LEARNING TO FLY: A STORY TALE FOR MY THREE YEAR OLD SON.
AN UNCONVENTIONAL ETHNOGRAPHIC RESTITUTION OF A CREATIVE INVESTIGATION ON
BODY SUSPENSIONS.
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Introduction

When I read the call for contributions for the special issue ‘Creative Ethnography’, I immediately felt a connection with my work, as the word ‘creative’ has been associated with it under multiple aspects and in several occasions. Instead of selecting just one of the factors that could reveal the creative side of my ethnography, I decided to present a panoramic of my research topic (which involves unconventional performances) and its experimental methodology (where research participants have been invited to join me in a hybrid path between qualitative interview and artistic co-productions), and to invite the reader to become familiar with one of the forms of dissemination of its results (including public exhibitions of these co-produced handcrafts).

A very small number of scholars have payed attention to contemporary body suspensions in Western societies: the little available bibliography is mainly constituted by psychological researches questioning the mental wellbeing of practitioners. This paper is based on the doctoral research ‘Learning to fly. A trans-spatial ethnography on body suspensions in Europe’, in course of development at the Institute of Social Sciences at the University of Lisbon. The project aims to investigate meanings associated with suspensions, as well as the flow of materials, ideas, and people circulating in Europe during festivals and private events. The traditional methodology soon revealed its limits due to the bodily and intense sensory character of the experience, and so new strategies of self-narration have been proposed as experiment, involving the artistic taste of participants and ethnographer’s contribution with suggestions and questions.

The present work has been conceived as a symbolic introduction to the body suspension culture and to my experience as ethnographer in this world of wings and tears, colors and hugs, blood and hooks. In the first pages, I imagined telling story to my three year old son, and I tried to make my fieldwork easy and accessible; little by little I went deeper in my consideration, leaving more articulated conclusions at the end of the contribution for adult readers. After this research experience, I think that we are never too young to learn to fly, or to understand why people decide to do it. I do not encourage my son or anyone to experience piercing hooks, but I believe that it could be a positive and enhancing experience, especially when it is pursued with professional hands.

In the present format, words are interlaced with images taken by myself (with the exception of the last picture, shared thanks to the courtesy of A. Galad) during different fieldwork sessions around Europe between 2016 and 2019. Pictures expand the text, as handcrafts produced during the ethnography go beyond words.
This article constitutes a co-production made with some research participants who gave me their feedback and contributions in the representation of the body suspension. This ‘paper’ also became a personal exercise to turn my investigation into an accessible, enjoyable, and simple point of contact with body suspension practice and the incredible people I met during the ethnography, for an audience who probably never listen to talk about this practice. I wish you a good journey.

DEAR SON...

One day I saw people flying.

I was at a body suspension event.

In my mind a sequence of agitated thoughts started to flow: ‘What are you doing? Are you mad? Oh my god... Are you ok? Doesn’t it hurt? Of course it hurts! So why do you smile? How... Just how did you get up there?!”

But their faces were so peaceful and happy that my panic vanished just staying with them.
Some were having so much fun that they forgot time, keeping flying for hours.
Others were in their own private dimension, probably far away from us.

I saw the breeze of the Mediterranean Sea swinging hanged bodies and caressing my wet cheeks. I was crying too, while an iron taste mixed with dried salt penetrated into my nose.
When one of them came down, an enthusiastic clap rose from the audience, followed by hugs and congratulations. Hooks were removed by gentle gloved hands, while supportive smiles surrounded reddened wounds and some relaxing tears.

I wanted to understand what was happening around me.

Instead of posing millions of questions, I offered to start a journey together, where words would be just one of the bridges to communicate.
That summer, twelve people responded to my call: seven Italians, a Spanish couple, one person from the United States of America, one from Norway, and a last one from Denmark. They were between 26 and 47 years old, equally gender representative.

M. decided to focus on the lightness of her flight.

F. : So you feel light during the suspension... light like what? A balloon?
M.: Oh no, a balloon has a string, instead I’m free. Maybe a butterfly, but not an ordinary one: they are too conventionally beautiful. I’m not like that. You see me... My body is not conventional, neither my hair or my skin.

She picked up the metaphor of a night butterfly, a moth.

