

INTRODUCTION

Suspension, This Project, and Me



This book is about people who practice body suspension. This practice entails being elevated in the air through metal hooks temporarily inserted in the skin without anesthesia. The following pages explore why people currently suspend in Europe, the meanings associated with the practice, the social contexts in which suspensions take place, and also the expectations, the role of pain, and the group dynamics involved in this very unique way of experiencing corporality and unconventional emotions.

To perform a suspension, the body is pierced with multiple hooks: they are placed in the body according to the desired *suspension pose*, which can be vertical or horizontal, for instance with six or eight anchor-hooks in the back, on the legs and abdomen, or in the knees or the shoulders. The piercing phase is an invasive process that usually emotionally touches observers and participants. Hooks hurt, but more than this: through the ethnographic method, the reader will explore what is beyond pain in suspension.

After *facilitators* place the hooks in the skin of the suspendee, a system of ropes (also called hook-lines) connects the hooks with a scaffolding above, the *rig*. Then another facilitator (or a member of the *suspension crew*) pulls the main rope, and the protagonist is gradually lifted from the ground for a variable period of time. Once the suspension is finished, be it after an hour or only a few minutes, the suspendee's feet come back to the floor and facilitators disconnect the person from the rig by cutting the ropes. Finally, hooks are removed during the *aftercare* procedure. The entire suspension connects people, materials, encoded behaviors, and emotions that signify the performance and what happens between all the people involved.

The voices of people practicing suspension are often unheard: their motivations are generally misunderstood and related to forms of deviancy (social or

mental). Why does this happen? Because pain is a controversial ingredient of the experience and is used as the main factor for delegitimizing behaviors by non-suspendees. During suspensions, pain is embraced as essential to triggering the alteration of ordinary perceptual abilities, leading to an ecstatic state also called bliss or trance. Taking a self-poietical and phenomenological perspective, this book presents an ethnography dedicated to analyzing suspension narratives as empowering processes creating a unique and enhanced version of the self. Connected to a network of acts of body-care and experiences of body manipulation, suspension only appears to be destructive: rather, these are forms of self-empowerment, socialized in an affective social environment. Through suspension, people learn how to master and go beyond pain, and how to fly in everyday life.

Suspensions are learned and practiced during annual suspension festivals, especially in Italy and Norway, as well as one-day meetings. In Portugal, these one-off meetings involve five to ten people gathering to suspend on the beach or in the woods. Besides in-person events, practitioners narrate suspensions online, circulating posts and celebrating the practice and the exclusive relationships established though it during gatherings. The interconnection of online and offline actions motivates an approach called *trans-spatiality*, which focuses on mobility through online and offline spaces, rather than limiting the researcher's gaze to a single space of action.

Body suspension is a growing phenomenon that involves hundreds of enthusiasts in Europe, although it is almost unexplored academically. This anthropological work is characterized by a multisited comparative perspective developed over a decade of intermittent fieldwork, including online and offline data (meaning participant observations during suspension events from September 2016 to December 2019 and an online ethnography on social media between 2018 and 2019); over the years, qualitative interviews have been performed with a sample of sixty-five suspension practitioners. This methodology involved an experimental technique based on the production of metaphorical objects: the creative laboratory was the attempt to enhance suspendees' words, as the suspendees felt powerless to accurately narrate what suspensions are and represent. At the same time, I had to learn how to hear and collect these words, or how to go beyond the hooks.

Suspensions involve the progressive acquisition of a set of practices, values, and meanings that are collectively constructed. Practitioners are not born as such: they learn how to suspend, and I similarly had to learn how to explore suspensions. The learning process takes place in the body suspension community, often called a *suspension family* by practitioners who self-identify as members of the group. The community is based on the interest in suspensions, as well as on respect, intimacy, and affection. Through suspension, suspendees enhance relationships and explore extraordinary sensorial experiences, signifying suspension as a way to manipulate their perceptive abilities.

Altered perceptions of the self, of the environment, and of others are at the core of regenerative narratives, where an initial unpleasant pain triggers a more valuable reward. Differences between individual projects of empowerment coexist in a social environment committed to emotional and mechanical support, where similarities are echoed and reinforced by the group. Suspension's goal is the well-being of the suspendees, who reenter everyday life with an improved mood, confirming a logic of excellence and self-care (Pussetti 2023). Through the practice and the community, people regenerate and achieve a better version of themselves.

How Suspension Found Me

I saw a suspension for the first time on a computer screen in late 2007. That week, I had to prepare an essay about female genital modification for a MA course. Navigating online, I landed on *BMEzine*, a social platform collecting experiences of people with various body modifications, among which suspension stood out. As for many others who have discovered the existence of suspension online, the web was also my entrance point. Modems still made noisy crackly sounds for few seconds before they allowed you access to the Internet, but every single ring was worth it. The screen showed the hanging bodies of white people with fifteen-centimeter-long hooks placed through the skin. I remember the discomfort of my body looking at those pictures: I imagined the pain, the fear that I would feel in that situation. I had a purely negative reaction. Something in my belly cramped, my shoulders folded up in a defensive reaction, but I kept browsing the hair-raising pictures in a state between curiosity and malaise. What was I looking at? Who were these people? Why did they do these things? Among so many questions, just one thing was clear to me: I wanted to speak with them, I had to understand. Online accounts described suspension as a beautiful emotional experience, but I was not ready to understand. Many testimonies were in English, signed by anonymous people, and many identified as North Americans. The next summer I was flying to New York.

I was young and expected to meet suspension practitioners simply walking in the street. Many online pictures showed extensively tattooed suspendees, but none of my visits to tattoo studios were fruitful. People refused to talk about suspension with me, and I did not understand why. I did not know it at that time, but suspension was misinterpreted and stigmatized, and my appearance, without visible long-term body modifications, probably induced people to see me as an overly curious and potentially dangerous outsider. As I learned later, the pain involved in suspension is disapproved of by non-suspendees: suspendees are accused of sadomasochism, sexual perversion, self-harming, or other psychosociological deviances as the reason for voluntary unnecessary pain, contributing to

the stigmatization of the practice. I was far from holding this opinion. Although the painful aspect fascinated me, I was more interested in understanding suspensions and in listening directly to practitioners' voices, but I had to let them know that I was sincere first. So far, I felt that I was wasting my chance. Only at the end of the summer trip did a key informant give me the impetus to reverse my plan: "Why are you coming here to study suspensions? I mean, you are Italian: you come from one of the most important countries in the world when we talk about suspension." When I was able to raise my jaw again, I understood that I had to go back to Italy, which is where my journey with body suspension really started.

The data collected after that meeting guided my first research project, interviewing a sample of Italian practitioners and creating a bibliographical review of suspensions performed in traditional settings (Manfredi 2009), such as the O-Kee-Pa rite among Native Americans and the Gajan in West Bengal. The anthropological work showed that Italian suspensions were nonmainstream actions, connected with other body modifications, like tattoos and piercings; conversely, traditional suspensions are socially approved ways to intervene in the bodies of selected individuals: the entire community shares the same meanings about the act, turning it into a mainstream practice. The comparative approach highlighted a new, rising Italian culture around suspensions, analyzed in reference to contemporary body-artists such as Gina Pane, Stelarc, and Orlan: they introduced the use of voluntary pain in a vision of total self-ownership of the body, pushing the limits of what was thinkable to do to with the flesh. Even outside of a professional artistic context, the research analyzed suspensions as alternative body-centered experiences based on the right to self-exploration: the body's limits were reconfigured beyond theaters and galleries, without an addressee-public receiving political messages through the performance and showing that extreme body interventions like suspensions were no longer the prerogative only of artists or Indigenous people.

My Positioning(s)

After that research experience, I faced other life challenges, but over the years, suspension always fascinated me. In 2014, I was invited to attend Italian Sus-Con, the local suspension festival, to deliver a lecture on the body's symbols. At that event, I interviewed practitioners and made new contacts, observing live suspensions for the first time, one suspension after the other, for four days. It was a precious opportunity to establish new access to the field and to reinvigorate my curiosity. The group of people at the gathering was international, with a very emotional mode of interaction: when people prepared for the insertion of hooks, there was always someone holding a hand or caressing a head, making the

context intimate, tender, and emotionally careful. The smiles of suspendees in the air clashed with the drops of blood sliding from the hook wounds, showing me a sentimental side of the practice.

