

# *What if we had danced?*

*Stitching between  
family sphere n care n tarantismo*

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Figure 1: A. Talò., experiment of embroidery on latex (2023/2024)

### 🌀 Acknowledgements 🌀

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## ❧ *abstract* ❧

*to my mum and my sister*

This text intends to explore my personal experience and family legacy, questioning the current state of collective care and healing, with a specific focus on the dynamics within the households. My perspective and sensitivity play a key role in shaping the research.

*What if we had danced?* is a reflection on the emotional weight I carried while growing up in a family that struggled with mental distress. I ponder whether there could have been tools available for me to deal with these challenges and to cope with my emotional exhaustion.

Research on ethics of care, particularly the work of Professor Joan Tronto, has been instrumental in contextualising these emotions.

Tarantism has been a significant focus of my research, as it offers intriguing opportunities for exploring embodiment and collective practice of healing and caring. The term tarantism indicates both the illness and the ritual associated with the bite of the tarantula spider, which was widespread in Salento until the last century. It was believed that the spider's venom would lead the afflicted to a state of mental distress, which was cured through a ritual entangling dance, music and colours.

I will describe the phenomenon of tarantism and touch upon its historical development and the geo-political conditions, as well as explore the various symbols that are central to the ritual's significance, directing the emphasis on the figure of the spider (tarantula). I have been inspired by Clarissa Pinkola Estés, poet, psychoanalyst and author of *Women Who Run with the Wolves* (2008), to reinterpret the significance of the ritual in an empowering and liberating way. Additionally, reading the works of religious studies scholar Catherine Bell has enriched my acquaintance with ritual practices.

My interest in this particular phenomenon is motivated by its connection to my family's place of origin. This early curiosity progressively evolved as

I further developed my understanding of collective healing practice and compared it to the approach to healing and care inside my household. Here, healing has sometimes been overseen, hidden, or addressed exclusively through medication. My practice and research journey have been moved by the disclosure of this contrast and by my raised interest in sound and its bodily presence.

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### Notes:

The right-aligned texts interwoven in the thesis present reflections from my notebook or spontaneously added during my writing process. I believe their inclusion will encompass my intimate engagement with this exploration.

﴿ as both a daughter and a sister ﴾

I grew up in what I would describe as a female environment. This environment has been standing on a fragile pedestal. After running away from an overbearing family situation and losing her husband, my mother raised me and my sister alone.

It has always been just the three of us.

Nevertheless, it has always been implied that a paternal figure was missing inside the family. It is even not necessarily the loss of my father as the individual he was that has left a noticeable void, but rather the archetype of this authoritarian, inflexible and protective role in the family. This absence united us, but, at the same time, it made us feel also inadequate as if we were longing and in need of the fatherlike figure that could embody a sense of guidance, order and firmness.

It still echoes in my mind my mother's voice saying: "If only your father were here..."

*But what would that have changed?*

While reading Alex Martinis Roes' *To Become Two*<sup>1</sup> (2018), I have found the words that resonate with the kind of relationship between my mother, my sister and myself.

Roes describes the political structure of the Milan Women Bookstore and elaborates on how the practice of this collective highlights the affirmation of each member's singularities rather than conforming to the common impression of women's relations based on the lack of a self-defined subjectivity and victimhood under a patriarchal structure, both in the domestic space and in broader society.

I've always felt the bond and support in our house entangled with our

shared negative experiences within the family, including my father's behaviours and death, and the chain of events that followed. This implication led to a family dynamic shaped by gender role expectations, insecurity and inadequacy.

For the interest of my research, I have chosen to avoid referring to specific episodes that have affected me during my younger days. Instead, I will reflect on the emotional impact of these circumstances.

As both a daughter and a sister, as a child exposed to parental loss and facing episodes involving depression, anxiety and a few instances of violence, I've taken upon my shoulder the responsibility of upholding the familial bond. I have been feeling like my actions and my behaviour could have prevented certain situations from happening again. Nevertheless, I got stuck many times with a sense of helplessness. As if my efforts had been swept under a carpet.

and this sense of **helplessness**  
*being unable to - not doing enough - not knowing what to do and to say*

Another consequence of becoming an adult in this environment has been my tendency to withdraw emotionally and distance myself when confronted with feelings of helplessness. I still fear calling back home and receiving heartrending news.

Growing up, I also encountered difficulties opening up and sharing my experiences, often prioritising other's needs over mine. Expressing my emotions and communicating how I feel has always been challenging. This pattern of behaviours reflects the unchanged communication problems between my family.

I came to realise how this way of coping slowly eroded my sense of empathy and care. As Joan Tronto (1993) suggests, "care involves some forms of ongoing connection"(p. 105), yet the care I yearned for often remained dismissive. Being perceived as the "good" and "responsible" child, I felt compelled to manage everything independently, including providing emotional support.

## ❧ *about care* ❧

C a r e

from the old English carian, which expresses the feeling of concern, worry and grief.

*This last word pierced me*

As I delve into my personal experience of care, it's important to explore the interweave surrounding the notion of care. This chapter is largely informed by theoretical research in the ethics of care, particularly by Professor Joan Tronto.

Care deeply penetrates our lives, comprehending the personal, social, moral, and political aspects. Human existence consists of interdependence, people mutually rely on each other as we are not completely autonomous. At times, we need help and care from others.

According to Tronto (1990), care is recognised when a practice is aimed at maintaining, continuing, or repairing the world. In this light, actions are guided by the concerns and needs of others, framing care as a practice rather than merely an emotion. This last statement suggests that care, when conceptualised as a practice, involves both thinking, taking action and continuity in time. The origin of the term practice can be found in the Greek term *praxis*, which held "an ethical dimension, concerned with self-shaping or a decision as to how to live, as well as a political dimension, concerned with the form in which one lived with other people" (Boon & Levine, 2018)<sup>2</sup>.

According to the chapter *Towards a feminist Theory of Caring* (Abel and

Nelson,1990), J. Tronto and B. Fisher outline care unfolding through four interconnected phases:

1. *Caring about*

The initial phase involves recognising the necessity of care and understanding the importance of meeting that need. This is often identified by empathically assuming the perspective of the other person

2. *Taking care*

The second phase involves assuming the responsibility to meet the identified need and deciding how to respond to it. This stage deals with taking agency, responsibility and the ability to care.

