the discomfort that I had initially dismissed during the writing of the January Article helped me to identify the violence of dichotomies that lay behind it. The violence of dichotomies is prevalent in armed conflicts. Participants in my research spoke about it as affecting their everyday lives. It is the violence that I research and that—with a very different impact on my body than on those living through the armed conflict—is not separate from me. Dichotomies seem inescapable. Words used when referring to the content of my research (such as terrorism/conflict) are fraught with the assignation to a particular side.

Sides. / Sides.

Me atraganto. Las palabras se me atraviesan. Words that choke.

Discomfort and the violence of dichotomies

It was through the feminist alert raised by my colleagues and sitting with discomfort that I was able to understand that the move that made me jump into the norm, into academic acceptance, was propelled by the violence of dichotomies. The social classification of the other is at the base of the entanglement of violences caused by patriarchal, capitalist, colonial systems of oppression. The other is not worth listening to. The other as such gets displaced from the space of dignity–from material dignity to the dignity of intellectual recognition.

Otherness has been key to literature on discomfort. Sara Ahmed (2012; 2014; 2017), in her analysis of discomfort, uses the metaphor of a chair to explain how bodies that inhabit existing norms sink into what feels comfortable because it fits their shape. The discomfort of not fitting in is not a personal flaw but relates to structures of power. Following on Ahmed's reflections on heteronormativity and racism, comfortable spaces are felt as such by those who do not need to question how those chairs have been designed. Otherness is felt in the bodies whose shape is represented as inadequate and hence get displaced from the normative social order. In Western cultures, the fear of the other, Boler (1999, p.185) states, has shaped the emotional investments and visual habits that prevent social change from happening, refusing difference and perpetuating harm. Exploring those fears and the histories in which they are rooted is the aim of a pedagogy of discomfort, which involves learning to dwell in spaces between binaries (Boler 199, pp.196-197).

The dichotomy 'us' versus 'them' has been said to be 'characteristic of situations of extreme conflict and war' (Yuval-Davis, 2010, p.276). This dichotomy has been significantly addressed in literature on conflict and reconciliation as fertilising the soil with potential violence (*inter alia* Castillejo Cuéllar, 2016; Hamber, 2009; Lederach, 1997; Verdeja, 2012). However, the violence of dichotomies that is exacerbated during an armed conflict rests on a social and economic structure that is actually sustained by hierarchical binaries. As stated by postcolonial scholars, the global capitalist structure has in its axis a universal social classification of the population, a codification of the other that promotes the perpetuation of relations of domination (De Sousa Santos, 2015). This

classification works through the concept of 'race' (Quijano, 2000)—and, fused with it, gender—as a 'colonial concept and mode of organisation of relations of production, property relations, of cosmologies and ways of knowing' (Lugones, 2007, p.186). Feminist scholars have noted how hierarchical dichotomies establish a way to see the world that upholds logics of domination and oppression, and therefore violence (Anzaldúa, 2015; Confortini, 2006; Gaard, 2011; Harding, 1986).

In the Basque Country, the configuration of the other and a dichotomised view of society entailed different kinds of violence: from social rejection to physical danger, including murder, torture, prison, exile, living under threat… It also provoked social divisions in the everyday and symbolic walls that impeded listening to different experiences of violence. Neighbours became 'others' in a dichotomous view of society as divided between those deemed ETA supporters and those seen as complicit in State violence. Protests confronting those two sides happened weekly in every town. Spaces for leisure were divided. Workmates, friends, and relatives stopped speaking with each other. Identities were more and more fixed in what was described in the field by research participants as 'closed compartments', in reference to the isolation of their suffering and the hindrances to being heard by others. The binary good/evil silenced the multiple and entangled experiences of violence. Having to fit into one of the sides was expressed by different participants as oppressive because there was no place for 'middle grounds', ambivalence or contradictions in relation to the good/evil dichotomy.