In those years, I kept attending scientific congresses, and only rarely did someone already know about suspension. Our discussions nourished my reflections and made me aware of my preexisting focus on pain. Pain was the protagonist of my previous interviews, but, paradoxically, interviewees stated that it was not so important. Little by little, I began to understand that my initial fieldwork data was deeply influenced by my sensory impression of the practice: I was posing the wrong questions, overestimating the role of the pain.

I personally have a very repulsive relationship with pain, and I avoid it as much as possible: this is probably why I have never been tattooed, even though I am very attracted to the practice. Besides my earlobe piercings, I have only received tragus and tongue piercings, both performed during a summer trip in Spain for my eighteenth birthday. They were symbols of independence, but today I do not use them anymore: the items were removed for surgery years ago and I simply never installed jewelry there again. Probably one of the motivations nourishing my interest in body suspension was to understand the approach of practitioners to pain, their ability to pass through it, and maybe to better understand how I personally relate to pain and to my own body.

I never considered being suspended: it is not just out of my comfort zone, but an unthinkable practice for me and my body. Despite this feeling, I am still very attracted to and curious about it even after thirteen years of intermittent research. Although I am not in the position of the suspendee, I engaged my body in the knowledge creation process because I embraced the research practice as an embodied, emplaced, and multisensory experience (Csordas 1990; Howes 1991; Stoller 1997; Ingold 2000; Pink 2015), following a phenomenological approach. I devoted my full self to each interaction or suspension performed by research partners, aware of the sensory gate that the body constitutes in the perception of the environment, both social and physical, and of its role in the co-construction of ethnographic knowledge.

Over the years, I performed several positionings: anthropologist-lecturer, volunteer at festivals, clumsy porter, and even beginner trainee in hook-insertion. I discovered myself to be emotionally close to a selected group of practitioners along the way, and they taught me how to properly attend a suspension, not in a passive observer position, but supporting from an emotional perspective before, during, and after the suspension. Figure 0.1 represents one of these precious moments. Even without flying, I mindfully embodied what it means to enhance human contact and to experience extraordinary emotions during suspension.

I progressively found my place in the suspension community, even if my skin is untattooed, my ears are unstretched, and no hooks have ever pierced me. Such characteristics do not define or limit membership.



Figure 0.1. Narrowing the ethnographic distance, July 2019. Picture courtesy of a research participant.

When a suspension event is planned, people expect me, and if I do not manifest my intention to be there, I receive messages from members of the community who are worried I do not know about the occasion. Despite my acceptance in the community, I never felt exactly like the other members: the ethnographic distance was maintained because I never suspended, and that is a crucial point. I never became a *native*, even though I lived in the same towns as some research participants, and I was pursuing the same level of education. According to Matthew Engelke (2018), we tend to talk today of native anthropologists when they explore aspects of their homeland's traditional setting, usually after studying abroad. I do not feel that I have performed a native anthropology, even if I did not place my fieldwork in another continent from the one in which I was born and raised. Sharing a nationality or an educational path with some of my informants does not mean that we have the same approach to the body and its interventions, which is a crucial aspect here. The *view from afar* (Lévi-Strauss 1987) was guaranteed mostly by my skin, unpierced by hooks and previously untattooed and unscarred.

Body modifications are not conceived of as a marker of fixed membership: I am distancing myself from subcultural studies that describe deviant groups by underlining their hostility toward the rest of the society. My perspective has no moral value in any hypothetical community scale, following the example of David Muggleton (2000) and Andy Bennett (1999, 2011), who have deconstructed pre-deterministic behavioral assumptions based on class, age, or group membership. For this reason, terms such as “micro-community,” “subculture,” or “counterculture” are not adopted to describe the suspension community. Instead of establishing frontiers and looking for unmovable identities, this book focuses on floating boundaries and actions through spaces, because self-definitions, interests, behaviors, and senses of affiliation are dynamically constructed rather than given once and for all.

Me Suspended? Well . . . My Wings Still Have to Grow

Throughout the years, I have received dozens of invitations to suspend. Many of them were generous encouragements to experience an activity signified as positive and beautiful by my new contacts. In other cases, some research partners provoked me, saying: “If you want to understand what we do, you have to do it, too.” These kinds of statements always sounded like shortcuts to me: I do not think that the personal experience of a suspension would give me direct access to the understanding of participants’ meanings. It would give me my own experience, not just a single perspective, but rather a plurality of possibilities, depending on the effects that the practice had on me. Additionally, suspensions are not isolated episodes, but rather inserted in lifelong paths characterized by other body interventions that I did not experience either. The assumption that one suspension would guarantee a privileged access into what it means for a regular practitioner corresponds to the belief that a single inhalation of a cigarette would allow a solid understanding of the life of a smoker, or that a yoga class would be enough to see the world as someone who has practiced it for years on a daily basis.

Every single positioning offers a unique gaze onto a phenomenon. It makes no sense to disqualify some of them on the basis of an idealistic correspondence between the life of the ethnographer and that of research partners. This is not a guarantee of anthropological success. I believe that the best positioning is one aware of the pros and cons, and the ethnographer should choose that which maximizes their success, as far as possible. The positioning of the ethnographer is a combination of conditions, possibilities, and choices made by each researcher because “in participant observation the researcher cannot be everywhere at once. . . . Similarly, ethnographies cannot be everywhere at once; their claims are specific to the contexts in which they are written” (Boellstorff 2008: 30).

Understanding the benefits of those who embody a research topic with a *carnal* perspective (Wacquant 2002), I advocate for the recognition of the limits and advantages that each positioning entails: even if fruitful research should converge on similar results, the paths to get to them are necessarily shaped by multiple factors. I consciously showed my untattooed arms and I declared openly that I had never suspended to stimulate informants to make explicit elementary information, to not assume that I already knew what we were talking about, and to teach me everything from the beginning, like a child. I did not minimize the ethnographic distance, but tried to turn it in a fruitful condition, making it more visible. I experienced my own way to be carnal in the fieldwork. Additionally, there are other features of my positioning that influenced my research experience, such as my gender, age, education, tone of voice, body size, economic power, and so on. My lack of experience with needles and hooks is one of many other factors.

In my understanding, the statement “if you want to understand suspension, you have to suspend yourself” was sometimes an invitation to make me part of the group, maybe masked as provocation, as a rite of passage expected of someone so close to the community. I think that my diplomacy and the respect I always showed to research partners allowed me to “skip” my hook initiation and to remain in the field for so long. Why did I get this deal? I probably bought my evasions of hooks with the promise of the production of new knowledge.

Finally, I think that many invitations to suspend were based on the fact that suspendees were frustrated by the efforts of orally communicating with me. Suspensions were often indicated as being too hard to put into words. This intuition was supported by statements such as: “Words are not enough for suspensions” or “It’s hard to tell you how it is to be on hooks” (fieldwork notes, 2016–17).

How can I tell you what a suspension is? When I am on hooks, I am not here anymore, my mind flies away and . . . There are really no words to express it! It is so . . . intense! You can feel so much with your body if you only give to yourself the possibility. If you want to understand, you have to try. (Leon, May 2017)

In suspension you experience [such] intense emotions and maybe when you think [of] it later you can reconnect yourself to that feeling, but I’m not a writer, neither a good speaker, so I don’t know how to pull out that thing from me to you. We should invent new words maybe. (Babi, June 2018)

According to the phenomenological perspective that I adopt here, language risks substituting itself for the world. “It is all too easy for us to forget that people feel pain and joy and think in ways that cannot be readily captured in words” (Jackson, Piette 2015: 24). As Jean Jackson demonstrates, as do other scholars working across decades with pain and bodily experiences, oral narratives stand

out as difficult to translate (Scarry 1990; DelVecchio Good et al. 1992; Jackson 2003, 2005). Speech is too distant from the moment in question to express the intensity of emotions experienced and this gap frustrates informants and listeners, complicating the efficacy of the communication.

The frustration of my research participants was evident. Instead of inventing new words, as suggested by Babi, we worked to empower communication strategies and an experimental methodology was the result of our efforts.

Inventing an Experimental Methodology during Pre-Fieldwork

I progressively understood that words were not the most useful way to elicit data: my questions about pain had too much of an influence on conversations and research participants were stressed about not being able to express themselves. Interviewees performed the role of pain-explainers to me, with the sensation to not express what deserved more care to be communicated properly. I had to step back and leave more space to practitioners' voices. I needed a strategy to empower the words.