M.: Some of them live only one day, like a suspension that it’s pure peace just for a moment, and then it vanishes. Moths are night creatures like me, a dark girl. I love to work during the night. Nevertheless moths can fly, and so I do when I suspend. I let all the bad things behind me.
The suspension can transform, it can fix and restore people’s fragmented sense of self, as symbolized by the three elements in M.’s painting (left).

The suspension can put life-pieces together, giving a sense of completeness, a feeling of unity.

M.: The suspension makes me feel good, I can really be myself when I fly. It makes me evolve, like a chrysalis that blossoms in a butterfly.

M. used symbols, images, and metaphors to express her narration of an embodied and emplaced sensory experience, going beyond words and a logo-centric logic. The dark-green blends into a lighter color in the background, to communicate the positive transformation, from the chrysalis stage (at the bottom of the triptyque) into M. herself, who is performing her upcoming suspensions.

F.: But a butterfly is totally different from a chrysalis: don’t you want to save something from your past?
M.: You are right: let’s put some white strings standing the continuation of good things. The suspension doesn’t reset: it makes me filter what I want to keep. I never understand that before... Thank you F.

One year after our journey made by recorded interviews, interactions, co-productions of symbols and referents for a complementary strategy of self-expression, M. proposed to continue our project: many changes had occurred in her life thanks to that suspension, and they deserved to be expressed. She
was ready for a new suspension, this time with a totally different approach because she felt like a different person.

M. painted butterfly wings on pieces of paper. They were symbols of things she was ready to leave behind, moments of her life that were causes of pain and frustration.

In a performative moment involving another friend, the butterfly wings were sutured on M.’s chest. Only a few drops of blood stained the white cloth delimitating the sacred space of the performance.
After the stitching, the butterfly wings were cut off and confined in a black box (the one M. is holding in her hands), sealed forever, as those parts of the self that M. was ready to abandon. I still store that box in my house: I protect her meanings and I cherish its memories as M.’s paintings.

It’s hard express the love I felt in between our bodies in those moments, and words are not the best way to completely share what happens when a body suspension is on ‘air’. I never flew; my body is not ready for that. But what I am ready for is to pay attention to silenced voices, often misunderstood and
accused of self-destructive behaviors. Contemporary European body suspensions are configured with positive and regenerative meanings, and I can facilitate their narrations.

AFTER THE FIELDWORK...

Co-produced handcrafts narrated stories of joy, transformation, freedom, self-exploration, and solidarity to anyone interested in paying attention to them. They enriched logo-centric narratives of interviews and re-equilibrated powers, roles, expectations, and profits.

Sitting or walking together, eating, swimming, and creating handcrafts reduced the ethnographic distance, created intimacy and proximity, lowering the pressure of traditional interviews.

Working moments reduced questions’ influence on the investigation of the experience, and the time of interactions was fragmented and multiplied using social media to communicate before and after face-to-face interplays. Emoticons, audio-visual messages, music, and capital letters co-participated in the flow of exchanges going beyond traditional protocols of research.

Soon handcrafts replaced some parts of oral narratives and originated new narratives, becoming material referents of expression and opening the exchange to more meanings than those planned. By symbolic and artistic complementary strategies of sensory communication, suspension practitioners highlighted connections between the practice and other body modifications, such as tattoos and body performances, as well as their attitude for self-making actions passing through a de-tabooed approach of the pain.
The body is the canvas for life-stories, and each body-mark is a memory, a re-elaboration, a reconfiguration of the iridescent self. In a self-ownership rhetoric, the body becomes an autobiographical map where the auto-poietical self is actively constructed after each skin incision.

The sense of community arising from sharing those acts is paid with blood in a ritual frame, detached from a society perceived as liquid, superficial, and senseless. The suspension becomes the aware reaction to fill the existence with beauty, solidarity, and vibrant sensory experiences, restoring the connection with nature, the others, and the self. Through body suspensions individuals manipulate their perceptive skills and open sensory possibilities to new horizons.

In the last years I have had the great honor to cooperate with people able to fly. I would like to thank them with my all heart for the fantastic journey they shared with me, even if my wings still have to grow up. Despite all, ‘learning to fly’ was a great trip.

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