'We were "us" and "them"', comments Ainhoa[7] in an interview. 'You couldn't go beyond that. People didn't approve. You could feel differently, but you repressed your feelings, because things were very strict. There was a time when I felt I did not know where to stand.' In the current scenario after the ceasefire, Ainhoa allows herself to express both the feeling of not fitting on either side of a strict division and the reassurance found in meeting other political stances, breaking with a divisional confrontation within her. She took part in the Glencree initiative, named after the Irish town that held secret encounters between relatives of people killed by ETA and those killed by paramilitary groups supported by the Spanish government. Presented publicly the year of the ETA ceasefire, Glencree was set up in 2007 by the two people in charge

of the Basque government's Department of Victims of Terrorism. I bring the Glencree initiative into this article through the voices of Ainhoa and Nerea because their experiences shed light on the role that dichotomies play in listening to experiences of violence, and the way these dichotomies get shattered through navigating discomfort and accepting conflict as part of life, while also practicing care and support.

Ainhoa and Nerea are both relatives of people killed by the state-sanctioned paramilitary organisation GAL (Grupos Antiterroristas de Liberación or Antiterrorist Liberation Groups) in the 1980s. I am aware that this selection of voices might be seen as breaking the two-sides-of-the-conflict balance that is expected in peacebuilding-related activities, including academic analysis. I am also conscious that this concern about being regarded as leaning towards 'one side' is linked to a dichotomised approach to reality that is part of the discomfort I feel when writing about my research and that people frequently experience in contexts of armed violence. I have decided not to force the contents of this article to fit into the 'two sides' balance since doing so would maintain the dichotomised division of two homogenous sides/identities/communities in conflict that I criticise—here and elsewhere (see also García González, 2016, 2018).

The Glencree encounters were charged with difficulties in challenging otherness, from feelings of betraying those close to one when seen as meeting or collaborating with the other to the meetings themselves, when dichotomies arouse and created feelings of anger, frustration and belligerency. Nerea, whose political activism has been inscribed in the pro-independentist movement, stated in the interview that if her friends had learned about it, 'they would have thrown me out of the town!' This exclamation referred to being seen as collaborating with the Basque government at a time when Basque police were committing repressive actions against the pro-independence movement. Oppressive dichotomies created moments of tension, as expressed in Ainhoa's account:

> I was, obviously [louder tone], the *etarra* [ETA member]. All of us who were not ETA victims, we were considered etarras. And then I thought 'If they start hitting me, I am hitting back', 'Don't call me etarra again'. There were very tense moments. I said that those who were in jail were also victims. A woman said, 'But

> how [dare you say that]!' […] With this woman, who was also very bold, I got on the defensive. There was a break, and I left the room crying. We came back after twenty minutes. This person said when we were going to resume the talk: 'Ainhoa, when you left, you looked really bad and I felt so sorry for you, all I wanted was to hug you…' [sighs] It was incredible, really, because she was really feeling it. I said 'Ok, give me that hug', rather defiantly. But… wow [reassuring sigh], that hug has made us very close.

The discomfort expressed through defensiveness and tears is eased by an unexpected bodily gesture, a hug, that creates a change in Ainhoa's physical perception of the other and of the whole situation. Sometimes during these encounters 'bodies get dislocated from the speeches and begin to do what their words cannot say' (Garcés, 2013, p.67). In these spaces, bodies deal with different ways of expression, such as gazes, gestures, and silences. The rupture generated in her perception when navigating discomfort led Ainhoa to acknowledge the violence to which she had turned a blind eye for years.

> When the councillor who had to be with a bodyguard [because of being an ETA target] expressed what it is to live having to be escorted by bodyguards, how he felt… *buf* [sighs] When we left the meeting, I said to him: 'I want to give you a hug. Today, I've found out that there are more victims.' And I knew before that people were escorted, a lot of people. But I didn't really know until I heard it in person, you don't really know… […] Listening to how he lived through it. I explained, in tears, how I experienced what happened to me. But they explained their experience too. Listening while looking into their eyes, without any judgment, how he lived… [silence] I discovered the victims of persecution. That struck me.

When going through Ainhoa's experience in the writing of this article I can identify how my own feelings of discomfort opened me to experiences of violence that I had not emotionally understood before. It happened first in my meetings with people in the Basque Country during my years as a journalism student and during my PhD research. During this research, getting in touch with people with different standpoints, I had to face emotionally unexpected situations that I did not know how to deal with and that made me feel uncomfortable. I felt the tambaleo of instability, which in the field I considered a deficiency in my research skills. I felt unsettled when I became aware that the otherness I was analysing was embodied in me: when I perceived participants

who were, for me, in the category of the other; when I was worried that I could be seen as the other and the consequences that that otherness could have in my research; when the tambaleo of being vulnerably exposed to listening[8] to different experiences of violence created a break with my dichotomised interpretative frames of what is good/bad, just/unjust, violent/non-violent. Navigating discomfort can be painful, but it can also open new questions, new understandings, and connectedness.