The idea arrived in May 2015, when I was pregnant with my first child, and I met Chiara Pussetti at a congress in Rome. I found an immediate connection with her: inspired by her interests in art-based ethnography, she became my mentor. A few months later, I was preparing the proposal for my doctoral project at the Institute of Social Sciences at the University of Lisbon, and that very summer I was invited to attend the Italian suspension festival again. It was an opportunity to reinforce connections and to attempt a methodological experiment as pre-fieldwork: a creative laboratory to produce handicrafts as symbols of upcoming suspensions.

The first step of each creative project was for the participant to choose a starting element to express something about the upcoming body suspension that deserved to be narrated: it could be a positive aspect or a bad one, a fear, a motivation, an expectation, or any other characteristic or emotion perceived as important. One participant decided to focus on one of the expected effects of the suspension (lightness or restoration, for example), someone else chose the sense of freedom desired during the practice, while another person decided to elaborate on the sense of responsibility, he felt toward people whom he would suspend. For three months prior to the event, I exchanged from three to twenty messages with each participant, every two or three days. Breaks between messages were important moments to reflect on data, and I appreciated this new way of interviewing compared to traditional investigations, where silences and pauses must be carefully managed in the flow of the conversation (Rubin and Rubin 1995). Online interaction has strategic pauses, too, and the new way to be silent offered interesting spaces for reflection.

After choosing a starting element, I asked each participant to associate a symbol with the idea they had decided to develop. Sounds, smells, tastes, poems, songs, colors, images, or other ideas were all welcome: there was no limitation to creativity. Explanations of choices were precious moments of meaning-collection associated with the upcoming suspension, as well as expectations and motivations. Those moments were less stressful compared to traditional interviews in which the conversation starts from a preestablished question from the ethnographer. Using symbols, the communication was able to go beyond the limitations of a narrative exclusively based on words. A symbol is a visual and cognitive element that evokes abstract meanings and creates a connection between concepts through one or more shared characters. In the research, symbols were multiply significant and had the ability to highlight aspects of suspension that resisted oral expression, offering opportunities for reflexivity.

After the choice of the symbol, which sometimes required several weeks to be established, we engaged in a sort of chain reaction or brainstorming that ended with the definition of a plan; some became statues, pictures, drawings, poems, or other projects that people developed independently or that we decided to create together during the festival. The focus was not specifically on the final result, but on the creation process: each interaction was a source of meaning and a motor of intimacy.

My contribution was not limited to the coordination of the projects: I exposed my previous knowledge of body suspensions, asking for connections during our working time, as well as suggesting symbolic substitutions or modifications of participants' proposals in order to stimulate additional explications and self-reflexive processes. The handicrafts, or some of the components, become material referents for answers and supporters of orality, as exemplified by the interaction with Silvia in 2016.

Silvia, a thirty-year-old tattooer, created a statue composed of a set of spikes implanted in a wood base (Figure 0.2) to represent the people at SusCon. They are linked by a transparent nylon string, which portrays the energy among participants, and the resulting net holds a small statue, which represents Silvia, supported by the community. When we started to work together at the festival, I noted some red paint at the base of the nails, and I investigated whether any meanings associated with blood or pain were present. In my mind, the red color was a direct reference to such elements, intrinsically connected to how I conceived suspension.

Silvia's answer not only put aside my pain-centered hypothesis, but rather gave me more information than I had asked for: the red color was a continuation of the wooden base of the statue, which was of a red-brown hue, and which she initially painted with red just because it was nice-looking. After my questions, she decided that it would be appropriate to give extra meaning to that color and the connection between nails and the base: a metaphor of the continuation between



Figure 0.2. Silvia's handcraft, September 2016, © Federica Manfredi.

practitioners (symbolized by nails) and the Earth (the base of the statue). In previous interviews, I had become used to hearing about the configuration of suspension as a bodily practice able to alter mind states, during which the sensory experience suggested an extraordinary connection with others, nature, the planet, and a perceived true self.

Silvia's work not only confirmed previous data about the perceived connection between the practitioner and the environment, it suggested a referential use of the handcraft during oral expression. Her statue became a plastic device able to embody more meanings than those originally planned at the beginning of the project (or when we started our interaction).

Merging Words, Objects, Intimacy, and Data

Through her handcraft, Silvia engaged in a process of knowledge production, meaning negotiation and communication about her sensory experience. The importance of the others was the main focus of her project, but interactions around the materiality of the statue highlighted unexpected topics, such as the role of nature and suspension's ability to create a sensory connection between the suspender and the environment.

The creation of objects did not replace oral interviews, but was a methodological adaptation of the fieldwork, reinforcing oral expression: creative projects became referents during discussions, means to visualize silenced meanings of suspensions that participants co-discovered with me during the process. Through their manipulation, words regained efficacy.

This reflexive and self-explorative work created a special intimacy, redistributing the ethnographic power: we were equally involved and responsible for what was going on. Handicrafts brought us closer without us being pierced by the same hooks.

The creative process reduced the pressure of standard interviews and opened the discussion to new topics, letting the pain be a possibility rather than a pre-determined research focus and reducing the pressure to provide “good” answers. The laboratory expanded opportunities for data collection before and after a single suspension experience thanks to the long timeframe of the process. This allowed a special gaze onto expectations and effects because suspendees were invited to comment on and modify their handicrafts after their suspensions in a final interview. These moments were opportunities to discuss unexpected elements of the experience and unachieved expectations.

Another positive output is linked to the multiplication of meetings through different channels: instead of waiting for the festival to interact with suspendees, I started to contact volunteers for the laboratory by sending online messages, using the list of people interested in the event on Facebook. This strategy solved a recruiting difficulty, because when people are close to the moment of going into the air, they are absorbed in the process and not easily available to talk with a stranger, especially a non-suspendee ethnographer. The laboratory facilitated virtual intimacy before in-person meetings, allowing me to obtain more contacts than those I could reach on site. The creative projects expanded the borders of the fieldwork, maximizing the in-person moments.

Despite these advantages, the laboratory required a lot of preparatory work, such as sending invitations and explaining its purpose, in addition to the energy required for the coordination of different projects in parallel. In order not to confuse interactions and ideas, I developed several fieldwork notes on my personal computer to record messages (which were texted, voice-recorded, and enriched with audiovisual links, emoticons, and other images) and each working plan. Those fieldwork notes in digital format, as well as my paper fieldwork journal, were updated almost every day. Sometimes Facebook-mediated interactions migrated to WhatsApp, in the form of private communication and enriched by emoticons and other materials. Words did not abandon the fieldwork, but they were combined and enhanced with complementary elements, regaining power and sense.

Chiara Pussetti, who works on art-based ethnography, shows that the use of artistic practices can help the ethnographic experience to discover new topics of

research by catching the nonverbal dimensions of the experience, exploring the unspoken and the unspeakable, favoring a reflexive approach, and “communicating in a more effective way the multi-sensorial lived experiences of the field, making space for a multiplicity of voices to be heard” (Pussetti 2018: 7). Following Pussetti, art is here understood as a creative production, composed of aesthetic choices, and resulting in handicrafts such as Silvia’s one, and it corresponds to ethnographic data and a scientific basis for new anthropological knowledge.

Artistic products have been an object of ethnographic reflection under multiple perspectives in recent years: they can be produced by the ethnographer as personal projects during fieldwork or after it, as a reaction to the experience in the field, and they can be used to interact with research participants to achieve deeper levels of mutual understanding (Degarrod 2007; Noronha 2019). In other cases, objects can be produced by interlocutors to propose complementary forms of expression and to elicit data beyond oral communication (Brown 2019). In the creative laboratory, handicrafts were co-created projects by which words were enhanced by materials, sounds, touch, and smells, in a sensory and methodological experimentation (Foster 1995; Schneider 2008; Leavy 2009; Schneider and Wright 2010; Pink 2015; Estalella and Sánchez Criado 2018) that promoted trust, intimacy, self-awareness, and unexpected data (Manfredi 2021b).

Finally, the laboratory was a methodological adaptation to informants in a creative perspective, because many of them self-define as artists (tattooers, photographers, and performers in live shows) and express their artistic interests outside of suspension. The skin is the privileged stage upon which suspension practitioners merge creativity with the flesh, as demonstrated by the intense use of other body modifications, such as tattoos and scarification. The co-presence of suspensions and other body modifications among suspendees’ interests supports an analysis of the practice in a holistic perspective: suspensions are not isolated episodes but are intertwined in a system of meaning that finds space in the body.