3. *Care-giving*

This next step involves the material fulfilment of the need for care. It typically takes more time and responsibility than the previous phase.

4. *Care receiving*

This last phase encompasses the complex moral element of responding to the received care. As the previous step involves actioning upon something or someone, there we encounter the expectation of a response.

Exploring these phases helped me position my sense of helplessness and fatigue in between the *caring about* and *caring for* stages. These moments mark the recognition of the necessity of care and the following assumption of responsibility towards that need.

Moreover, all these components are not exempt from conflicts between each other and their fulfilment depends on the presence of certain factors such as time, material resources, knowledge and skills. As a child, I could recognize the need for care, but many of these factors were beyond my control. This left me feeling vulnerable and hopeless as I was trying to meet that need and find ways to show my concern and my affection.

Despite my efforts, I often felt like the care received wouldn't align with my necessities, leading me to feel alone and frustrated. I don't think it has been a lack of caring about me, but rather a lack of understanding and directing that care.

## 🕷️ *tarantism:* *historically and culturally explained* 🕷️

My family comes from Southern Italy, from the very beginning of that area known as Salento.

Although I was raised far away from that cultural and social dynamic, I grew up hearing stories about Southern Italy. Traditions, beliefs, places, music... to my childhood eyes, it seemed such a distant land, so different from my environment.

T A R A N T I S M O<sup>3</sup> is a tradition that really stuck with me.

In Salento, up to the last century, tarantism was widespread as a historical, cultural and religious phenomenon. It predominantly involved the rural world. The term refers to both illness and ritual. It was believed that the bite of a spider, the tarantula, would lead to a state of mental distress. The treatment consisted of a ritual involving choreutic, musical and chromatic elements.

The most important collection of information about tarantism can be found in the work of the Italian anthropologist Ernesto de Martino, who engaged in researching the culture and tradition of the South of Italy, starting from the second half of the 20th century, when still some residues of this particular practice could be found. The value of this research lies in the effort to understand the phenomenon in a sociological and historical way, addressing the folkloristic and religious materials. For many years, in literature, the cultural aspect of the ritual was overshadowed, giving largely attention to the toxic syndrome or the psychological alternation.

The phenomenon of tarantism would mainly affect women — although I would argue that it touched individuals with a certain sensitivity. The sufferers would fall into a state of inertia and passivity, refusing to work, eat or communicate. The diagnosis was based on recognising the symptoms just

described, the direct encounter with the spider or the presence of symbolic bite marks on the skin.

Throughout the text, I aim to keep a neutral approach when I address those affected by tarantism, acknowledging the determination of gender fluidity beyond the binary and static structure of males and females that shaped our understanding of gender until now. Yet, when I'm specifically delving into the personal reflection of my family's experience I believe it's fitting to come back to the female perspective. The decision lies in my intimate connection with the individualities I'm bringing into this play.

Music rules the symbolic venture of the ritual and it catalyses the healing process. Musicians were hired to trigger the dance and the performing of the ritual. The primary instrument used was the tambourine, followed by the violin, accordion, and guitar. As I will mention later on in the text, they had to explore different kinds of rhythms and melodies to discover the one that would resonate with the specific type of tarantula that caused the condition. The musicians and the community had to be responsive to the dancer's urges and understand their needs. The dance could go on for days, with just a few breaks for the musicians to recharge, until St. Paul<sup>4</sup>, protector of the tarantati<sup>5</sup>, would give his blessing and liberate the sufferer. Various symbolic elements were staged during the ritual to accompany the music and its therapeutic function. These elements included a bowl or a gid in the ground filled with water, coloured ribbons, swings, swords, mirrors and objects that could bring an olfactory stimulus into the scene. Certain aspects, such as the choice of colours, were addressed carefully, as certain nuances could trigger diverse reactions in the afflicted individual, driving them either to dance or withdraw again. Significant attention was also given to the presence of the water, suggesting the profound connection to nature intrinsic to this rural society and underlining the ritual's origin. Moreover, the swing can be interpreted as an imitation act of spiders' behaviours, precisely the action of hanging from the spider web and being elevated from the ground.

It is interesting to trace back the symbolism of the s p i d e r that in the southern body of beliefs was the cause of the illness.

*Latrodectism* was a medically recognized disease provoked by the bite of the *Latrodectus* spiders (black widow spider and related species). It was mainly spread among farmers engaged in harvesting, and the symptoms involved



pain, muscle rigidity, vomiting, and sweating with more severe consequences if not treated appropriately. Contradictory to the prevalence of female cases in tarantism, most of the ones poisoned were men.

The presence of this contradiction between the distribution of the cases in latrosectism and tarantism and the causes that led to the crisis in the latter can be attributed to the critical moment of someone's existence: harvest fatigue, losses, love disillusion, misery, hunger, and women's subordination. Furthermore, the phenomenon should be fully comprehended under the sphere of the *Southern question*, which is essential for grasping the political and historical conditions of this region. Since the second half of the 19th century, Italy has experienced an increasing socio-economic gap between the North and the South, especially when the first one was struck by the industrialization wave, while the second maintained an economy based on agriculture and commerce. The Italian government has failed to intervene with effective legislative actions that could have bridged this gap; World War I and World War II and the protectionist and fascist demographic policies caused a situation of large economic inequality between the Northern and the Southern parts.

Adding on to this discussion, it is important to remark on the patriarchal structure embedded in Italian culture. This aspect is reflected in the late achievements of the feminist movement, such as the right to divorce (1970), abortion rights (1978) and the repeal of honour killing and shotgun marriage (1981). These significant yet tardive accomplishments underscore the obstacles faced by women. Despite progress, there is still much work to be done in a society heavily shaped by conservatism, Catholicism, and patriarchy where issues like the right to abortion, feminicide and gender equality are still disputed themes in public opinion.

The oldest document regarding the musical exorcism of those poisoned by the bite of the tarantula is the *Sertum Papale de Venenis*, dated 1362.