Nerea explained how her experience of the encounter made her change her feeling of 'going to a war' to her impression of a 'very positive experience'. The other, as well as the understanding of one's self, moves away from a demonised image to the conceptualisation of being 'normal people'. She also felt listened to when she could talk not only about her suffering but also 'contextualise' those experiences. This 'context' refers to conversations in which Nerea could explain experiences of violence that she felt were not being heard, such as the conditions suffered by Basque prisoners, or the torture inflicted in police stations. However, this exchange and awareness of different experiences of violence did not mean that consensual dialogue was reached and differences erased.

> It breaks your whole way of thinking. You see that they are nice, I mean, that they are normal people. Same as they might say about us, that we are also 'normal' [laughs]. Us and them, it seems as if we had horns and they had whatever […] The problem is that you reach a point where you can speak about some issues, with a lot of respect towards each other, but if you then try to move forward in relation to the ideological aspect, then you cannot make any progress. […] When we came back [from Glencree], we kept meeting up. But then I said, 'I am not going to come any more', because I didn't want to keep arguing about why I attended the *ongi etorri* [welcome event] of X [a well-known Basque prisoner], or about... We don't need to search for a common ideology. Each of us will keep having our own ideology. I don't need to justify myself about why I go to this or that. 'Are you then justifying what they have done?' 'You are then supporting…' whatever. We cannot go to that point because it's when relationships get broken again.

The willingness to sit with discomfort expands the vision and allows one to see the violence done to the other that was previously dismissed. Acknowledgement of experiences of violence can imply a transformation,

being moved from previous positions at a personal level, but also having an impact on and broadening other people's vision of that violence. Nerea, for instance, is part of an initiative about the memory of the armed conflict where I could hear her raising the experiences of violence that she had learned in Glencree.

The move from the place of the dichotomy entails the bravery to undertake a challenge and confront new fears that appear in relation to 'learning to see differently', in what Boler calls 'learning to inhabit a morally ambiguous self' (Boler, 1999, p.182). Navigating discomfort means dealing with old fears and coming up with new ones; but it also unravels a more complex acknowledgement of the world that can lead to more connectedness (Pratt, 1984, cited in Boler, 1999). In their experience of the encounters in Glencree, Ainhoa and Nerea navigated the discomfort of confronting their own identity, their belonging to a specific community, their image of the other, their beliefs and assumptions. They managed to navigate that discomfort in the tambaleo, the staggering feeling of ambivalence, located on an unstable ground and leading to unexpected and uncontrollable outcomes. The unbeatable attitude built during years of hostility, brought into the first meetings, eased and let vulnerability take up the space. The vulnerable exposure of inhabiting an ambiguous self when the good/evil binaries were shattered was supported in gestures of care. The sense of a supportive community and infrastructure needed when exposed to vulnerability (Butler, 2015) did not erase differences. In their accounts, Nerea and Ainhoa navigated discomfort and were opened to the vulnerability arising in the unstable movement of tambaleo—accepting conflicts (both internal and external) as intrinsic to the relationships developed with others.

Tambaleo and the epistemology of the 'I don't know'

> Late night at a bar in San Sebastian. A guy approaches me. When he learns that I'm from Madrid, he claims to belong to ETA. Both of us know that this is no more than a provocation into which I don't sink. At some point, we talk about my research. Out of the blue, he states that his uncle was a target of ETA. He talks about how he felt for his auntie, as she had to live with that threat and with a bodyguard always by her side. Through the way he refers to his support to ETA,

> I can perceive the struggle inside him. I ask how he felt. I get a long gaze as an answer. Followed by a simple: 'Ez dakit'.