A suspension is a very emotional and strong experience. It solidifies abstracted things of my life. It’s like a tattoo inside me, something that stays for all [my] life, but you can’t see it. Only you know it is there. (Sami, September 2016)

A New Research Project

After the pre-fieldwork, the creative laboratory became a systematic part of the qualitative methodology along with participant observation, qualitative structured and semi-structured interviews, and the reconstruction of life stories. From 2016 to 2021 I collected data, creating a sample of fifty-eight interviewees (twenty-six male, twenty-nine female, and three people who do not identify with any gender categories), and seventeen of them joined the creative laboratory.

Interviewees were mainly experienced suspensees, who had performed over ten suspensions before we met and did not conceive of the practice as a single life episode. Ten people were at their first suspension or had fewer than nine prior experiences, while twenty-seven were members of suspension teams and were able to facilitate other people's suspensions.

Interviewees were contacted online (using the list of people interested in suspension events on Facebook), during suspension gatherings, or using the snowball strategy. To avoid social homogeneity, the sample was diversified in terms of age, academic qualifications, profession, and parenthood.

Interviewees were aged from twenty-three to fifty-five years old (most of them born between 1977 and 1991), with diversified education levels (twenty-three had a BA, MA, PhD, or were university students, twenty-two had a high school diploma, and ten a secondary school certificate as their highest form of education; three interviewees did not share educational information). Most interviewees had a job involving body modification (they were tattooers, piercers, or professional fakirs), while twenty-seven supported themselves with jobs unrelated to body modification practices. All of them, except for fewer than a dozen, had extensive body modifications such as tattoos, implants, piercings, scarification, and other body marks that cover at least one-third of the total body surface. They were of sixteen different nationalities and lived in ten different countries (five of them not in Europe), and seventeen people did not live in the same places where they were born. Ten of them were parents and twenty-six were in stable relationships with a romantic partner.

Interviews took from thirty minutes to up to four hours, and most of them were carried out in several sessions over years, both in private and during gatherings, mainly offline and one-on-one. I recorded our interactions every time it was possible, and used handwritten notes, pictures, or, occasionally, drawings co-produced with informants. My notebook was an additional tool of expression, and I introduced interviews by giving interviewees the right to stop or pause the recording at any moment.

The interview protocol was designed to underline social, symbolic, and biographical dynamics connected to suspension experiences, with a flexible, pre-prepared interviewing guide that usually started with the invitation to describe the context of the interviewee's first body suspension (their age, with whom it took place, why, how it was, and how the opportunity was discovered) and further experiences of body modifications (especially tattoos), that usually portrayed a trajectory of the suspension approach and eventual connections with other body marks through time. Additional questions were flexibly inserted.

An extra sample of seven people was interviewed exclusively online, through private messages; they were Facebook users that contacted me in reply to questions I posted in suspension groups. Because I do not have complete information about

them and our conversations were sometimes limited in time and details, I include their contributions to the project alongside the main group of interviewees.

Interviews were conducted in English, Spanish, French, Portuguese, or Italian. I am able to speak, write, and understand these languages at very different levels, and thus my records originate from a heterogeneous multilingual environment. Interviews have been transcribed in the language of the interview or translated into Italian, my native language. Transcriptions were shared with interviewees when it was required, and feedback was added to the data. To provide a cohesive reading experience, I personally translated the excerpts reported in these pages, except for those already recorded in English.

Data was analyzed according to a thematic analysis, and I initially reviewed individual points in isolation from one another, coding a selection of the relevant materials with descriptive and conceptual observations. Subsequently, I created connections in the textual data, cross-referencing it with relevant and recurrent topics, and later I considered it alongside the images and handicrafts. The process was spiral, repeated after fieldwork sessions and interviews. The saturation of information was the lens behind the motion between fieldwork and analysis: the convergence of narratives supported the research protocol.

I met over three hundred suspendees in person and watched around two hundred live suspensions, from hook-insertion to aftercare. I wrote over four hundred pages in fieldwork journals, inspired by participant observations, interviews, and also WhatsApp messages, SMS messages, voice messages, phone calls, Facebook posts, and projects from the creative laboratory. Other sources of inspiration were emails and discussions with colleagues and supervisors; sometimes these deeply destabilized what I was doing. At the beginning, this was a painful process, unveiling knowledge gaps, but suggestions pushed me to question my gaze and choices, offering me the opportunity to grow as a researcher.

Pictures were another sensible product of the fieldwork: I shot between two and five hundred pictures during each suspension event, using my camera and smartphone. After a process of selection, the pictures progressively composed a visual support that is used here as a complementary strategy of exposition. Pictures are also an integral device of investigation in the field, a way to take notes quicker than with my notebook. Additionally, taking a picture of a setting allowed me to take handwritten notes (or sometimes voice recordings) of those elements that the camera was not able to record: smells, sounds, emotions, a gaze of complicity between people, and so on. In the present ethnography, pictures do not prove that I was in the field or that elements correspond to my accounts. Rather, images visually present the field, in such a way that the reader might notice extra aspects that I do not textually describe. I also used pictures to reconstruct spaces after fieldwork, as with the collage made in Figure 0.3, where a map from the field journal is linked to images of the Oslo festival location.

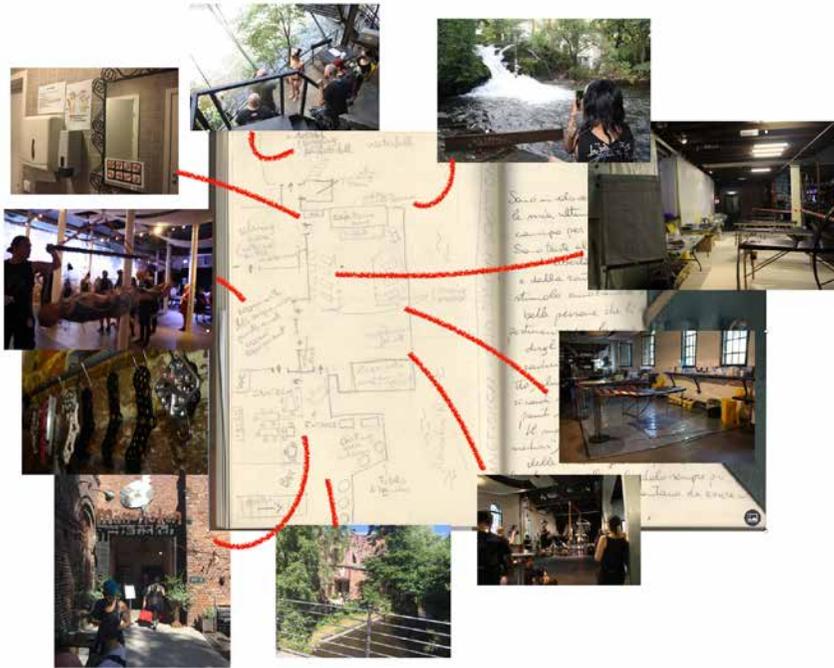


Figure 0.3. The festival venue in the fieldwork journal: red lines link spots on the map to pictures taken in each area during Oslo SusCon 2018 and 2019, © Federica Manfredi.

Given the reflexive approach, the pictures changed over the years: the ones shot at the first festivals are the most emotional; they evoke fear, the search for freedom, and the desire for lightness, wonder, surprise, and magnificence, all feelings that I experienced or noticed on site. In the following years, my emotional reactions changed, and I started to take pictures of technical details, such as the aftercare instruments prepared before a suspension or the white knuckles of a hand holding a piercing bed. As noted by Milton Guran (2000: 159–60), ethnographic pictures can describe the field or be tools of investigation, especially once the researcher is in control of the field and understands on what elements it is fruitful to focus.

A picture selects a fragment of reality, which corresponds to the gaze of the observer: in this sense, images not only reveal a subject, but also the person behind the camera. Looking at my fieldwork pictures, I can track the evolution of the investigative gaze, because the pictures changed with me. This ethnography is based on multiple and combined descriptions, composed of pictures, creative projects, and words. I am the creator of the majority of the pictures presented, except when otherwise indicated, because the research was not a solitary journey and my partners' contributions supported its development, for instance by making visible the ethnographer's positioning (Figures 0.4a, b).



Figures 0.4a, b. Outdoor suspension under a rock, June 2019. Top picture © Federica Manfredi. Bottom picture courtesy of a research participant.

My Fields: A Trans-Spatial Multisited Network

The research activity focused on places where people gathered to practice suspension and to share narratives about the practice, in other words, popular annual festivals, one-day events, and Facebook groups.