As de Martino (2008) underlines, the origin of the ritual dates back to the Middle Ages, when the Italian population was exposed to the expansion of Islam and other Afro-Mediterranean cultures. Yet, syncretic aspects can already be found in the Greek experiences of initiatory and orgiastic rituals such as corybantism and maenadism.

At first, the phenomenon was not only restricted to the area of Salento, but it extended to all of Apulia and the Kingdom of Naples. These circumstances explain why we find many more similar practices that were — and are — widespread along the Mediterranean, for example, the *argia* in

Sardinia, the Spanish tarantism and African rituals such as *bori* and *zar*.

I've recently visited the exhibition NO DANCING ALLOWED / 2<sup>6</sup> at Garage Rotterdam and one of the works presented stood out to me. The piece in question, *The Politics of Ecstasy* (2019) by Chiara Baldini and Rafael Kozdron, explores the causes of the Bacchanalia Affair and the incorporation of Dionysus' ritual into Roman culture, where he was known as Bacchus. The tradition originates from the orgiastic and mystic rites of Magna Graecia, but even though the overall tolerance of the Roman Senate, this cult had not been officially approved by the government. The phenomenon quickly spread beyond the lower classes: at first, participation in Bacchanalia was restricted to women, but membership eventually opened to all. The Bacchantes would lose themselves in dance, inebriated by the wine, following the rhythm of music and entering an ecstatic madness. Sacrificial rites and sexual intercourse were also associated with these events. It served as a form of rebellion against the oppressive hierarchical structure imposed by the government. However, with the *Senatus Consultum de Bacchanalibus*, dated 186 BC, the Roman Senate decreed the end to this ritual by prohibiting the performance of rites with more than five people. This regulation, indirectly addressing the threat posed by the Bacchanalia, repressed the phenomenon while recognising the significance of the ancient god Bacchus. This repression of Bacchanalia serves as a captivating example of the cathartic power of music and collective experience, going as far as threatening the authorities. I believe there are shared cultural inheritances and similarities between the two experiences, given their origins and influence within the same geographic region, including the fact that the Catholic Church tried to bend the ritual of tarantism to its structure.

As previously mentioned, the ritual is no longer being performed, but the dance is still a significant aspect of Southern Italian folklore. The ritual remains a topic of fascination and study, the reasons for its decline can be found in the significant transformations it faced over the past two centuries. The Catholic influence interfered with and disrupted the intrinsic symbolism and language of the ritual, generating confusion and contradiction. The attention had been redirected towards the figure of St. Paul and away from the symbolic significance of the spider. This drift caused discrepancy and inconsistency regarding the saint's role: at times, he was perceived as a protector, on other occasions he was the one responsible for sending the tarantula as a punishment for someone's sins. Other interpre-

tations also overlap the character of St. Paul to the tarantula itself, necessitating exorcism.

Sources from the 18th century state that the ritual could occur either indoors or outdoors, and nature symbolism played a vital role in building the stage for the ritual. Eventually, in an attempt to Christianize the phenomenon, it lost its door-to-door performativity, being confined to the mere procession to Galatina's Chapel every 28th and 29th of June. Here, in the small space of the shrine, without music, coloured ribbons and the intimate and collective setting, "there was only an intertwining of individual, horizonless crises, disorder and chaos [...] and in the absence of this traditional apparatus of evocation and release, the tarantati foundered" (de Martino, 2008).

A ritual can bend and stretch, it can adapt to changes but when the core aspects are being erased, it will eventually perish.

*what was left was just the screaming of the afflicted  
trying to sing on their own  
for themselves*

A phenomenological approach helps us understand rituals in their historical context, giving a broader significance to the patterns and orders of the practice.

"Most simply, for Smith, ritual portrays the idealised way that things in this world should be organised, although participants are very aware that real life keeps threatening to collapse into chaos and meaninglessness. Ritual, he suggests, is an opportunity to reflect on the disjuncture between what is and what ought to be; it is a "focusing lens" through which people can attempt to see, or argue for, what is significant in real life." (Bell, 2009, p.12)

A ritual can be understood as the instrument to merge thinking and making, where ideas are created, experienced and affirmed. Representations and experiences of both the collective and the individual find here a platform to intertwine and to repose meaningful insight into the accidental, hectic and fluctuating chapters of life.

## ﴿ spider's symbolism and behaviour ﴾

As it has been mentioned above, the spider was already intrinsically part of the rural culture as the cause of latrosectism. However, other insights come from investigating their behaviour, including sexual dimorphism, not to mention the chimerical suggestions that come from mythology and religion spread worldwide.

Spiders are quite ancient creatures, their lineage dating back approximately 300 million years. Female spiders are typically stronger and more predominant than their male counterpart. Unlike males, who roam frequently as they hunt, females don't leave their web and commit to protecting their nest. For this reason, female spiders possess larger venom sacs, to defend themselves, and have a longer life span, as they are less exposed to threats. It takes a huge amount of energy for spiders to produce silk, as it demands a large quantity of proteins. Spiders weave for different purposes, such as to trap the prey, transmit tactile information or create a nest to protect their offspring.

Also, another intriguing aspect of spiders' behaviour is their communication method. The vibration sense is highly predominant in this species. During mating, the male spider would courtship the female by performing on the spider web, using *v i b r a t i o n s* and drumming. If the female doesn't respond, it indicates that the male approach is not to her liking.

I believe that this more factual information could enhance the understanding of the symbolic interpretation of spiders we encounter in different cultures, especially regarding the predominant female associations and their attribute of marvellous weavers and bearers of wisdom.

For example, in Greek mythology, we encounter the myth of Arachne, a young woman with majestic tapestry skills who dared to challenge Athena. During the confrontation, Arachne went so far as to picture the gods in

their controversy, explicitly Zeus and his misleading and abusive behaviours towards the humans — particularly women — and did so by simultaneously proving her excellent textile abilities. As a consequence, the goddess of war and handcraft tore the tapestry and hit the young woman. Arachne, out of shame, hanged herself. Athena, showing compassion, decided to bring the girl back to life as a spider, allowing her and her descendants to preserve their weaving ability seemingly forever.

As the majority of interpretations see Arachne punished for her sin of pride, some contemporary views recognise her courage and bravery in trying to cross the established borders (G. Cominito, 2020).