Ez dakit, I don't know in Basque. Tambaleo. Tambaleo that might have no words and is expressed in the logocentric convention of hesitancy. I refer to tambaleo as the continuous internal movement that appears when breaking dichotomies and navigating the lack of static truths and fixed certainties. Sometimes there are no words. Sometimes silences, hesitations, a gaze, can convey the vulnerability of fixed identities being shaken. The embodied experience of tambaleo might mean an opening; it might mean a challenge, a long journey of understanding, staying with discomfort and without static truths… Pedagogies of discomfort, as stated by Boler (1999), invite us to learn to inhabit positions and identities that are ambiguous.

I consider the concept of tambaleo to add another dimension to discomfort. As expressed above, I consider discomfort an embodied signal that allows us to identify the violence in structures of power that we suffer and reproduce. Tambaleo is connected and caused by the discomfort provoked by questioning cherished beliefs, by blurring the good/evil binary, and by developing accountability in relation to our position in power structures. Tambaleo would be the movement that discomfort produces. The movement on a chair that is not fastened. Tambaleo represents the openness of the body to awareness of discomfort in a move that does not try to avoid discomfort or domesticate it but to explore it. The internal move of tambaleo is uncomfortable, since we are not normally used to sitting with uncertainty and ambivalence; but it can also be pleasurable. It represents a move towards connection with others, in an awareness of human and non-human interdependency, which can be pleasurable. We can find pleasure in tambaleo since staying with it represents an ease in the aim to control the uncontrollable reality, allows for contradictions and shared hesitant dialogues, and explores new meanings and ways of knowledge.

Tambaleo resists binaries. Tambaleo resonates with the concept of *neplanta*, the Nahuatl word for in-between spaces that Anzaldúa (2015, p.2) uses to describe the place where cultural and personal codes clash. In Anzaldúa's (2015, p.127) account, neplanta would be the 'site of transformation, the place

where different perspectives come into conflict and where you question the basic ideas, tenets, and identities inherited from your family, your education, and your different cultures.' In troubling the us/other division, living on the slash in between, *las neplanteras* create 'new topographies and geographies of hybrid selves who transcend binaries and de-polarise potential allies' (Anzaldúa, 2015, p.82). Tambaleo para tejer alianzas. As argued by Sholock (2012, p.709), epistemic uncertainty could promote coalitions across racial and other power inequalities that are not based on comfort. Alliances that come from a position of the 'I don't know'. Webs of nodes. In dialogue, in the transformative power of the non-closure, la relacionalidad del encuentro, where statements are contestable and contested (as in the science of stuttering that Haraway, 1991, advocates for), where the starting point for taking a step is the tambaleo.

Ez dakit, 'I don't know', can be linked to the internal teetering of tambaleo and the uncertainty of the proper path to follow. It is not the 'I don't know' of avoidance or disavowal that Gilson (2011) explores in her analysis of the dismissal of vulnerability that involves both ethical and epistemological closure. 'I don't know' could point precisely to opening up the self from the protection of not knowing: an opening that Boler (1999, p.199) describes as a sign of success in the pedagogy of discomfort and that Gilson (2011, p.325) considers the precondition of learning. 'I don't know' could disrupt the compulsory clarity demanded not just in academia to establish who is given authority as knowledge producer, but in the everyday where the same colonial and patriarchal understandings of knowledge exchange sanction our ways of expression, giving more status to the illusory omnipotence of control and order in our speech.

Identities that are built on the 'silencing of potential otherness' (Achino-Loeb, 2006, p.43) can get shaken in periods after a ceasefire, periods of instability, where beliefs can be challenged. Alejandro Castillejo Cuéllar (2017, p.11) has named the time coming after a ceasefire 'the demilitarisation of everyday life', referring not only to the disarming of a society but to 'the importance of building another order of categories, different to the one established by the conflict'. As in the illustration of a conversation in a bar, the discomfort that resists binaries does not only appear in arranged encounters such as the Glencree experience,

but in the everyday. The uncomfortable feeling of tambaleo is a teetering movement that entails a vulnerable opening and could be part of the paths of conocimiento (Anzaldúa, 2015). Tambaleo produced when dichotomies get cracked and the vulnerability of altering 'not just one's ideas and beliefs, but one's self and sense of one's self' comes up (Gilson, 2011) can be a way to connect with others and enhance knowledge while in itself practicing social change.