From previous research experience, I knew that festivals had an international attendance and that participants were used to traveling to practice. Hence, I

felt three necessities: (1) To examine in depth the Italian context using the complementary methodology of the creative laboratory and by expanding the sample of interviewees, considering further contexts of practice; (2) To extend my fieldwork, following the other most popular annual gathering of suspendees in Europe: the Norwegian festival, which was the first European suspension event in 2002; (3) To define a pole of comparison for those contexts and, at the same time, contribute to new suspension testimonies of practitioners performing outside of festivals. In this sense, Portugal perfectly matched my requirements: even without any annual event, Portugal had recently seen the rise of several suspension groups and intimate one-day events, offering a complementary approach to suspension experiences and offering a study context in which suspension culture was on the rise.

The offline participant observation was based on data collected from September 2016 to November 2019—including the pre-fieldwork—during which time I attended six suspension festivals (four in Italy and two in Norway), five one-day events (two in Portugal, one in Norway, and two in Italy), three suspension shows (two in Portugal, one in Italy), and two suspension demonstrations for educational purposes (one in Norway and one in Portugal).

On all of these occasions, I introduced myself as a researcher and tried to maximize the opportunity for meetings by arriving five to seven days before the event, helping organizers by arranging materials or carrying out similar preparatory tasks, and leaving the venue a few days after the end of the gathering. As mentioned by Sarah Pink (2005) when studying how people do laundry in the United Kingdom, ethnographers interested in studying behaviors in Western countries can rarely live for months with their informants, as traditional anthropologists did in past centuries. I use the term “Western” as it is understood by Pietro Scardulli (2003), who does not portray a homogeneous society placed in a misleading “West” but identifies similar patterns and behaviors shared among European countries and North America in contrast to other areas of the world.

I was hosted by members of a suspension crew in Lisbon during one of the fieldwork sessions, and this occasion gave me the chance to collect data by interviewing my hosts several times. I similarly shared accommodation with suspension practitioners during Norwegian and Italian events, but the most significant time with informants was spent under rigs or close to piercing spots: everyday life moments rarely offered meaningful opportunities to understand the practice, especially compared to suspension events. Practitioners do not live their entire lives in service to suspension, or together with other practitioners in suspension villages: the most meaningful moments were when people were focusing on suspensions, spending time with other enthusiasts at events and in virtual groups dedicated to the practice.

Intermittent fieldwork has been criticized as superficial because it interrupts the long-term presence of the ethnographer in the studied community, a

condition examined by Helena Wulff (2002), who describes it as “yo-yo fieldwork.” As she notes, the intermittency gradually immerses the researcher along a temporal axis, offering a long-term perspective that six uninterrupted months can rarely offer. The temporal lens adds an enriching perspective to the biography of the people involved, both practitioners and ethnographers. A critical approach to the gold standard of traditional long-term fieldwork arose in the manifesto of *patchwork ethnography*, which invites us to reconsider the ethnographer’s life against previous assumptions of the always available and “up-for-anything fieldworker” (Günel et al. 2020).

Being at home does not mean being away from fieldwork. In a first sense, this is because “the field is always present, at least in the back of one’s mind. I keep thinking about theoretical questions, plan methodological maneuvers for my next field trip, read and write” (Wulff 2002: 126), as well as arranging future interviews by email or presenting working hypotheses in scientific debates with colleagues. In my experience, the period between fieldwork sessions was time to reflect and reorient my gaze, maximizing my presence on site, reinforcing my understandings and contacts via a circular approach (Pink and Morgan 2013; Handelman 1998).

In a second sense, fieldwork was always present because I gradually started to replicate the daily online interactions between suspension practitioners on social media, especially Facebook. Specifically, online interactions were spaces to share memories of previous meetings, such as videos and pictures, but also sometimes statements and emotional thoughts among people co-present at events. Facebook posts were preparation for upcoming events, supporting logistics and circulating memories, but they were also exchanged during festivals, connecting online attendees who attended the meetings in-person. At other times the online spread of material involved those geographically far away. In all these cases, online content circulated suspension meanings. Because of this intuition, I investigated online activities before, during, and after the principal European suspension events from June 2018 until September 2019, regularly monitoring discussions and participating in what I called the online part of the ethnography. My activity was more intensive during summer because that is when most suspension events take place, but checking Facebook suspension groups gradually became part of my routine both during suspension events and when I was away from practitioners. Online and offline suspension narratives were intertwined: reproducing the way that practitioners interact using Facebook, I never really left the field, even when I was at home.

When Helena Wulff talks about a “yo-yo field,” she problematizes the ethnographer’s mobility: it is not only from A to B, as in the movement of a yo-yo. In my research too, I experienced many fields, in Oslo, Lisbon and Porto, Sardinia, Tuscany, and the Dolomites, but also outside the gates of SusCon locations, such as Håvve’s courtyard, where the after-party of each Oslo SusCon constitutes an

unmissable social moment. When I attended a week-long event in Sardinia, the travel by boat and car with seven participants was a fruitful occasion for data collection, starting days before the suspensions commenced. Similarly, my headquarters, the place I call home, changed during my doctoral years: I lived in five different houses from 2016, dealing with three moves, diversifying points A and B in a network of spaces.

Hence, I understand this research experience as mobile and multisited (Marcus 1995) because through many sessions of fieldwork, the participant observation was based in different regions of Italy, a few cities in Portugal, various venues in Oslo, and through online and offline dialogues with multiple practitioners. As an anthropologist, I embraced the mobility characterizing suspension practices and I shaped the ethnographic experience around it. Because I understand the studied object as a circulation of people, practices, materials, and ideas, a phenomenon that is dynamic and in continuous movement, I moved as well, following forms of sociality based on suspension. The metaphor of flow could be misleading, because a river keeps moving independently of what is in its path and the water remains water after each inlet. Instead, I think that the circulation of suspension practices, of images, techniques, and people, reacts to each step, meeting, or Facebook post. My “water” is ontologically created by the junctions through which it passes, in a continuous and dynamic evolution, involving more spaces than those investigated.

Due to the relevance of the circulation among spaces in my theoretical perspective, I refer to my approach as *trans-spatial* to highlight the attention to in-between spaces, the complementary duo of online and offline data, as well as of words and materials. My gaze goes beyond single spaces as units of analysis, inspired by the transnationalism (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013) that has expanded the movement from A to B in mobility studies. Trans-spatiality pushed me to focus on the motion of meanings through spaces, considering an amplified setting that unfolded online traces in offline interactions and in-person actions in online spaces.

In this sense, fieldwork experiences are representative and not isolated fragments: suspension sites are inserted into a network of meanings due to an incessant circulation that is periodically reactivated. Fieldwork places, as well as community spaces of interactions, are conceived of as being shaped by the flows of interconnected actions, recognizing their spatiotemporal peculiarity and highlighting a holistic approach that stresses the continuity between experiences, people, and places.

Case studies are not conceived of as cultural generalizations, and this research does not establish differences between countries where suspensions are practiced. Similarities as well as differences within countries arise, which demonstrates the continuity of suspension culture without reducing it to the same “water.” Generalizations may be confused with stereotypes. As an anthropologist, I do not

essentialize behaviors, linking them with the biology of a population or their nationality: “anthropology accepts that culture is normative and that we can describe peoples’ behavior as ‘typical’, but our analysis is used to find the reasons behind that behavior, which are usually historical and cultural” (Miller and Sinanan 2017: 202–3). In the following pages, suspension events will be described by their duration and number of participants, exposing considerations and hypotheses about the reasons for such distinctions that correspond to the European areas where data was collected.

Studying Suspension and Not Just Suspension

A suspension cannot be reduced to a mechanical action: a body is not simply “hung.” The practice entails a specific performativity, a way to properly behave and to use the body in the space and with materials, achieving expected emotions and encoded by meanings shared by the social group—the suspension community. A suspension is realized according to silent rules that are signified socially, revealing a common approach to corporality.

How cultures manipulate bodies has attracted the interest of ethnographers for hundreds of years, with an abundance of accounts about permanent body modifications (such as scarification, genital alterations, and tattoos) analyzed in social contexts where they were at the center of rites of passage related to the social recognition of a new status or gender identity. Remotti (1996) suggested the expression of *anthropo-poietical actions* to stress the role of body modifications in defining what is understood as human, while Liotard (2003) and Fusaschi (2008) noted the conformity and normativity entailed in rituals involving body alterations.

More recently, many scholars have directed their attention to Europe and North America, where modifications, especially tattoos, have not been performed only during traditional rites of passage (DeMello 2000; Featherstone 2000; Pitts 2003; Ferreira 2010); contemporary Western tattoos have been defined as marks of civilization by Rubin (1988), while Marenko (2002) talks of practices of permanent decoration.

