

The Work of Writing in the Age of Neoliberal Academia

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English Abstract:

Remedios Zafra's *El Informe*, an essay on intellectual labor and the meaning of writing, compels us to think about the conditions under which we research. Through narrative digressions, Zafra condemns the effects of liberalization on the bodies and minds of researchers and writers. The essay illustrates scholars' affections and losses within the bureaucratic machinery. In other words, it is a manifesto against mechanical labor. It is a valuable read for those on the verge of burnout.

Die Arbeit des Schreibens im neoliberalen akademischen Zeitalter

Abstract:

El Informe von Remedios Zafra, ein Essay über intellektuelle Arbeit und die Bedeutung des Schreibens, zwingt uns, über die Bedingungen nachzudenken, unter denen wir forschen. In erzählerischen Exkursen kritisiert Remedios die Auswirkungen der Liberalisierung auf Körper und Geist von Forschenden und Schriftsteller_innen an. Der Essay veranschaulicht die Zuneigung und die Verluste von Forschenden innerhalb der bürokratischen Maschinerie. Mit anderen Worten, es ist ein Manifest gegen die mechanische Arbeit. Es ist eine wertvolle Lektüre für alle, die kurz vor dem Burnout stehen.

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A flow of words without a pretended path. A call to disobedience, to dissent. When I think of the books in my library, I remember the essays I reread and felt overwhelmed by my annotations. To this heterogeneous group, I consider adding this unclassifiable book. Its one hundred ninety-nine pages unfold a series of reflections on writing and intellectual labor. *El informe. Trabajo intelectual y tristeza burocrática* [The Report: Intellectual Labor and Bureaucratic Sadness], by Remedios Zafra, is an inquiry into digital work and its effects on our quotidian life, health, and social relationships. This essay helps us to think about how well we are aware of the pressures of administrative work, its conditions, influences, and changes in the form we write.

Remedios Zafra is a writer and philosopher who teaches and researches at the intersection of art, innovation, and digital culture. Her inquiry begins with the following questions: “Is it living to work and feel busy most of your life dreaming of being able to retire someday, just when you get sicker, even all the time? How does this time that is the life I live sabotage things that I want but always put off to ‘when I have time?’” [“¿Es vivir trabajar y sentirte ocupada la mayor parte de la vida soñando con poder jubilarte algún día, justo cuando enfermas más, incluso todo el tiempo? ¿De qué manera ese tiempo que es la vida que vivo boicotea cosas que deseo pero siempre aplazo a ‘cuando tenga tiempo?’”] (p. 14). This *report* is her answer to how she works and lives as an intellectual – as a writer, professor, and sometimes research coordinator – inside the academic maze of cognitive capitalism.

In five sections, Remedios Zafra searches for the meaning of intellectual labor, creative writing, working time, and meaning in the digital age. To achieve this purpose, she fractures conventional academic writing and presents an essay of the in-betweenness of poetry. For

instance, each section and its corresponding subchapters opens with a quote related to the subject matter of her reflection. As readers, Remedios Zafra compels us to relate this quote to her story. We are invited to play with *The Report* as she conceals the name of the references she quotes. Following her game, we can read a parade of ideas by Simone Weil (*Oppression et liberté*, and *La condition ouvrière*), Fernando Pessoa (*Livro do desassossego*), Albert Camus (*Notebooks 1942–1951*), Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari (*Capitalisme et schizophrénie. L'anti-oedipe*), among others. Thus, this essay becomes a hypertext, a network of intellectual digressions on topics such as freedom, administrative work, the academic environment, the productivity and efficiency of writing, the mechanization of time and work, and the impact of excessive work on our bodies.

Although the book is structured in a linear order, it is quite challenging to read. Each chapter is written according to two rules: it must be no longer than eight pages and it must focus on one topic. Some topics appear repetitive, such as Remedios' digressions on writing and freedom. However, this repetition is a narrative device that demonstrates her critique of the automatization of academic writing. She plays with the sounds and images of her work, weaving collages about the pain she feels when becoming aware of all the time spent on some bureaucratic processes.

Remedios Zafra calls this work an *ineffable report*, divided into five sections. In the first section, she begins with the reasons for writing her report: to denounce the tyranny of bureaucracy, the murder of time and passion, and to recover our relationship with life. Under the logic of efficiency and mechanization, promoted by neoliberal academia and free market values, what seems useless – like creativity – shakes the spirit, exploits the culture, and prevents the disease of society. In section two, she explores the effects of overloading our minds and bodies with tons of digital work and proposes a political defense of intellectual labor, identifying herself as a writer before being a researcher or philosopher.

In section three, she reveals the pressures and painful conditions she has suffered as an intellectual in the last decade: the subordination to technology, the acceleration of time and hyper-productivity, and the loss of time for oneself. Remedios looks at how the academic system burns our bodies to achieve goals and meet deadlines. In section four, she combines

the macro- and micro-political perspectives to show, first, the operation of digital capitalism and the need of the bureaucratic machinery to extract the lives of intellectuals to generate profits. Second, it shows the harmful changes in subjectivity that occur within this system, such as the constant feeling of guilt, loss of trust, and blind obedience.

The Report concludes with a manifesto for the recovery of hope, the meaning of life, experience, poetry, the possibility of thinking in the future, and the creation of bonds of solidarity and mutual care. Remedios calls for belief in passion, in the *ineffable* register of life, as a way to break the chain of mechanical works of neoliberal academia.

As a researcher and doctoral candidate, I find it impossible not to be overwhelmed by Remedios's narrative. Her style and rhythm reveal her fears, pains, hopes, and desires to keep moving forward in the academic environment and digital capitalism. Sometimes researchers believe we are rocks in the middle of a storm and do not need any help to meet the deadline. *The Report* shows us that we are human, fragile beings with minds and bodies on the brink of new burnout. "Does what I do really have any value?" ["Realmente esto que hago tiene algún valor?"] (p. 123). Remedios asks herself, and the answer leads us to consider another question: "Can you imagine being able to escape from that doing you do for the sake of doing that is mechanical or from doing that is merely executive, that an algorithm can do, to regain the concentration that thought, creation and writing demand?" ["¿Se imagina poder huir de ese hacer por hacer que es mecánico o de ese hacer meramente ejecutivo que una programación informática puede resolver, para recuperar la concentración que reclaman pensamiento, creación y escritura?"] (p. 187).

The Report cannot be accused of lacking sense and meaning. Some chapters are challenging to read, but in the end the narrative embraces us and we discover that we need a break and some time to breathe. I would like to take this idea as the main lesson. Remedios invites us to commit to writing with meaning and purpose. Her exploration of the administrative maze, its effects and traps, reminds me that even in an academic field like cultural studies, I can be dragged down by bureaucratic claws, become a machine, and lose the purpose of my writing. After all, the joy of words never really disappears, even if we sometimes experience losses.