Anansi is another spider figure present in West and American African, as well as West Indian folklore. It is a trickster god and a liminal figure, both belonging to the establishment and at the same time withdrawing from it. His character is also connected to creation, wisdom and storytelling, indeed one of the most known myths identifies Anansi as the owner of all the stories in the world.

In Celtic folklore, we see the goddess Arianrhod tied to a spider, as a needleworker of human destiny. She is a primal figure of feminine power and as the goddess of the Silver Wheel, she is associated with spinning and weaving. The same position can be found in the Egyptian goddess of war and hunting Neith, the weaver of destiny, personifying the role of creator and nurturer of life.

In these few examples, we see how the spider has been identified as the symbol of creativity and storytelling across the globe. These tiny creatures are able to elicit imagination in humankind. They embody wisdom, knowledge and ability, representing symbols of creativity and inspiration.

Spiders are *silent* animals. They quietly weave their webs.

Alongside spiders, women have been reservedly weaving for thousands of years. Weaving and textile practices transcend the mere production of fabrics, as they represent ancient art used for expression. As proposed in *The Subversive Stitch: embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, these practices have been historically relegated to the realm of femininity, with the inherent silence being unfairly stereotyped as mere concentration,

attention-seeking and even as a sexual trick. Nevertheless, this quietness has a subversive quality; women are allowed to become aware of their constraints, while also nurturing self-experience and contemplation. Under this lens, “stitches convey meaning, they create and they repair the damage” (R. Parker, 2013). Patterns, but even fibres and colours have social, cultural and economic considerations.

Woman have been

embroidering, *sewing*,  
knitting, *crocheting*

healing, *repairing*, *closing*,  
*mending*, *joining*

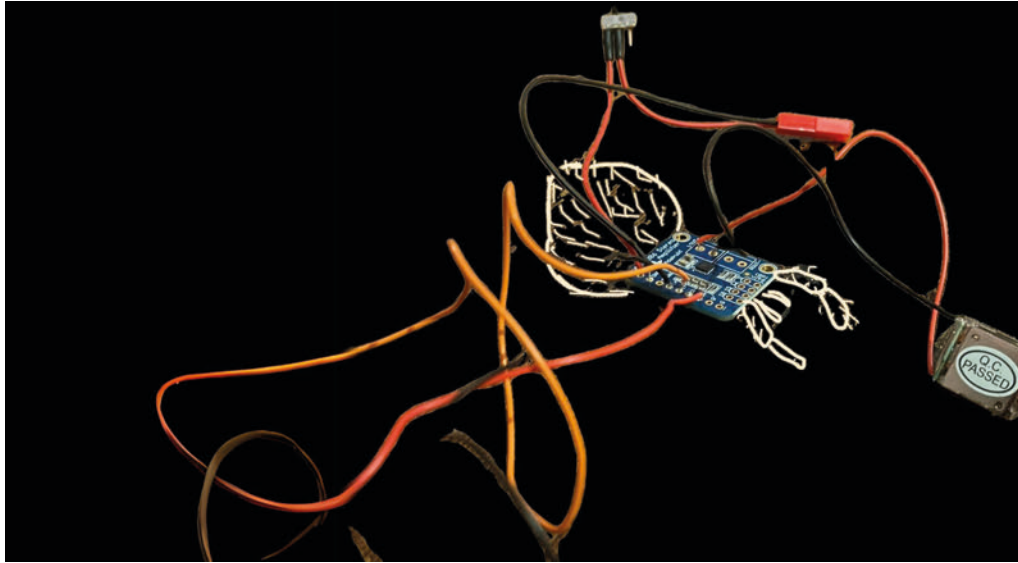


Figure 2: A. Talò., experiments between electronic parts and spiders (2024)

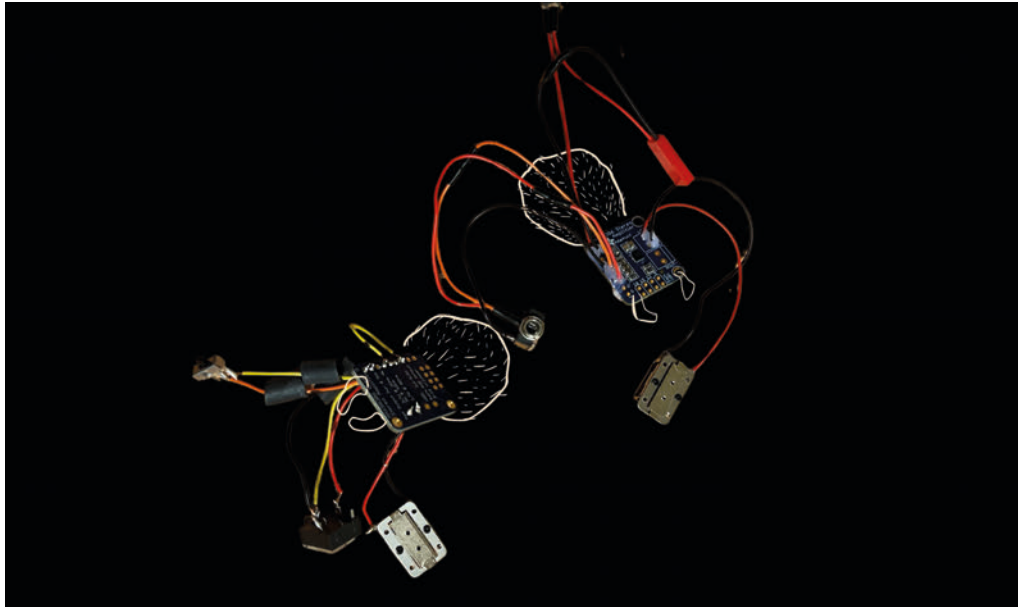


Figure 3: A. Talò., experiments between electronic parts and spiders (2024)

## ﴿ embodying the crisis ﴾

“I am starting to forget”  
 “Flitting in and out of consciousness”

These are some of the sentences that scroll across the screen in *Voice (a retracing): an emerging lexicon*, a collaborative project by Vida L Middelw and Tom Williams, which incorporates conceptual ideas and artistic process to broaden the discourse surrounding dance improvisation and electroacoustic music. This research captivates my attention due to the effort to record — and speculate on — the power of improvisation and how this practice can be articulated.