Discomfort is not just an affect to be included in our research processes, but in a broader consideration of knowledge production and social change in different contexts, from the classroom to periods of crisis, such as the times coming after a ceasefire. Ez dakit, I don't know, can represent a period of uncomfortable dislocation, when identities might become unanchored, or where the anchor's ropes are loosened. The aftermath of an armed conflict can be a period of acknowledgement of multiple violences that were internally and externally silenced. I am not only referring to acknowledgement of the violence committed by those who confronted one another during the armed conflict, but also the acknowledgement of that confrontation sustained by an axis of domination, namely capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism (or 'coloniality' in Quijano's [2000] words). Examples of these structural violences include the erasure of different ways of knowing (the epistemic genocide named by De Sousa, 2015). It is alliances built across differences from the space of uncertainty, communities of support created when vulnerability is exposed, that can collectively aim for radical change ('radical' understood as addressing the roots of violence).

Movement. Movement in the tambaleo of the I don't know. Tambaleo that can sometimes be transformed into *zancadas*, strides, or become a dance (García González, 2019a), lead to falls and getting up, or be the impetus for energetic steps in collective gatherings. Movement when the chair does not suit your body, cuando la silla rasca, when the norm is revealed and hence can be challenged through alliances created from shared tambaleantes, vulnerabilities.

Pause. Breathe. Listen.

I am going to pause here with an invitation to you. As I did when this article was communicated as a paper in some academic settings, I would like to share this experiment of embodied knowledge creation with you as a reader. I would like to invite you to explore listening through your own discomfort. If this were a talk, I would explain the instructions and guide you through it. In this material form of communication, I would suggest that you read what is written below and then you take your time to immerse in it at your own pace.

Think of a situation that you have felt as uncomfortable. I would suggest focussing on an experience that is not too upsetting, since this format does not allow the support that the exposure of vulnerability would require. You might focus on educational settings, experiences connected with the academia, with writing, or with community involvement, since some thoughts about those situations may have already appeared when reading this article. Even though this format makes it difficult to give support to the vulnerability that might be opened in this exploration, it is important to identify, when thinking of that situation, what support you would have needed or you would need in dealing with the embodied experience of discomfort, since that relates to the inseparable link between navigating discomfort and collective support. Reading these instructions, you then may decide if you would like to explore discomfort in the way suggested or find a group of people and do it together. You can undertake this bodily exploration before the article ends or read the article in full and then undertake your exploration of discomfort at another time… Your own pace, space, and time.

> First, I would ask you to find a quiet place to sit comfortably—comfortably enough to sit with discomfort 😊
>
> Pay attention to your breathing. Breathing will allow us to listen to our bodies.
>
> Feel how your breath expands in your body. Calmly breathe in and out.
>
> Stay with breathing.
>
> Now picture yourself in a situation where you felt uncomfortable. It can be something that occurred in a classroom, a conference, in an event online, at a meeting, doing research, or in the writing process…

> Try to go back to that uncomfortable situation: the space, the actions that occurred there, and yourself in the situation.
>
> How does discomfort feel? In what part of your body are you feeling the discomfort? Breathe into that part of your body for a moment.
>
> Keep breathing.
>
> What were the elements that provoked discomfort? Could you identify them better now than when the situation happened? What is the feeling of discomfort pointing at? How does that discomfort relate to individual and socio-cultural expectations?
>
> How did you react in that uncomfortable situation? How did you move from it?
>
> I may ask you to just stay in silence for a couple of minutes. You can write down your thoughts, or just stay there.
>
> Minutes passing…
>
> What happens when we stay with discomfort? Can we recognise some power structures that affect that feeling of discomfort? What is our relation to those structures? What kind of support or collective action would be required?

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'A pedagogy of discomfort is about bodies', affirms Boler (1999, p.196). As I realised when digging into what happened when I ignored discomfort in the writing of the January Article, in order to listen, we need to be able to breathe. Productivity, fears, expectations, demands, deadlines, interpretations of success, unchallenged inequalities… restrain our breath. I could not understand when I lacked the oxygen to breathe, when I lacked the connection with my body. As I reflect from the beginning of this article, in covering up my experience of discomfort with distant academic writing, I took a leap towards the unquestioned comfort of the academic armchair. I did not listen to those who are part of my research. Nor did I listen to my own discomfort.