Both in traditional settings and new ones, the surface of the body is the symbolic stage upon which the drama of socialization is enacted (Turner 1980). Bodily adornment in all cultural forms, from bodypainting to clothing to cosmetic surgery, becomes the language through which the self is constituted in the meeting with the group, while the skin is the scene where this gathering is performed. The mark contributes to the *mise-en-scène* of the self, becoming a sign of identity (Le Breton 2002).

As analyzed in the project Excel—The Pursuit of Excellence, developed at the University of Lisbon, the individual is responsible for achieving a proper

body and a proper self. Body interventions, such as skin bleaching, cosmetic surgery, and cognitive treatments (Barbosa and Pussetti 2021; Pussetti and Pires 2021), show that individuals empower their social performativity through the body in a logic of excellence, meaning a lifelong pressure to be a better version of oneself every day. By suspending, the individual works to pursue regeneration.

I understand the body as an open site of construction (Orbach 2009) and a laboratory of experimentation (Ferrero Camoletto 2005): it is the means and the site of the experience of sensory inputs understood as shapers of individuality with self-poietical effects. As noted by Bauman (1995: 116), “the postmodern body is first and foremost a receiver of sensations, it imbibes and digests experiences; the capacity of being stimulated renders it an instrument of pleasure.” The emphasis is on the quality of sensations experienced through the body, and they operate on the way the person perceives themselves. The mark of a process responsible for intense sensation is thus a proof of the experience, a piece of the identity.

In a post-essentialist perspective, bodies are products of individual labor directed to the self: acting on the flesh, people self-define who they are according to self-centered projects of being in the world (Merleau-Ponty 1945; Giddens 1991; Shilling 1993). As theorized by Bauman (1999), the body is private property, and the owner is its guardian. Consequently, taking care of the body means cultivating the self. The body and the self, in conditions of high modernity, “become intimately coordinated within the reflexive project of self-identity,” and “like the self, the body cannot longer be taken as a fixed—a physiological entity—but has become deeply involved with modernity’s reflexivity” (Giddens 1991: 217–8). We have the authority but also the obligation to cultivate our body as well as our identity, because “individuals assume increasing self-responsibility for their health and body shape” (Featherstone 1991: 183) in a lifelong commitment, where uniqueness is another mandatory aspect.

The anonymity of existence is fought with unique marks and experiences: compared to art pieces, bodily intervention turns the individual into a remarkable result of original success. Each sign has a different story and substance, but all the marks together communicate the complexity of the person and how they have navigated through the world. Leaving traces on the skin becomes a way to narrate a story, to transpose an experience onto a material support: as Carlos Trosman (2013) highlights, the skin is a *cartography* of our relationship with the world, or an embodied narrative balanced between memory and imagination.

The success of projects of the self and of body is not only measured in comparison with others but with an ideal-typical self that is continuously imagined, wished, and expected to constantly improve. This is the logic of excellence. The body is hence both allied with and the rival of success because accomplishments are measured on it.

The sources of body modifications and projects of selfhood are diversified and not always connected to local cultural traditions. The self-ownership rhetoric

of the body expands the source of models of being-in-the-world. The aim is to empower the self and to experiment with intense emotions, actively taking control of the form of being through actions directed toward the flesh. The body is a means of expression, a praising of individuality and uniqueness, as well as a bundle, a moral encumbrance to deal with.

Taking a constructionist approach to the body and selves, this ethnographic work explores body suspension in a lifelong perspective and in connection with other bodily signs, addressed as meaningful traces of other body-centered experiences realized with scalpels, needles, hooks, blood, and pain. Tattoos, scarification, fire-branding, piercings, body suspensions, implants, and other interventions are interlaced means of exploration, emotional experiences, and continuous self-poietical processes. In the case of suspension, the work on the self is supported by the social group, which is enhanced by individual projects: sharing the activity of suspension forges collectivity, producing a sense of belonging and identity narrated in emotional and affective ways. In this sense, emotions are embraced as epistemic data and are part of the ethnographic understanding of the field (Ferdiansyah et al. 2019).

Suspension Narratives

The construction of identity is embodied, and the narration of the self contributes to the identity-making experience (Bruner 2015). Through narrations, individuals shape who they are and telling others about ourselves can be an opportunity to “make order” in our lives (Portis 2019). Experiences, meetings, and emotions become “good to think” once they are narrated because the recounting creates perspective and gives significance to existence.

Scholars interested in tattoos have observed that people like to talk about what they do with their skin (DeMello 2000; Le Breton 2005a), especially because marks are generally associated with personal memories or episodes perceived as meaningful for the evolution of the person who carries them. Suspension is not an exception: the pair of circular scars left by removed hooks can be reminders of meetings or flying experiences viewed as particularly significant in the trajectory of one’s life.

Suspension practitioners embody self-narration with multiple bodily techniques: tattoos (especially covering visible parts of the body, such as the hands, neck, and an extensive portion of the total skin), piercings (of nipples, tongues, ears, septa, genitals, cheeks, or combined with tattoos and other body modifications), scarification (aiming to create a permanent scar by cutting or branding the skin), fire branding (often performed at the final BBQ party of popular festivals with handmade incandescent irons), transdermal implants (an object placed partially below and partially above the skin), subdermal metal or silicone implants

(a body modification placed underneath the skin, therefore allowing the body to heal over the implant, creating a raised design), earlobe and lip stretching (a progressive technique involving artisanal jewelry), and genital and tongue splitting, among other procedures.

Those interventions are embraced as marks of individuality, whereby the projectuality of the body involves a desire for beautification and mirrors the evolution of the self. During interviews, body marks guided the reconstruction of life stories: talking or caressing a scar or a tattoo, people offered intimate and personal insights into segments of their lives. The location on the body and the mark itself were triggers of memories and meanings guarded in flesh.

Remembering and narrating are artificial labors involving a selection of what deserves to be saved from the oblivion of time, and this operation is not done only once. Remembering creates connections and significations in the present, but it requires a constant commitment. Memories forge a trajectory of a series of positions that the individual occupies through time, a chain of selves as Bourdieu (1995) imagined, and the self becomes a sequence of incessant transformations where each step is connected by similarities to the previous one, while differences increase with distance. At least in the past, or in memories, the self is stabilized, saved from constant transformations. Sweetman (2000) defines it as “anchored,” because it is forever connected to an episode perceived as a knot of existence, a crucial experience that Caroline Brettell (2002) calls a “turning point.” Those moments are at the center of most significant bodily decorations, as in the case of commemorative and celebrative tattoos (Manfredi 2017, 2022a).

The process fastens the self to the present, creating connections with a stable past despite changes. However, we know that time cannot be cheated and the alteration of the self and of memories is inevitable; that is why Ugo Fabietti speaks about “exaggeration of identity” (Fabietti and Matera 1999: 154) and Francesco Remotti (2010) defines “identity obsession” as when some aspects of the person are advocated as immutable or absolute. The relationship with the past and with previous versions of the self—Where do I come from? What brought me here?—is in constant dialogue with the present—Who am I? How do I characterize myself?—and with the future—What do I want to be? The illusion of an unlimited self-poietical power is threatened by the fragility of the process:

A self-identity has to be created and more or less continually reordered against the backdrop of shifting experiences of day-to-day life. . . . Moreover, the sustaining of such a narrative directly affects, and in some degree helps to construct, the body as well as the self. (Giddens 1991: 186)

Body marks show the incessant labor of the creation of the past, present, and future, through memories and projects of a suitable and more perfect self that learns from what happens and is forged in an enhanced version for the following

day. Body signs and discourses cooperate in the construction of the body and of the self, attributing value and meaning to specific episodes or people instead of others. Not only as the trace of an intervention—like a scar—do these carry meanings for identity: the body-centered experience of suspension is also a strategy to create and narrate the self.

I argue that suspension is a site of discourse. I extend the concept of discourse beyond the act of speaking to also include songs and poems, jokes and quips, and screams and shouts (Abu-Lughod and Lutz 2005). Through discourses about the practice, written and oral, online and offline, one-on-one or in group discussions, practitioners put in place strategies of self-narration, similar to what Margot DeMello (2000) observed with tattoo narratives in North America.

Embracing Foucault's (1985) notion of discourse as a practice that systematically shapes the objects narrated, I understand discourse as a producer of experience and a constructor of reality. The discourse not only verbally represents the experience, but also molds it, grounding it in the world and solidifying a specific way of being-in-the-world according to a phenomenological perspective. As noted by Joanna Bourke (2014b: 485), the metaphors used to think and express our physiology have profound effects on the way we experience it.