The project revolves around the concepts of phenomenology and somatic practices. It aspires “to draw an audience’s attention to experiences and knowings in the making” and where “knowing is understood as embodied” (Middelw & Williams, 2012). If we understand the body as a repository of emotions and experiences, then emotional unresolved issues can get trapped within it.

Taking into consideration the context of this research, the symbolic relationship between the tarantula’s bite and the subsequent disease suggests how the ritual performs as a system of interpretation and control of critical situations and unresolved conflicts.

“The body is a key location for liberation, because changing our thinking alone is not enough to bring about the personal and political transformation that we seek. We need to change what it is we embody and what our conditions have embodied

in us. By orienting around the embodied self, somatics counters the objectifications.” (What Is a Politicized Somatics? | in Our Bodies – on the Streets, 2023)

The ritual’s choreotic forms articulate in two phases: the first happens on the floor, where movements are oriented horizontally, and the second entails standing vertically. I consider tarantism as holding noteworthy resemblances with somatic dance and improvisation practices. In this tradition, the dancer holds agency in determining the rhythm to which they would dance. The mixed mental states encountered by the individuals were symbolically echoed by the nature of the tarantula that inflicted the bite: varying between libertine to tempestuous, melancholic or silent, depending on the individual case. The spider’s temper, indicative of the individual’s psychological state, influences their bodily response to music and colours. Typical dance patterns would follow the imitation of the movement of the spider and these kinds of moves, such as throwing the heads backwards, spinning, and the so-called hysterical arch are all also propedeutic to enter the trance and alter the perception.

Via embodied movement, crises are absorbed, transformed and ultimately released. The dance appears as a way for the individual to become the architect of their own healing.

Being extremely fascinated by the movement of the dance, the collective aspect and the self-healing and spider communication, I’ve started to practise the dance myself and do visual research on the movements.

I have been going to university during the night. A bit reluctant at first about what I was doing or if it even had any sense. I would walk around in search of a welcoming room: the light was always too bright, and usually, there was no door to close - even when there was one, I would fear not knowing what could be happening on the other side. Seeing the sensor lights flickering in the corridor or hearing any kind of sound always kept me on the edge.

Eventually, I turned on the music and I slowly gained the confidence to dance and just embody the rhythm. I would not care anymore about doors or lights.

I would dance for myself and by myself, allowing me to listen and interrogate myself.



Figure 4: A. Talò, visual documentation of the dance practice, stills from video (2023)

I would like to introduce into this discourse the understanding of being alone given by the poet and psychoanalyst Clarissa Pinkola Estés in her touching book *Women Who Run with the Wolves* (2008). She describes it as the moment of being

**“all-in-one”.**

One specificity of this ritual, as Chiara Baldini indicated during our discussions, is the absence of the thiasus, a gathering of people who sing and dance in honour of a deity. Instead, within this phenomenon, the dancer performs alone, permeating the space appointed as the stage. To investigate the psychological effect of the dance experience on one’s mind and this aspect of solitude featured in the ritual, I reference Estés’ description of aloneness as a state of isolation to reconnect with the inner woman’s nature and truth.

“In order to converse with the wild feminine, a woman must temporarily leave the world and inhabit a state of aloneness in the oldest sense of the word. Long ago the word alone was treated as two words, all one. To be all one meant to be wholly one, to be in oneness, either essentially or temporarily.”  
(Estés, 2008, p. 292)

In this state individuals allow themselves to listen to and interrogate their innermost feelings. There are many ways to achieve this deep listening place: through meditation, writing, singing, dancing, rituals and more. These are all practices that could allow one to tune out distractions and just tune in to one’s own rhythm.

Moving forward to delve deeper into the components of the ritual, I would delve into the role of the community that would gather for the ritual occasion.

The community plays the role of testimony, or better the direct interlocutor. It is there to acknowledge the social and cultural problems that have led to that moment. When society doesn’t allow expression and the outflow of critical feelings, they remain in the body, they collect and accumulate.

“This crisis is not the symptom of one’s illness but the symptom of a sick culture and society. (in conversation with my tutor Victoria McKenzie<sup>7</sup>)

Here, the authority is taken back by the woman’s body and embodied personal experiences lead the unfolding of the ritual (Magliocco, 2014). The woman’s body shifts from a submitted position to a transformative subject, in a contest where the individual changes should and have to bring transformation in the surrounding diseased environment.

The affirmation of the need for reconsideration in society is also suggested by the British biologist, eugenicist and writer J. Huxley (Bell, 2009) when he describes the role of ritualization in nature as “the adaptive formalisation or canalization of emotionally motivated behaviour” and how “it seems to provide animals a clearer communication and improve the well-being of the community”. This point of view is shared among other ethologists who further suggest that the inherently communicative nature of the ritual of animals was inherited in human behaviours and cultures.



## ﴿ when the poison becomes the cure ﴾

*What if a spider had bitten one of my foremothers? What if we carry this heritage of self-healing?*

In the framework of tarantismo, it was believed that once bitten, the crisis would cyclically repeat itself and one could potentially transmit the affliction throughout the generations until the tarantula had been killed.

*But what if the tarantula's venom is actually curing? What if it is instead providing a means to embody the crisis through the dance?*

Maybe the spider is inviting us to dance and spin with it and embrace the creative, powerful in-contact-to-nature side of us that has been so long repressed. This speculation infuses the character of the spider with the ability to give individuals agency over their bodies and provide a platform to be heard. The bite of the spider acts as a beneficial condition for the sufferers where the crises are embodied and released. It is their chance to reconnect to their true nature and dance away unresolved conflicts. To dance them away, step on them, crush them until they become dust. The bite of the spider is not meant to be understood anymore as a “remorse” of the past, as de Martino (2008) describes it, where traumas that have found no answer or relief valve, come back to torment and re-bite the individual. This interpretation I’m proposing shifts away from the imagery of the spider as the cause of the crisis, which relegates society’s responsibility to the realm of symbolism and mysticism, by absolving society of accountability and searching for blame elsewhere. On the contrary, if we acknowledge the spider as the catalyst of the healing process we confront the lack of care and healing in the reality that the sufferers inhabit and societal responsibility.