The body: the body is a ground of thought. Writing is about being in your body; my feminism is grounded in corporeal reality (Anzaldúa, 2015, p.5). Anzaldúa inspires me. I still smile when I look at the notes I wrote when re-reading her book:

> La amo a Anzaldúa. La amo. La excitación interna—(xq la siento en el cuerpo—el pecho ampliado)—y suspiro out loud—de un enamoramiento, de una conexión. Cuando resuenas con la otra. Te sientes cerca de ella—de su hacer y sentir—porque te llega. Y me río. Y gozo.

Heart beating, the connection, the resonance. Opening up to discomfort, recognising the feeling of tambaleo in the unpaved path of the no answers, can lead us to look for connections, to broaden our field of awareness. Connections found in the honest feedback of colleagues, in friends that listen to your rambling ideas in the drafting of an article, the thoughts of scholars that resonate with mine, creating the feeling of being part of a community of thinking, of transformative thinking. Discomfort and comfort might not be so distant al fin y al cabo (García-Gonzalez et al., 2022). In the mutual support that, I have stated, is required for opening up to discomfort, we can find some calm. It is not saying that we need to comfort any feeling of discomfort. I argue for identifying discomfort, exploring it, finding its connection with structures of power, with historical and socio-economic inequalities, taking responsibility in those violent structures. If comforting, as put by Applebaum (2017), might be a way to smooth over deep self-reflections and erase responsibility, the feeling of connectedness and openness that discomfort could lead to may connect to pleasure and excitement, as explained by Ahmed (2017, pp.132-133):

> When you don't sink, when you fidget and move around, then what is in the background becomes in front of you, as world that is gathered in a specific way. Discomfort, in other words, allows things to move. Every experience I have had of pleasure and excitement about a world opening up has begun with such ordinary feelings of discomfort, of not quite fitting in a chair, of becoming unseated, of being left holding onto the ground.

In this article, I refer to that movement as tambaleo: the continuous internal movement created when challenging dichotomies and fixed certainties that can be tiring, at times frustrating, unsettling, but also pleasurable. Feelings of pleasure in the tambaleo, when moving, when uncertainty leads to the unexpected, when you can confluir with allies, when you are more aware of the part you play in power structures, you don't blindas la incomodidad, you create more honest connections, te haces responsable de la incomodidad, on a moving ground, in the tambaleo that makes us open to connectedness.

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From our body and emotions, discomfort allows us to see concealed violences and our complicity in them. Discomfort is movement (Ahmed, 2017). Discomfort es sentir un revoltijo al que is painful to pay attention to because it puts our sense of self into question (Petillo, 2020). Answers given to calm the experience of discomfort can perpetuate violence (Applebaum 2017). When it is not domesticated, the ambiguous and vulnerable self is exposed, and it is a way to collectively generate knowledge and a call to action (Boler, 1999). Power structures aim to resist change, as one of the reviewers of this article pointed out. Institutions may try to manage feelings of discomfort, to contain them, or to dissipate them. In this sense I go back to the alarm bell that initiated this article: my colleagues rang the bell, and I looked at its resonance in my body. Alert alert. Institutions might try to adapt the chairs in order to absorb any tambaleo. Awareness of the internal alert might lead us not to rest on that cushioned chair and make a move. What are the fasteners that hold us there? Why is it that the chair is not rough to me but it is for others?

Discomfort should not be ignored in research if we aim for decolonising, transformative, and accountable practices (Chadwick 2021). Contrary to the aim of the epistemologies of the North to represent and dominate the world (De Sousa Santos 2015), I have explored discomfort in knowledge production for a more honest engagement in our research, aiming to find ways to perform incoherence and contradiction in our work. Escaping the normative academic norm of coherent and conclusive thoughts is difficult though. Collectively, we could create spaces for breathing,[9] where we allow ourselves to be incoherent, unclear, to explore and fail, not fitting, not reaching the expected outcomes, rambling.