People love to talk about their suspensions, other people's suspensions, their upcoming suspensions, previous suspension events, and suspension in general. They post pictures of their favorite experiences, and they chat about positions that are suitable for their next attempt, or new suspension teams providing new experiences where suspensions are mixed with other challenging practices, such as bungee jumping in Montenegro, free-climbing in Portugal, parachuting in Russia, or zip-lining in Sardinia.

In talking about suspensions, people tell their own stories and talk about themselves, molding a specific form of a suitable self. They make order in their life, with the possibility of redefining experiences had in the past. The association of meanings and episodes is subject to change over time and according to the audience, as a pliable material for self-expression. The narrative also provides an emotional and intellectual frame for the practice, offering people the chance to verbalize their motivations for and expectations of being suspended. I believe that suspension narratives have practical effects: they give form to the suspension, shaping meanings related to the experience, and mold both the suspendees' identity and the identity of the group. In this sense, discourse is a form of social action that creates effects in the world (Abu-Lughod and Lutz 2005). Additionally, as well as aspects of identity, talking about suspensions socially grounds what suspensions are and represent.

Discourses are embodied experiences, internalized norms as habitus (Bourdieu 1972): in this sense, talking about suspension is a cultural labor, learned and embodied, revealing the social aspect of suspension. The group is refined by suspension narratives. When Arjun Appadurai (1990) thinks about "communities

of emotion,” he focuses especially on narratives transmitted by mass media. In addition to videos, films, books, tweets, and posts, the suspension community reproduces itself through narratives shared during events in physical co-presence: the deterritorialization of the group is thus a temporary condition.

I understand the body suspension community as a symbolic space, made of online and offline contacts through which practitioners narrate themselves both as individuals and as members of the group. The community is idealistically portrayed as egalitarian and supportive and is reproduced during gatherings, especially in the summertime (in the short term), and online in a long-term perspective. Thanks to web pages, blogs, and social networks, new members have continuous access to discourses made of information, images of the community, and activities, and to values associated with the practice.

Through suspension narratives, and not just verbo-centric self-narratives, I observed what body suspensions mean, the connected emotions, risks, motivations, and expected outcomes, and, moreover, the extra value that they acquire because they are shared within the suspension community. Doing a suspension with other practitioners is a way to transform a physical exercise into something special and morally valued, similar to the passage from sex to love. In more anthropologically conventional terms, the social action transforms a hung body into a sensory emotional experience regenerating the person and their bonds, moving from *raw* to *cooked*.

Ethical Choices and Militant Commitments

I understand ethnographic practice as a co-produced process of knowledge production performed by the researcher and other people selected due to their experiences, also called *epistemic partners* (Estalella and Sánchez Criado 2018). Relationships in the field are part of the data collected because conversations and exchanges significantly shape “co-creative knowledge making” (Elliot and Culhane 2017: 3). Thus, the use of the term “informant” does not entail that raw data is delivered from A to B in order to be “cooked”; rather, it underlines the essential contribution of research partners in the co-production of meanings.

The relations constructed over years in the field are ones of mutual respect, emotional intimacy, and reciprocal understanding. They were born thanks to the participants’ engagement in ethnographic cooperation, which I view as an unexpected gift: research partners invested time, energy, and trust in sharing their experiences, exposing themselves and their most vulnerable or controversial life episodes, perplexities, and fears during our meetings. I am deeply grateful for the trust I experienced, which was probably related to the participants’ nonjudgmental perception of my behavior, as a fieldwork episode suggested to me.

When I came back from the United States in 2008, I was ready to perform my first interview with a suspender in his tattoo studio in a little town in Italy. I contacted Fabio online, and it took five hours in the car to get to the meeting. When I entered the shop, on a cold autumn afternoon, I was faced with a man much taller than me, with large black tattoos on his face and hands, implants in his forehead, stretched earlobes, and several piercings in his lips and cheeks. It was the first time I had been in front of such an extensively modified person, and I froze for a moment. Fabio had a sweet, calm voice and a very respectful demeanor, so in a few minutes we started to talk fluently, and I gradually forgot his appearance. He was flattered by my academic interest in his greatest passion, body modification, and I was grateful for his desire to share. At the end of four hours together, he confessed how easy it had been to talk with me compared to a previous interview with another student of social sciences: “She had to do a tattoo essay, but she was very scared by me. It was clear: she wanted to escape from here as soon as she entered the shop! With you, it was different, thank you for listening to me with respect.” I felt incredibly guilty for the way my blood had run cold at the beginning of our meeting, but also encouraged by my respectful behavior. That experience suggested that I would often meet people used to being misunderstood and socially blamed because of what they do with their bodies.

This publication is embedded in ethical and political commitments: suspendees’ voices deserve to be listened to, and I hope that my work will contribute to correcting the misinterpretations of suspension. Suspension is discriminated against and a priori associated with destructive behaviors, mental instability, and moral deviancy, especially because of the voluntary pain involved in the hook-insertion and elevation without anesthesia. I distance myself from the pathologization of suspension, and I propose to deconstruct it. Inspired by Veronica Pitts (2003), I think that relating the hypothesis of mental illness to a practice is a powerful act of social delegitimization, which is counter to the nonjudgmental positioning characterizing ethnographic work. The research at the base of this book explored body suspension’s meanings and the ways that they multiply signify according to practitioners’ interpretations. Thus, the mental health perspective does not represent an authoritative truth, rather one among many narratives that contribute to constructing the way that suspension practices are socially configured in accordance with collateral actions performed by practitioners as living human beings.

Fabio is not an invented name: I offered research partners the possibility to be anonymous and I respected their decision when they refused the option. Otherwise, I would feel that I was assuming a paternalistic position, implying knowledge of what is better for them. I circulated an informed consent form, describing my research objectives and informing them about the possibility of quoting excerpts of interviews, as well as the reproduction of pictures I shot during events and of Facebook posts. In the form, people could declare their preferences for

anonymity related to interviews, pictures, or online posts. When preferred by partners, I fictionalized names and personal details such as age, native country, or profession, while providing information as close as possible to reality.

In order to maximize the ethnographic experience, all research actors should have open access to research questions, objectives, and project details. During research, I openly declared my research position, motivating informants to cooperate and creating an awareness of what was missing in the scientific literature, and to contrast the misunderstandings of the general public. Since most of the people contacted in the field had already experienced some forms of social stigma related to suspension, many decisions not to be anonymous were equivalent to a militant position against discrimination. “I have nothing to hide” was a recurrent assessment, underlying the notion that the visibility of suspendees could be a way to counter bias associated with suspensions by nonpractitioners. I interpret the request to use nonfictionalized identities as a statement of pride and courage, accepting the expectation that my work could promote a restored image of the practice.

Some informants could also be motivated by the pleasure of reading their names in a written document. I believe that it is fair for them to expect some profit from the ethnographic collaboration: as I am developing a professional product, an equal relation entails that each informant can have access to some form of advantage.

What to Do with Fieldwork’s Products?

At certain moments, I felt pressure due to the expectations people might have about my work and its impact on the perception of suspension. The creative laboratory offered unexpected circulations of meaning through the collection of handicrafts that gradually evolved. The laboratory’s products are visual materials able to communicate multiple meanings without an immediate focus on the most controversial aspect of the practice: the pain. Passing through paintings of butterflies, balloons, or drawings of trees, the attention of the spectator is driven to complex, complementary aspects and significations that are hardly perceivable at first glance. Additionally, creative projects suggest a multiplicity of approaches, problematizing a universal and monolithic interpretation.

I began circulation of the laboratory’s products during scientific congresses to report preliminary results, following the intuition that such materials had a communicative power that could share more (and better) than traditional presentations of papers could. The handicrafts were created to implement communication between me and suspendees, but they became tools to disseminate research findings among non-suspendees. Objects have the power to capture the audience’s attention, materializing informants’ opinions more powerfully than

interview excerpts. The ethnographic collection was returned to the suspension community too, with expositions during festivals and online artistic events like the Shared Sacred project, organized by Safet HadžiMuhamedović at the University of Cambridge. After that, positive feedback motivated new partners to join me and stimulated suggestions for unexpected topics; reactions were new data and opportunities to reassess research questions. More than once, the research appeared to be a spiral motion, from fieldwork to restitution that nourished new questions that in turn informed more fieldwork, deepening the understanding at each coil.