*If this condition has potentially a history in my family, I wonder how many women before me have danced, and how many have not. Am I one among those who resist the music?*

Figure 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9: A. Talò., visual documentation of the dance practice, scanned stills from video (2023)

Here, asking myself «*What if we had danced?*» unveils a deeper self-reflection. I'm not just asking someone else, my family, «*What if you had danced?*» — interrogating my own stance on the matter also unravels how this research deals much more with myself than I initially realized. During one of my classes, the tutor's query «What comes before your research question?» helped me become conscious of how much taking distance from the situation and moving to the Netherlands has helped me. But over and above that, what has happened *u n d e r n e a t h* my research question is what has struck me the most. It has been a journey of also showing self-care, accepting that there were problems I couldn't have resolved and easing some of my fatigue.

here  
with my ear next to a wall, feeling  
their steps'  
reverberation

*a bodiless dancing sound*

*What if we had danced?*  
Would it have made any difference if I had asked?

Should we dance now?





Figure 10: A. Talò., *Untitled* (2023), 42 cm x 29,7 cm, monotype, ink on paper

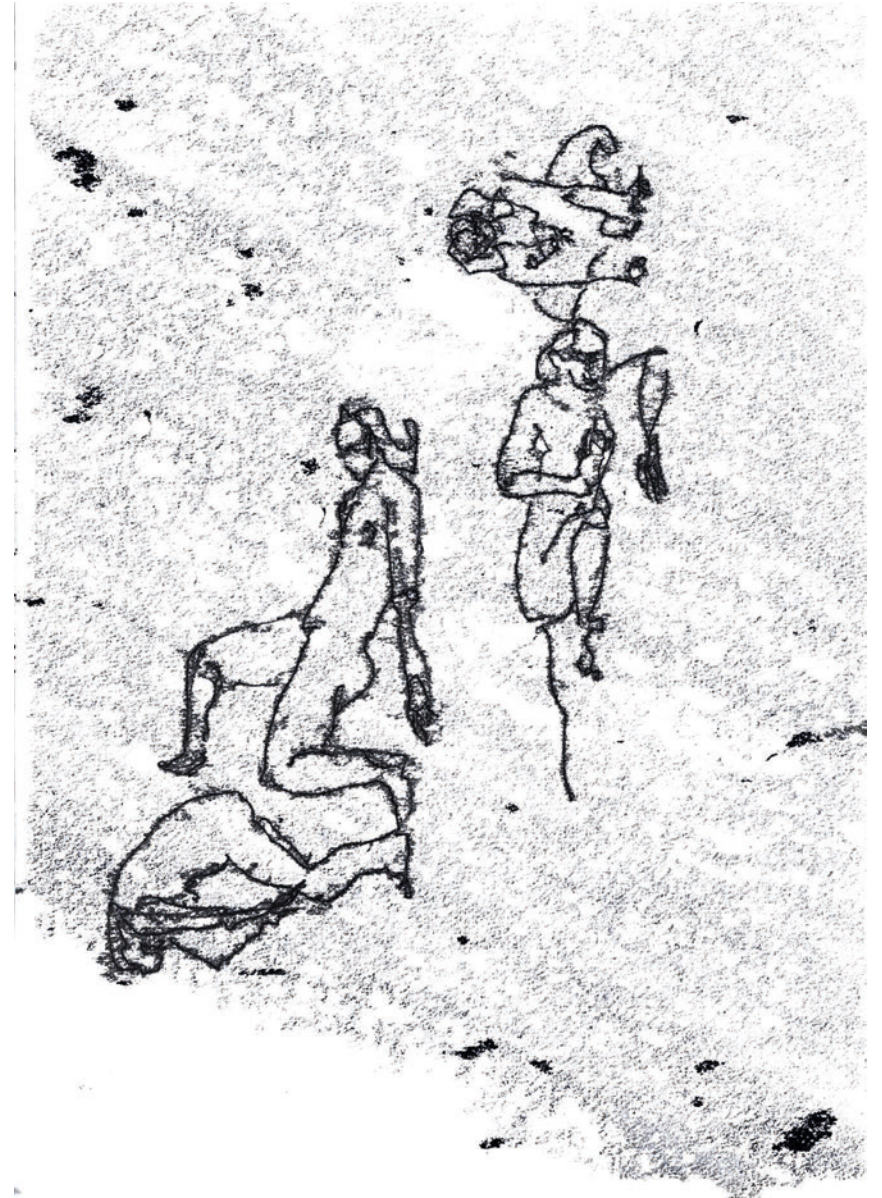


Figure 11: A. Talò., *Untitled* (2023), 42 cm x 29,7 cm, monotype, ink on paper

## 🌀 *what I've yearned for* 🌀

Nevertheless, I felt like practising the dance had been just a unilateral means of dealing with my feelings. Rather than confronting the communication issues or opening up the discourse with my family, I found myself dancing alone, still unheard.

While I have moved on from this embodied form of expression, I remain open to reconceiving it when my body is ready.

I have found myself mostly deprived of the tools and insights to better handle the challenges I've faced. I continue questioning my choices and my actions; I keep confronting myself with the moment I decided — or perhaps my body decided for me — to shut down and distance myself from critical situations.

My interest in tarantism prompted me to reconsider approaches to mental distress. The disclosure of the contrast between communal practices as rituals and an individualistic approach to care left me with a kind of bitter-sweet aftertaste in my mouth. In rural and archaic communities, it was the norm to share collectively significant moments of human experience — birth, puberty, illness, grief, death and so on. Currently, in many realities, including the one I'm experiencing, these aspects are treated privately and mainly through the medical and clinical eye. If we reflect on the neoliberal structure that also impacts the healthcare system, the individual is treated as a consumer rather than focusing on patient care. Additionally, this approach emphasizes the individual responsibility for taking care of oneself and neglects how the broader social and collective community could be also concerned and involved in the process.

My navigation in the ritual has led me into the realm of movement, embodiment and resonance possibilities.