Being able to identify and explore discomfort and stay in the tambaleo for knowledge generation is part of an epistemological and political contribution to social change. Opportunities to encourage this exploration in a collective engagement could appear in different contexts: from educational and research contexts to periods of crisis that include post-ceasefire processes. It is important to stress, nonetheless, the structural and contextual inequalities in all these processes of exploration and transformation. Unequal positions for different

actors might entail different approaches to the exposure to vulnerability. Contextual circumstances and power relations need to be considered in an approach to discomfort that could be transformative. Spaces for breathing where discomfort can be explored, where the vulnerable tambaleo can be embraced, can be brought into being at different paces and different circumstances: they can emerge in everyday practices, in informal gatherings, through phone text exchanges, in an online meeting, or through an unexpected encounter in a bar. As with the examples raised in this article in relation to exploring opportunities for listening through discomfort, in these processes it is important that mutual support and collective care are at the core, when challenging fixed binaries, while accepting conflict as part of life, in a constant critical interrogation of power structures and of the violence we do not want to sustain.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Elona Marjory Hoover for her first invitation to explore discomfort collectively. I am also thankful to Ana María Forero Ángel and Carrie Hamilton for their helpful comments on the drafts of this article. I gratefully acknowledge support from the British Economic and Social Research Council.

Ethics statement

University of Brighton Arts & Humanities College Research Ethics Committee (Approval No. AHCREC15-22, 5 May 2016).

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Notes

[1] At some points throughout this article I use a way of expression that I experimented with in a collective piece on discomfort I co-created with Elona Marjory Hoover, Athanasia (Nancy) Francis, Kayla Rush, and Ana María Forero Ángel (García-González et al., 2022). This expression includes incorporating my native language, Spanish, the language I use for understanding myself and the world, when writing in my personal notebooks. It is inspired by the disruptive creativity of Anzaldúa's work (1987, 2015) and how she performs through her writing the theories of borderland, the living in between cognitive worlds. As an immigrant in the Anglo academy, I adapt to the geopolitics of knowledge production while at the same time showing through this mixed writing (although in another colonial language) that this is not how my thoughts would flow. Sometimes I provide partial

translations in English; in other places I allow the Spanish to stand on its own.

[2] In this sense, the exploration of discomfort connects with feminist genealogies that, from the women's liberation movement, posed a challenge to disrupt 'the binaries of emotion/reason that silence and dismiss emotions within realms of learning and knowledge creation' (Boler and Zembylas, 2016). While so-called gut responses were displaced from the realm of scientific knowledge, feminist scholars (such as Abu-Lughod, 1990; Behar and Gordon, 1995; Fonow and Cook, 1991; Harding, 1987; Haraway, 1991) called into question the way knowledge is produced through 'androcentric research with its claims to value neutrality' (Tickner, 2005, p.8).

[3] When trying to find words to describe the processes of research, I realise that the concepts that I usually manage are fraught with a patriarchal and colonial approach to science with the researcher as the explorer, the conqueror, the one who knows all and has control over the reality examined. 'Participants', 'data', 'informants', 'findings', 'results'… How can these words represent the lives of those who generously share their experiences and wisdom with the researcher? Are not those concepts reproducing the dismissal of the intrinsic co-production of knowledge in ethnographic research?

[4] ETA started its armed activity amid the Franco dictatorship as a pro-independence demand that merged with an anti-fascist socialist stance. ETA continued its armed activity after Franco's death. From the first killing in 1968 until 2011, ETA actions killed some 830 people.

[5] Highlighting the emotion of fear in our unwillingness to broaden our restricted vision does not mean that there are not other factors as well, such as arrogance, denial, privilege, or hatred.

[6] For a thoughtful reflection on how our academic precarity is entangled with a precarisation of those we work with in the field, see Pascoe et al., 2020.

[7] Names used in this article are pseudonyms, since anonymity measures have been taken throughout this research. I took this decision in order to take care of the participants since the context being investigated is not free from potential risks in relation to political violence.

[8] I have developed the concept of 'vulnerable listening' elsewhere (García-González, 2022).

[9] Chadwick (2021) gives some examples of analytically performing incoherence, uncertainty, and contradiction. The collectively authored piece García-González et al., 2022 has also been an experiment in performing discomfort. Feminist writers such as Anzaldúa (1987, 2015) or Behar (2020, 2018, 1996) are other sources of inspiration in disruptions and experimentation in knowledge creation.