The participative approach characterized the production of data as well as the analysis and the restitution of results. In addition to the creative laboratory, my journal was a circulating device and people were free to add comments or drawings during interviews. Later, I invited informants to comment on their handicrafts during scientific presentations, such as during the 1st Colleex Workshop (Lisbon, 13–15 July 2017). Some research partners revised articles produced along with the research, we cowrote expositive notes accompanying handicrafts, selecting pictures and excerpts of interviews together, and we experimented with a different style of writing with a paper to describe suspensions for my three-year old son for the *Irish Journal of Anthropology* (Manfredi 2019). What happened was an extension of the co-creative experience, migrating to the production of texts and other forms of sharing of knowledge. Instead of a *monograph*—a piece of writing made by one person—that sometimes risks the creation of distance between the ethnographer and the others, this work is made of *heterographies*: multiple elements of communications that have been co-produced thanks to the engagement of multiple voices and hands.

Suspension in Times of COVID

December 2019 was the last fieldwork session. I was in Lisbon to present my fieldwork data at the doctoral seminar meetings at my host institution, and a suspension exhibition was planned in Portugal at the same time. I did not know at that moment, but these were my last live suspension event and in-person paper presentation for a long time. In the winter of 2019–20 the SARS-CoV-2 virus quickly imposed drastic restrictions on human mobility and gathering, affecting our way of working and taking care of ourselves (Barata et al. 2020).

I was extremely lucky because I had already collected years of data on suspensions before the pandemic. During 2020, when we all experienced months of life mainly confined at home, my moral strength was nourished by the analysis of data and the writing phase, with the possibility to arrange extra online interviews when I needed. I continued to monitor the online interaction of suspension community members, mainly for personal interest, but Facebook pages were

less active: new posts appeared especially when popular suspension events were canceled, offering the chance to share nostalgia and the desire to be reunited soon.

The second wave of the virus in 2021 re-enchained us in isolation, limiting again the possibility to gather and travel. At the same time, I experienced restriction in the circulation of handicrafts and research results, with the exception of online congresses. The space of computer screens was not suited to letting people touch or smell the handicrafts, and the available time was prioritized for panel discussions, without those informal and precious moments in which a comment or a joke triggers new contacts.

Many social occasions, such as artistic expositions, were canceled to adopt more prudent behavior, delaying chances to gather. The creative products of the workshop, intended to circulate in order to reproduce the motion of suspendees around Europe and to disseminate the meanings of practitioners, were paradoxically stationary in a box. The immobility betrayed their purpose, but it was a matter of time: in September and October 2022, they reentered the public sphere for the art exhibition *Be Fu**ing Perfect—The Pursuit of Excellence*, curated by Chiara Pussetti at the Óriq gallery in Lisbon and co-organized by Isabel Pires and I, with the professional support of Terra Esplêndida and Antonio Faria.¹ In the art exhibition, new multimedia materials reinforced the visibility of suspension experiences.

The ethnographic research at the root of this book documents a community and a way of suspending that existed before the COVID emergency and mobility restrictions, and was characterized by the use of gloves and masks before they sadly became mandatory personal protection devices. We do not know how the pandemic and other challenges will affect suspension in the future. The present analysis furnishes a testimony and a possibility for further comparisons with the culture of suspension in a specific time and condition, providing first-hand data from what was a COVID-free historical period. Through a reflexive lens, the pandemic restrictions I experienced after fieldwork provided a new embodied awareness that made me feel closer to research partners who were used to wearing gloves and masks any time they facilitated a suspension. So many times, I observed them sanitizing their hands and abstaining from touching any surfaces to avoid potential contamination risks, and only after March 2020 did I understand how hard and stressful it could be.

Future generations of researchers are not only invited to explore the evolution of the meanings of suspension, and the social shared signification of pain and trance experiences, but also to dig up tensions and connections between suspensions and other practices. The gender perspective is another dimension that is only superficially touched on in this book, as is the experience of being suspended in front of a paying public as a professional artist. The surface has only started to be scratched, even if this project answered its original research questions.

Description of Chapters

This book proposes a journey into the practice of suspension during gatherings in Europe to disclose the shared meanings of those who perform regularly. The first chapter invites the reader to consider suspension through the lens of time with an historical reconstruction, showing its evolution in the last fifty years and revealing how suspension events were born in Europe in the early 2000s. This journey in time illustrates how suspension passed from a traditional and spiritual frame, inspired by rites of passage of Indigenous North Americans, to an open concept characterized by freedom from motivation and interpretation. Key characters, such as Fakir Musafar, Allen Falkner, Håvve Fjell, and Bruno Valsecchi, marked the main steps of the process, influencing the three elements at the basis of the contemporary practice: the connection with other body modifications, artistic-creative domains, and the role of enhancing bonds among members of the community.

Chapter 2 explores the recurrent question: “Are these people insane?” If the first chapter examines the history (or one interpretation of it) of modern suspensions, the second step is looking at other forms of narrative about the practice. Revising the ways that scientific works describe modern suspensions, this reflection examines the cultural bias inserted into pathologizing interpretations. Refusing preestablished connections between suspension and disability, the second chapter introduces the stigmatization of suspensions by nonpractitioners, describing how accusations of mental deviancy have been associated with the practice in the experience of suspendees and in the academy during the first phase of the ethnographic research.

Chapter 3 is dedicated to the social group in which suspensions take place: the body suspension community, named the “hook family.” It introduces some of the theoretic concepts that I use to analyze the social group in terms of a symbolic space with the focus on the common interest in suspension, emotional and emotionally based. The community is a space where shared meanings support a cultural interpretation of the practice in terms of social performance and bonding experience. Fieldwork episodes and interview excerpts illustrate the importance of the group in the signification of suspension and, vice versa, the way that sharing “hook experiences” shapes the sense of the group. The final part of the chapter explores the figure of the facilitators, meaning those who assist the suspendees, and their role in the community.

Gatherings are the focus of Chapter 4, with dense ethnographic descriptions based on summer sessions in Norway, Italy, and Portugal. The initial part of the chapter theorizes ethnographic sessions as a network of fieldwork experiences that mirror the mobility of the suspension community, considering the challenge to study a community geographically delocalized. Successively, the reader will walk with me in suspension festivals, discovering some of the complimentary activity proposed to attendees, and later comparing these events with one-day

meetings, which is the first of three comparisons proposed in the chapter. The comparative exercise continues by reflecting on the connections between suspensions and other body marks, concluding with the juxtaposition of suspension performed during gatherings (of the community named self-centered suspensions) and public shows during tattoo conventions or in art-galleries.

Chapter 5 continues the presentation of fieldwork data, focusing on the online ethnography carried out during the wintertime in a complementary space of interaction with and among suspendees. Online connections maintain and nourish relationships through time and space, both between events and during them, contributing to the (re)production of the intimacy that supports the understanding of the group as emotionally based. Introducing the concept of trans-spatiality, the suspension community is understood as a circulation of people, materials, practices, and emotions across online and offline spaces that are constantly intertwined. The chapter illustrates online among members of the community and between suspendees and outsiders, documenting strategies of (in)visibility to prevent experiences of discrimination because of the pain involved in the practice.

Through the analysis of discourses and handicrafts from the creative laboratory, Chapter 6 presents what suspendees find beyond pain, exploring reasons, expectations, and meanings related to suspension as they coexist with the pain. Pain is socially constructed, defended, and recognized as unpleasant but unavoidable: it is necessary for the modification of perceptual abilities and for access to altered states of mind, which is the actual goal of the practice. The chapter unfolds mainstream meanings of pain and how suspendees position themselves compared to them, presenting an analysis that actually considers suspensions not so mainstream as they could appear.

The conclusive Chapter 7 illustrates the long-term effects of suspension, as the sensory turmoil does not finish once the hooks have been removed: through the practice, suspendees change their perception of themselves, of others, and of their natural environment, resulting in their being deeply regenerated. With new energy and self-awareness, they leave suspension events to enter into their everyday life once again, but happier and more empowered. Only apparently a nonmainstream way to intervene in the body, suspension confirms the modern need for self-promotion and the individual responsibility for always being the best version of ourselves.

Notes

1. The art exhibition *Be Fu**ing Perfect—The Pursuit of Excellence* was the final dissemination activity of the scientific project *Excel—The Pursuit of Excellence: Biotechnologies, Enhancement and Body Capital in Portugal (2017–22)*, funded by the Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia (grant agreement no. PTDC/SOC-ANT/30572/2017) and coordinated by PI Chiara Pussetti at the Instituto de Ciências Sociais da Universidade de Lisboa.