If we identify the first stop of my wandering with the practice of the dance, on which I already expanded, the second one would then be the experience of embodiment. As the tarantula's bite set in motion the transformative and healing process throughout the embodiment of the unresolved conflicts, my experimentations with textile practices have served as a tool to give tangible form to my tensions, questions and fears. As the spiders pierce the skin, so does the needle. This simile is encompassed in my artistic research through the use of weaving, particularly embroidery and crochet.

My third landing place shall be the concept of resonance.

The following scheme (Figure 12) illustrates the different ways in which one could resonate during the ritual of tarantism.

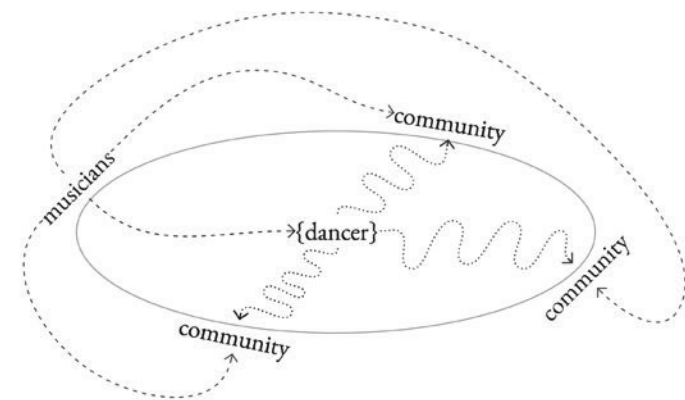


Figure 12, ways of resonating in the ritual of tarantism

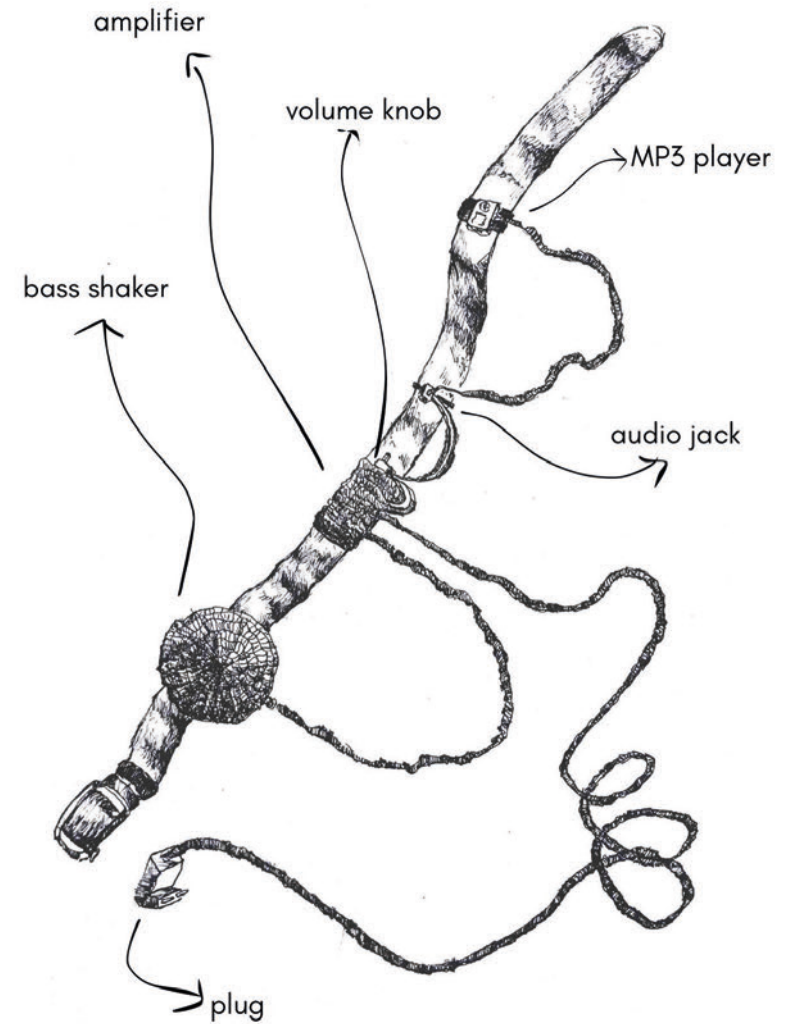
Here we can encounter the vibrations of the instruments and the vibrations of the dancer's movement. The first embraces music as the guide to undertake the healing journey, the second focuses on the acknowledgment of the crisis and society's responsibility in leading to this situation. In my case, there were no musicians, no community, and no one was dancing, yet I felt like something was vibrating. I can't tell if it is a reverberation from the past, present or future.

Sound has been an essential medium for me as it helped me to explore this bodiless sound atmosphere and my quest for care and consideration.

*I experience care as a mutual resonance  
a response*

My making and my thinking have been intrigued by the intersection of sensory experiences, technologies and traditional practices. Some of the works that have been inspiring for me have been: *Haptic Room Studies #3 and #4*, research projects initiated by Adi Hollander in collaboration with artists and scientists. The project aims to create tactile environments through the use of technological tools and make them accessible to sensory-diverse audiences. *The Intimate Earthquake Archive*, a project by Jonathan Reus and Sissel Marie Tonn, invites the audience to wear tactile vests and experience on the body the tremors of the human-made earthquake caused by gas extraction in the Groningen Gas Field. Finally, the *Knitted Radio* by Irene Posch is an installation piece “part of a larger investigation into using traditional textile crafting techniques to create electronic components and devices from scratch.” (The Knitted Radio | Irene Posch, 2017).

I have engaged the phenomenon of tarantism as a lens to interpret what had happened around me. I have been guided through the exploration of sound, vibrations and movement and how technology could help me address this physical absence. But this absence has gradually transformed into a bodiless sound as I was mainly working with the recordings of the sound of my feet I have collected during my dance practice. Just editing, cutting, and distorting them all over again. I’ve been attempting to build my own speakers and experimenting with bass shakers and bone transducers. Their physical way of conveying sound, by transforming the signals into vibrations, has influenced and sparked my creative thinking and process. Engaging with DIY has involved a cycle of trying, failing, asking for help, and accepting, which I believe parallels my attempts to care for my family. I utilized these instruments by feeding them with the recordings of drums and the sound of my dancing feet to physically experience their



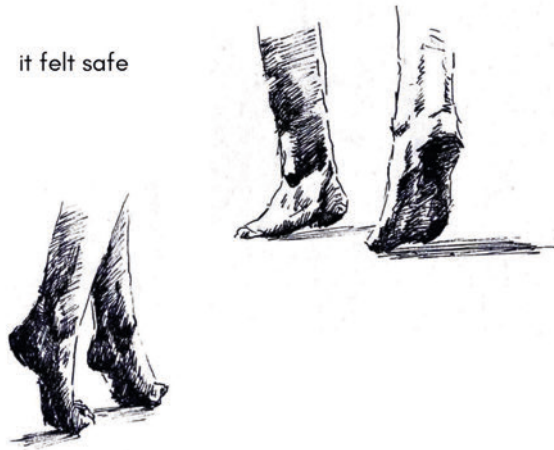
Figures 13: A. Talò, *About this belt*, excerpts from the manual created for the exhibition “Will Home Find Me?”, January 2024, Melkfabriek, Den Bosch

what are you feeling?



you are feeling the vibration of my dancing feet.  
I've been practising the dance alone, at night, at school

it felt safe



presence. This vibration deeply calmed me. I felt like it was restoring to just stay with these gentle movements and I am keen to experiment with how differently people might react to it.

Inspired by the aforementioned artworks, my lived experiences and experimentations in my artistic process, I aim to create inclusive spaces for collective and empathic listening, inviting participants to stay with, resonate and connect.

Through my project *What if we had danced?* I reflect on the absence of space for communication, sharing, awareness and care — all the things I've yearned for. It's a space to question and envision other possibilities.

Perhaps it's the space where I can finally disclose the dialogue I've been longing for.

Figures 14: A. Talò, *About this belt*, excerpts from the manual created for the exhibition "Will Home Find Me?", January 2024, Melkfabriek, Den Bosch

*we don't need to fear spiders as much as we do  
if they come to visit us, changes ahead might await us*

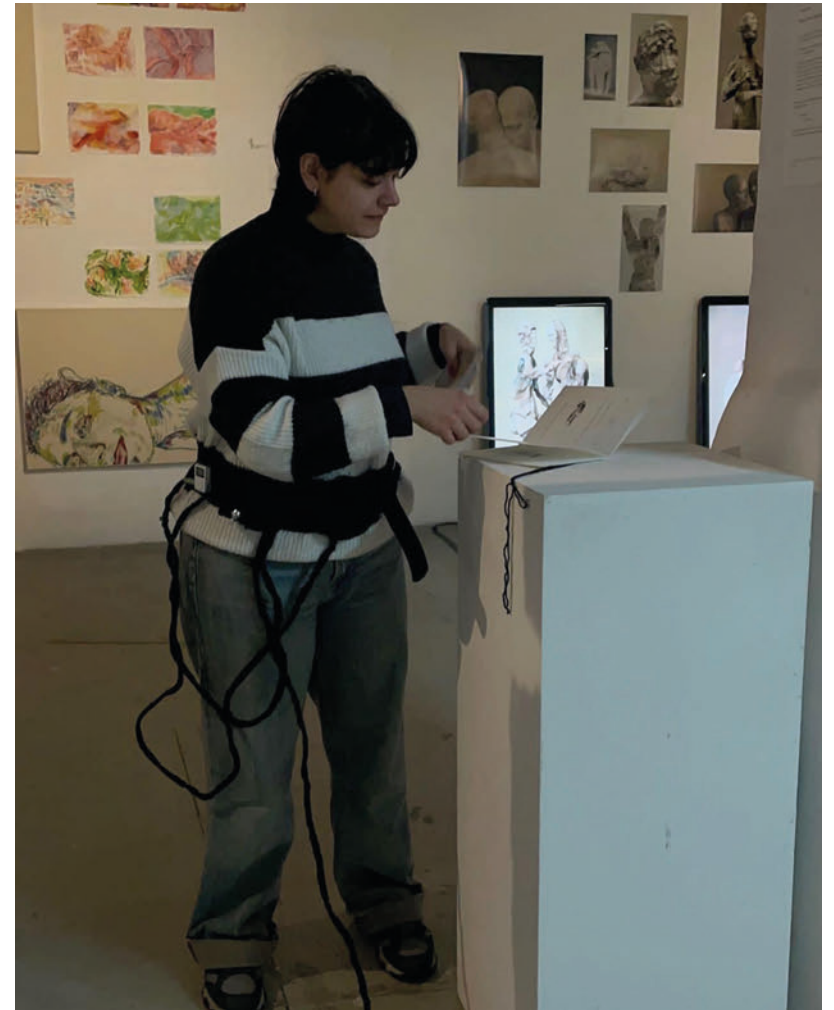


Figure 15: a friend trying on the resonating belt I created for the exhibition "Will Home Find Me?", January 2024, Melkfabriek, Den Bosch.

## Endnotes



Figure 16: A. Talò, experiment of embroidery on latex (2024)

1 The book is the further development of the theory-practice history project *To Become Two* (2014-2017), a series of six film installations following different political practices among feminist collectives.

2 I have the habit of looking up the etymology of words whenever I feel stuck in a process. I've developed a genuine curiosity about the origin of words, their initial meaning and how languages are intertwined. Language serves as both a means for bounding and for expressing ourselves. They shape our way of thinking and deliver our perceptions. All things considered, I experienced many times the limitations of linguistic language to fully describe what's in my mind. I think I have always searched for other kind of languages.

3 I have consciously decided to introduce the Italian term for the first instance it appears in the main text. From now on, I will refer to it as tarantism.

4 The legend has it that St. Paul and St. Peter made a stop in Galatina, Salento, during their travel around the world. To thank for the hospitality received, St. Paul conferred healing power to the water of the well where they sojourned. It is said that miraculous recovery from the poisonous bite of the spider would occur just by drinking this water and making the sign of the cross on the wound.

5 The term refers to the individuals affected by tarantism.

6 The exhibition, curated by Dogomir Doring, explores dance and its intertwine with societal dynamics, with a focus on these times of contemporary challenges such as COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing wars and recent ban of raving and protesting in Italy.

7 Victoria McKenzie is also a research architect, ecofeminist, academic-activist and artist.

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